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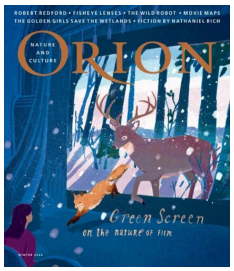
NATURE AND CULTURE

LAY OF THE LAND

Swarmed!

On the peculiar role of the bee in horror movies.

BY EVE BRATMAN



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I'M THE FEARLESS adventurous type. I've lived on my own in the Amazon, hitchhiked, ridden motorcycles in foreign countries, spelunked, climbed mountains, even impulsively once bought and lived full-time aboard a houseboat. I'm also a beekeeper. But the mere prospect of watching horror films makes my skin crawl.

Among Eleanor Roosevelt's many gems of wisdom, there's this: "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face." Part of what got me into beekeeping was my desire to conquer my fear of getting stung. I wondered, could my real-life work with bees help me get over my fear of horror movies in the same way? What if I watched horror films about bees and other colony-dwelling insects? There seemed to be plenty to choose from.

I began with research and developed parameters, making a list of horror and horror-adjacent films dating back seventy years. I downloaded from the web and scoured YouTube. Then, faced with the prospect of actually watching the films, I procrastinated. Avoidance is a cousin to fear.

Capitulating at last, I decided to begin with an early film: *The Wasp Woman* (1959), a femme fatale story about a beauty-obsessed CEO who doses herself with a wasp-derived serum that aims to reverse the process of aging. Predictably, she transforms into a monstrous killer wasp, preying upon her hapless employees. To my great relief, the film's fear factor is offset by production choices that imbue it with silly, campy scenes.

Things got intense in the 1970s, which ushered in more convincing special effects. At the heart of the plot of both *The Savage Bees* (1976) and, thirty years later, the National Geographic docudrama *Attack of the Killer Bees* (2006) is mass disruption caused by aggressive swarms. Both films play on the true story of how *Apis mellifera scutellata* became invasive in America, amplifying the drama of killer bees on the loose while offering salvation through the heroism of courageous entomologists. I squirmed in my seat, forced my eyes open, and channeled the rational scientific side of my brain. I could then find enough distance to marvel at the film's technical cinematography. Despite myself, I laughed out loud when the camera engaged in a slow pan of beekeepers, lined up with their smokers and hive tools in a military-esque defense squadron.

Within the genre, bees also feature as a sort of singular motif of cruelty. *Candyman* (1992), a Gothic horror film with a soundtrack by Philip Glass, has become a classic. It invokes the supernatural while foregrounding the legacy of racial oppression in America, balancing gore with suspense to create a chilling effect. In the fatal kiss scene, which will forever give me goose bumps, bees pour out of the mouth of the antagonist and stream into the throat of the haunted protagonist. I finished *Candyman* feeling like my psyche had just experienced a trauma and decided to give myself a palate cleanser: a little rom-com and a few good doses of *Bluey* and *Puffin Rock* with my five-year-old. Then, another late night and bowl of popcorn later, I mustered the courage to watch *Stung* (2015). The film is pure gore horror—low on plot and devoid of any connection to reality while taking every opportunity to portray enormous gut-sucking wasps erupting from human bodies, eyeball-stinging, with slimy, humongous larvae. I cringed, and my stomach did some flips, but I found enough absurdity in all the blood and guts to experience the film as a sort of pinnacle of B-grade movie mediocrity.

Finally, I sat down with a 2016 episode from *Black Mirror*, a sci-fi dystopian series. In "Hated in the Nation," self-reproducing killer robotic bees are loosed upon hapless victims. In the film's near-future world, the robotic drones are the backbone of pollination. "It's just a shame it's necessary," reflects one of the investigators. "The alternative would've been an environmental catastrophe. Bees were dying out." The episode delivers something profound, a siren's wail couched in a quiet candor that lets the irony sink in. One hour later, I'd benefited from the episode's critiques of surveillance systems, bureaucratic overreach, ecological risks and techno-fixes, and the dangers of social media. A terrifying scene also gave me flashbacks for days. But I finished the episode feeling a bit wiser, like I had survived while learning a lesson or two. I hadn't realized that insect horror was such a diverse genre—that it could be poignant, funny, and feminist.

In countless nature films, insects inhabit an enchanted microcosm. We are told loving these tiny creatures that sustain life and rule the world is easy. But in horror, the message is exactly the opposite. Insects are a scourge, an apocalyptic tiding, an inversion in which the smallest become monstrously strong and vicious. There's a certain liberation in flipping the script. Bees, after all, are not cuddly. Yes, they're fuzzy and cute, but stings really do hurt. Confronting our fear of them is, in its own unique way, a kind of thrilling confidence-building experience, like a trust fall exercise that keeps you coming back for more, wanting to feel over and over again the primal exhilaration of survival. The occasional sting is just the price of admission.

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