AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM BEE MOVIE AND MULTISPECIES THEORY

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Multispecies theory is applicable to a multitude of formats for analysis. In this essay, the film *Bee Movie* is analyzed for its purpose in multispecies studies and how it can be used to understand the function of the bee outside of the film. Multispecies theory suggests a new form of viewing the world, of being attentive to those around you that might not warrant a second thought, like an annoying bee buzzing around your head. It asks us to analyze the interactions we see around us on a day-to-day basis and how the world functions around these interactions. This essay analyzes the interactions in *Bee Movie* and how they might translate to real-life interactions made by bees. This essay analyzes how bees interact with the hive, flowers, and various other parts of the world around them in their daily lives and how these interactions shape not only the lives of humans, but other species as well.

The honeybee has been in countless headlines and topics of conversation, from concerns over the disappearance of bees to the unique way they communicate, honeybees are not only important to ecosystems, but to culture in America. The western honeybee, Apis mellifera is a vital and well-studied insect, but what impact does it have on the world, and what has popular media said about this insect? Many forms of popular media center around the honeybee, from movies, to television shows, to works of art. A significant portion of this media is aimed toward education, whether in kids' media or through documentaries about the importance of the mighty honeybee. One of the most popular pieces of media from this genre is *Bee Movie*, released in 2007 and directed by Simon J. Smith and Steve Hickner. This is an infamous movie, with memes and jokes surrounding it spanning the last decade. While *Bee Movie* is a children's movie, it analyzes our world through a multispecies lens without meaning to. This movie showcases the interdependence and connectedness that links all living things on the planet together through the relationships that the common honeybee has with the world around it, whether it is the hive, flowers, or other animals and bugs.

The story of *Bee Movie* is a simple one: the protagonist, Barry B. Benson, terrified at the thought of working every day until he dies producing honey for the hive, ventures into the human world. Upon entry into the world, he discovers that humans use their hard-earned honey in their food, drinks, and body products. This outrages Barry to the point where he sues the human race for commandeering their honey, and he wins. All the honey that humans have taken is returned to the bees and, for the first time in twenty-seven million years, the bees stop making honey. This leads to all the plants in the world dying, and Barry having to come up with a clever way to save the planet, with the help of his human love interest, Vanessa. The day is saved, and Barry and Vanessa live happily ever after in their bee-human relationship. The way the movie shows how important even the smallest creature is to the dynamic of our society and ecosystem is a key tenant of multispecies theory. Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and

Ursula Münster, authors of "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness", pose the question:Are all lively entities biological, or might a tornado, a stone, or a volcano be amenable to similar forms of immersion? What does it mean to live with others in entangled worlds of contingency and uncertainty? More fundamentally, how can we do the work of inhabiting and co-constituting worlds well?

Bees are taken for granted in our world. They're the little annoying bugs that buzz around us and scare our pants off because, what if we get stung? How do we determine what is important to each species, and how do we determine what is alive and what is not? Examining the dynamics of bees in Bee Movie allows us to view bees in a new light as well as acknowledge the gaps of information present in the movie.

For some background into real-life honeybees, the western honeybee, Apis mellifera, is one of the most studied insects in the world (Wood 1100). According to Britannica, the term "honeybee" can apply to any of the seven members of the genus "Apis-", but is usually in reference to Apis mellifera. Honeybees are extremely social creatures with a unique form of communication—they dance. Honeybees are the main pollinator for most flowering plants in natural and agricultural ecosystems (Danforth R 156). The importance of honeybees cannot be understated. According to Brianna Randall in her article "The Value of Birds and Bees," honeybees pollinate up to eighty percent of all flowering plants, and up to one hundred and thirty types of fruits and vegetables. In Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*, she writes:

> Ms. Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells—a sure case of what the biologist Lynn Margulis calls symbiogenesis. I bet if you were to check our DNA, you'd find some potent transfections between us. Her saliva must have the viral vectors. Surely, her darter-tongue kisses have been irresistible. Even though we share placement in the phylum of vertebrates, we inhabit not just different genera and divergent families but altogether different orders (15)

In this passage, Haraway is talking about her pet, Ms Cayenne Pepper, and how by existing together, surely their bodies share cells after so much

time together. As I sit here, I think about all the tea sweetened with honey that I've consumed in my life–all the honey straws bought at fairs and festivals. After eating their life source, their sole sustenance in the world over years and years, how much do I have in common with a bee? If you look at my biology, at all that I've consumed, how close am I to a honeybee—or any animal? I've lived with my cat for thirteen years now–over half of my life. How much of me is her, and how much of her is me? And, truthfully, how much does it matter? The labels we as humans put on everything, the way we explain our existence, is meaningless in the study of multispecies theory. It is all a way for humans to label and explain the world we inhabit. Multispecies theory tries to find a way to give those we deem "lesser" or "non-sentient" a voice.

Multispecies theory challenges us to change the way we think about our day-to-day interactions with non-humans. We must analyze what it means to be a bee in a world where the function of the bee has been changed by human interference and how that changes how the world works. Jordan Luttrell in their essay "Knowing the Honey bee: A Multispecies Ethnography" says, "The honey bee is commonly known as an introduced, domesticated species, kept by humans in beehives in apiculture. This conceals the agency of the honey bee, rendering it passive, productive and compliant to the desires of humans, or in need of human intervention for survival" (4). The bee is no longer a free agent. Instead, the bee has been domesticated for commercial use by humans. The relationship between bees has changed, and so has their relationship with the surrounding environment. Luttrell continues with:

Recent scholarship argues that non-humans do not just exist in the world, they are unruly agents which experience the world in particular ways. This scholarship has opened pathways of inquiry that explore how we know and engage with non-humans, and how modes of knowing and engaging shape them (11). Honeybees used to roam wild in the woods, cultivating honey as their sole food source. Honey is their lifeline—it is their entire life, essentially, boiled down into one substance. The importance of honey is an essential part of the plot for *Bee Movie*, as the com-

mandeering of honey by humans is the motivation Barry B. Benson needs to sue the entire human race for stealing their honey.

There is much that we do not understand about the honeybee. For instance, bees have been experiencing rapid declines in numbers for decades now. Much research has gone into what is causing their rapid decline, and several culprits have been identified. In an article by Jessica Robbins titled "Bees in the Balance," the phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) is explored, which is a condition where bees seem to disappear or die out of nowhere, leaving a colony in disarray. Robbins details that "[w]ithin six months of its first appearance, Colony Collapse Disorder had claimed the lives of up to 80 percent of the nation's honeybees, and there was still no clear explanation for the disorder in sight" (2) CCD is a truly disturbing phenomenon and one that has required a lot of research. There is still no answer as to what causes CCD, but cases of the disorder have dwindled over the years ("Colony Collapse Disorder"). The truth is that humans could very well face the daunting conflict in Bee Movie where the flowering plants in the world see a massive decline because of the loss of bees.

Before diving into an analysis of the movie, I took a look at how the public felt about the movie. Some reviews are scathing, considering this movie to be a retelling of already famous movies. A review on IMDB from RiffRaffMcKinley says "...the movie was basically a rehash of movies like "A Bug's Life" and "Antz," both of which were very good movies in which insects dreamed of a better life and had the fortitude to make it happen. That sentence should be its own genre by now!" But other reviews are in favor of *Bee Movie*, such as this one from Gordon-11 on IMDB that says "...to look at the world with a bee's perspective is interesting. I also liked the morals of the story, especially Vanessa's line about all lives are equal." *Bee Movie* is an infamous part of the culture in America, especially among the youth, so I was not surprised when I met with exaggerated reviews of the movie, one IMDB user calling it "The 'Citizen Kane' of bug movies." While the jury of public opinion is still out on whether or not this film can be considered a "good movie", there are also professional review-

ers to take into account. Roger Ebert says “All of this material, written by Seinfeld and writers associated with his television series, tries hard, but never really takes off.” Ebert is not a fan of the movie and the humor throughout, which is the main draw of the movie, not its multispecies applications. The critic consensus on Rotten Tomatoes says “Bee Movie has humorous moments, but its awkward premise and tame delivery render it mostly forgettable.” Sitting at a solid fifty percent on Rotten Tomatoes, the critics there are also not fans of the humor in the movie, but the humor isn’t the center of this paper, the multispecies interactions are.

There were two scenes that particularly stood out to me when watching this movie. The first scene that grabbed my attention was the first scene of the movie (00:02:21). Barry and his best friend, Adam, arrive at their “college” graduation after completing three days of grade school, three days of high school, and three days of college. They graduate, and are immediately moved on to Honex Industries, where the hive works tirelessly to make honey. The seats they were sitting in are transformed into a trolley to take them through the factory, a seamless and efficient transition for a hive that is constantly pumping out more and more worker bees. Barry and Adam are excited to begin this journey, as making honey is all they’ve ever been told to do. It’s their sole purpose in life. The music is happy, even a little inquisitive. Barry and Adam are constantly talking to each other, sharing their excitement, their eyes full of hope for the future. As they enter the factory, Barry proclaims “This is it!” and a collective “Wow!” travels through the group as the doors open and the honey factory is presented to them. The music picks up, climaxing for a dramatic entrance into their future. The factory is whimsical, with nonsense machines and mechanisms for making honey to appeal to the children in the audience. There’s even a device called the “krelman” that has bees wearing hats that look like fingers spinning on a wheel that “catches that little strand of honey that hangs after you pour.” and deposits it back into the honey collection. Adam is particularly intrigued by this job, he lurches from his seat and desperately asks “Can anyone work on the Krelman?” to which the tour guide answers “Of course, most bee jobs are small ones,

but bees know that every small job, if it's done well, means a lot." This is a sentiment repeated throughout the movie, about how each working bee, no matter how insignificant, is a working cog in the machine that is the hive. The hive can be seen as another species when looking at multispecies interactions. The hive exists because the bees create it to house and produce their honey. The hive houses the bees, and the bees keep up maintenance on it so they can continue to live and produce honey. Thom van Dooren et al. wrote "And so, beyond mere survival, particular lifeways in all their resplendent diversity emerge from interwoven patterns of living and dying, of being and becoming, in a larger world." Creating the hive is a form of survival, the bees must do it, but once the hive is completed, there is a clear cut relationship between the two in which they need each other, and thus their relationship is born.

A beehive is an entire, living, breathing mechanism. It has incredible complexities that are a small wonder. An example of this comes from some small witty dialogue at this juncture, with Adam at one point calling another bee "hot" (00:05:02) and Barry saying "But she's your cousin." and Adam going "She is?" and Barry proclaiming "Yes! We're all cousins!" Which, on some level, is true, as the bees within the colony do not reproduce with each other. The queen bee will mate with drone bees, and will mate with about ten to twenty drones at once, in a process that usually kills the drone ("How Honeybees Reproduce"). Another fascinating fact about the birth of honeybees is that the queen bee chooses the sex of the eggs. If she chooses to fertilize it, it will become a worker bee or a queen. If not, the egg becomes a drone ("How Honeybees Reproduce"). Honeybees have very complicated and fascinating hive dynamics and anatomy that Bee Movie barely scratches the surface of. Viewing the honeybee through Bee Movie waters down the truth of the everyday existence of the honeybee, imbuing it with human struggles and morals. Specifically this scene where the bees tour the "factory" and Barry faces his existential dread. Bees do not have existential dread, they are animals with a very specific purpose and they function in amazing ways throughout the hive. While the movie is entertaining to young children, there are very obvious

faults that can be found within the multispecies application of the movie. The movie doesn't fully appreciate the true hive dynamics, as well as the real relationship between bees and flowers. These gaps have to be filled in with knowledge the audience may or may not have.

As the scene progresses, things take a turn for the worse. After discussing the Krelman, the tour guide says "But choose carefully, because you'll stay in the job that you pick for the rest of your life." (00:05:57). While the other bees say "Ooh" and smile at each other, Barry's face falls. He doesn't want to work at the same job for the rest of his life. This is a horrible realization for him that spurs the conflict for the rest of the movie. The tour guide goes on to say that "…bees as a species haven't had one day off in over twenty-seven million years." to which Barry responds "So you'll just work us to death?" to which she responds "We'll sure try!" which gets laughs from the rest of the bees. This is the worst news that Barry could get. Barry is a bee that needs diversity and freedom, not to work at the same job until he dies. Of course this is an anthropomorphic bee that has human ideologies imprinted upon him, and this isn't how real bees feel, just how Jerry Seinfeld wanted him to feel. The human-centric feelings of living in what feels like a never-ending cycle of being taken advantage of by capitalists being imprinted onto a bee isn't the best lens for multispecies studies, but it's a great way to relate to the character and to understand how he's feeling and why he does what he does later in the film. This leads to the multispecies interactions later in the film.

The second scene that drew my attention is later in the film. This scene is an integral part of the film–it's the first time Barry leaves the hive. Earlier in the film pollen jocks (the only bees who leave the hive to collect nectar) invite Barry to leave the hive with them, and he takes them up on their invitation. The pollen jocks look different from the rest of the bees. They're bigger in every way. They're taller, their upper body is larger, and they have bigger wings. Barry is hiding behind what appears to be a storage station for the guns they use to collect the nectar, talking to Adam through his antennae like a phone (00:12:15). He says he has to go out there before he works every day for the rest of his life, but Adam doesn't

think it's a good idea, he says it's too dangerous. Barry hangs up on Adam and tentatively ventures to the pollen jock formation. The bee in charge, a caricature of an air force sergeant, tells Barry that the flight deck is restricted and he needs to leave, but the other pollen jocks speak up for him and say that he's good to go out with them. Barry promptly signs a few waivers, and that is that. He's ready to hit the skies. The sergeant gives us some foreshadowing by mentioning that it's supposed to rain that day, and that bees absolutely cannot fly in the rain. Barry looks nervous the entire time he's on the flight deck. He has incredibly expressive eyes, and every emotion he's feeling is portrayed in them. This is a situation he isn't comfortable with. It's a completely new, and dangerous, situation for him to be in, but he knows that he needs to leave his comfort zone and find out for himself what the outside world looks like.

As the sergeant is running down some cautions for the pollen jocks, he reminds everyone of bee rule number one: absolutely no talking to humans. Now, it's time to enter launch positions. The pollen jocks all march together, chanting "buzz" over and over again as they march into formation around Barry. Barry still looks absolutely terrified, and very confused about what's going on around him. The camera pulls out to show that the pollen jocks formed three arrows, with Barry in the center one. They pull down their glasses, and the sergeant bellows "Black and yellow!" and the jocks respond "Hello!" while they hop in the air. This is a common chant throughout the movie, but the meaning of it isn't ever disclosed. The bees all get down into a runners position, hands on the floor and one knee cocked. One pollen jock asks Barry "You ready for this, hot shot?" and Barry says "Yeah. Yeah, bring it on." in a very weak, unenthusiastic way. He is absolutely terrified, and it's written all over his face. The jocks go through various checks, just like air force pilots. At the end of their checks, Barry says "Scared out of my shorts, check." Other bees come on the platform and start up the wings of the jocks, like revving the engine of a car to get it ready. They pull stops out from behind the feet of the jocks, tying more illusions in that the pollen jocks are like real planes. The music tempo begins to pick up here, as does the volume. Something really big is

about to happen. Barry starts to look more enthusiastic as he stares into the opening of the hive. The camera pans to the back of the pack, and it's time for takeoff.

The bees pour out of the hive and the music crescendos. It's time to enter a brand new world. They fly out into the world in perfect formation, weaving between the branches of the tree that holds their home. The tree that holds their home is at least several decades old. It has weathered all kinds of seasons and the construction of the city around it. The funny thing is, this hive would not exist without this tree, and yet it gets no appreciation from the bees that live on it. A majority of the bees within the hive will never actually see the tree, they will just continue on with their lives within the hive, doing their small part to make the hive work without a second thought about the tree, and yet the pollen jocks must weave through its branches every day to retrieve the nectar that keeps the hive alive (00:14:14). This is the first multispecies interaction out of many within this scene. Once they leave the tree, they burst into the sunlight and Barry's eyes widen as he takes in the view of the park that they live in (00:14:21). Barry and the pollen jocks weave through the multicolored kites being flown by the children and adults below. The kites take various forms, from the traditional and rectangular, to those shaped like insects. The bees dive and fly among the bikers in the park, observing everything that they can. They fly under a bridge and find the flowers they were looking for. One of the pollen jocks lowers his glasses and sees that some of the flowers are ready to have their nectar harvested. The guns the pollen jocks use to collect the nectar are very whimsical, with multiple tubes that shoot out to enter the centers of the flower and then suck up the nectar to be collected into the gun (00:15:24).

The greatest multispecies interaction of all in this movie is between honeybees and flowers. This is a true symbiotic relationship as one cannot survive without the other. When collecting nectar from a flower, bees get pollen on them. The next time they land on a flower, some of that pollen shakes off of them and pollinates that flower, and so on and so forth. Collecting the nectar from the flowers fuels the bees quite literal-

ly, and the pollination from the bees moving from flower to flower keeps the flowers reproducing. Without one or the other, the suffering that these species would suffer would be insurmountable. Thus is the entire plot of the movie, the bees stop pollinating and all the plants die, and then when the bees run out of honey, what would they do? Van Dooren et al. continued in their paper with "The intimate relationship between a flower and its pollinating bee is one in which both forms of life are shaped and made possible through a shared heritage, an entanglement that Isabelle Stengers characterizes as "reciprocal capture." As such, they do not just happen to meet each other, this bee and this flower; rather, their relationship emerges from coevolutionary histories, from rich processes of "co-becoming." The honeybee and the flower share a rich history of survival together, through thousands–millions of generations. They are, essentially, one creature because they cannot exist without the other. As stated earlier, the movie does not fully capture the true complexities of the multispecies interactions that bees are a part of every day. This is a major shortfall of this film, but that's to be expected in a children's movie about anthropomorphic bees with human morals and problems. The movie doesn't fully capture the "co-becoming" of bees and flowers, the rich history these two species have with each other. There are a lot of shortcomings when it comes to this film, but it is a great starting point to examine multispecies interactions in film and the shortcomings the films may have. Examining these films leads to examining our everyday life, reconsidering how we experience the world around us, and how the world around us experiences life.

Multispecies interactions run our day-to-day lives. Every interaction we have is meaningful, and many different organisms and species work together to produce the environment we live in each day. The honey that we use in our tea was the result of the combined effort of hundreds of different bees, all working in harmony to produce our honey, beeswax, propolis, and royal jelly. Without the common honeybee, Apis mellifera, our world would look vastly different, or, human life would cease to exist on this planet. Honeybees work together with their hives and a multitude of different flowering plants to produce products that we take for granted,

as shown in *Bee Movie*. Multispecies theory has us analyze our world in a different light by immersing ourselves in our surrounding environment, and asking how each interaction shapes our world as well as the world for those around us, and *Bee Movie* is a fun and entertaining way to analyze that mindfulness.

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