Review Section

Stealing from the Bees and Cooking with the Rats

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Introduction

Bee Movie and Ratatouille target mainstream American audiences. They follow in the footsteps of successful animated films of recent years, with nonhuman animals as the protagonists interacting with humans in familiar and amusing, if non-realistic, ways. The relationships that the main characters form with humans, although surprisingly cooperative, take distinctly different turns and lead these films in different directions and with varying levels of authenticity and respectfulness to human-animal relationships.

Bee Movie

When Barry B. Benson (voiced by comedian Jerry Seinfeld) sets out to do some exploration, he discovers a friendly human florist named Vanessa (voiced by Renée Zellweger) with whom he can talk (though by doing so he is breaking a cardinal bee law) and who talks back to him in full understanding. Through this friendly relationship, Barry discovers that humans consume honey made by bees. With Vanessa’s aid, he files a class-action lawsuit on behalf of all bees against the honey distributors and wins the court case. All the honey is returned to the bees who then collectively decide they do not need to work so hard anymore and so they stop altogether. Immediately, all plants begin to wither and the world becomes desolate until the bees are convinced to return the honey to the humans and go back to work, and life returns to normal.

The bond that Vanessa the human forms with Barry the bee is cooperative and congenial. She saves his life when her friend Ken attempts to squash him. “Why does his life have any less value than yours?” she shouts to human Ken—a profound and even controversial
statement that challenges the status quo of mainstream human culture. When Barry breaks bee law by talking to, and thanking, Vanessa (because that is the way he was raised, he tells her), they find they have many things in common: a hatred of plastic flowers and disapproval of Ken’s mannerisms, to name two. Other humans treat Barry as a pesky pest and attempt to squash him at every opportunity. When Barry discovers the use and theft of honey by humans, Vanessa quickly agrees to help him right this wrong. This is done with no self-interest—except to help her new friend—and a general respect for bees.

This relationship is strikingly different from the science-fiction/horror films of previous decades, in which insects were seen as alien species bent on the destruction or enslavement of humans given any opportunity (Them! The Swarm, Killer Bees, Empire of the Ants). It continues a more contemporary trend of human-insect cooperation seen in recent films (The Ant Bully, James and the Giant Peach, Joe’s Apartment) in which insects join humans in an effort to some end, usually one that benefits all species concerned.

This cooperation leads to the surprising plot twist of Barry the bee arguing convincingly in a human court that humans are robbing bees of their hard-earned honey. It is a sound case and the humans can not deny it. Although the court case does not get into some of the crueler practices of the corporate honey business (e.g., killing aging queens, artificial insemination), the basic facts of bees making honey for their own well being and humans taking it from them are laid out quite plainly, including the practice of smoking hives to safely remove honey. A connection is even made between slavery and beekeeping. Because of the court ruling, all honey is returned to the bees, and the story takes an illogical turn of all the bees deciding they do not have to work any more.

Much of the first quarter of the film involves a walk through of a well-ordered and thriving colony where the various tasks involved in the daily lives of bees, hive maintenance, and honey production are imaginatively visualized in a Willy Wonka-style factory that clearly feels tied to at least some semblance of actual bee existence—even if all work in a colony is really done by infertile female worker bees, while the leads in this film are depicted as male (Free, 1977). The bees are depicted as hard-working members of a caste system with some free will as to which task they will devote their lives to for the good of the hive. Again, this borrows inconsistently from reality. Worker bees perform a variety of roles through the different stages of their life cycle: hive cleaners, nurses to larvae, honeycomb builders, hive guards, and finally pollen and nectar foragers. Only drones and queens serve in their respective roles for their entire lives (Free). However, it seems inconsistent that, even in this animated world, the industrious bees would entirely close down their production when the “stolen” honey is returned. What follows is an even poorer representation of the human-nonhuman animal relationship to the cycle of life—once the bees stop working, all plants immediately begin to wither until Barry sees the damage he has promulgated and convinces the bees to go back to work and let the humans have the honey.

Bees play a vital role in plant pollination, and fairly drastic environmental damage would take place if bees suddenly disappeared. Scientists have been testifying in front of the U.S. Congress concerning a recent reduction in bee populations and the effects this may have on plant pollination (Committee on the Status, 2007). Many plants rely on animals for pollination; honeybees are a significant pollinator for various species including certain crops cultivated in the United States. However, the depiction of plants being dramatically affected by the refusal of the bees to pollinate is accurate only to a minor degree. Plants would not dry up and die within days of the loss of the bee activity or any loss of pollinator activity.