

An Official 'Bad-Bug-Movie' Review
ENT 812, Insects in the Cinema
Michigan State University



“Invasion of the Bee Girls”
Reviewed by Nate Walton

Synopsis

In the sleepy California town of Peckham, men start turning up dead under suspicious circumstances. All of the deaths have one thing in common; all the men are dead of coronary thrombosis due to “extreme exhaustion”. The deaths also seem to be connected to a research facility in Peckham, Brandt. Brandt is a federally funded institution, so when one of their employees, John Grubowsky, is found dead an agent from the U.S. State Department is sent in to investigate. The agent, Neil Agar, begins interviewing Brandt employees and the spouses of the victims. Agar befriends a female employee at Brandt, Julie Zorn, who aids him in the investigation. Eventually they begin to uncover what seems to be a murderous conspiracy with a virtually random pattern.

However, Agar soon begins to suspect that the pattern is not as random as it seems. They discover that all of the victims were engaged in sexual activity at the time of their deaths. This leads them to quarantine the town and hold a meeting to warn the citizens of the danger, but the citizenry doesn't take too kindly to a recommendation that they not engage in sexual activity. Then the lead sex researcher at Brandt is brutally murdered right in front of Agar and Zorn, but the murderer miraculously escapes capture. Dr. Murger, the dead sex researcher, was the only victim who was not engaged in sexual activity at the time of his death, and when Agar searches his home he discovers his lover Joe, who informs him that Murger could not “make it with a woman.”

Triggered apparently by this and an earlier comment by the town's sheriff that the victims were “Dropping like flies”, Agar begins to research the life cycles of insects. In the meantime, one of the few remaining researchers at Brandt, Herb Kline, is invited to dinner at the home of an Entomologist on staff, the alluring Dr. Susan Harris. We soon discover that Dr. Harris is in fact the Queen bee, as it were, of

a group of women that she has transformed with radiation into sex-crazed “bee-girls.” She seduces Dr. Kline and he succumbs to the death by sexual exhaustion that is characteristic of the bee-girls’ victims.

The next morning, after Herb Kline’s body is discovered, Agar presents his insect theory to the two remaining male scientists at Brandt, Aldo Ferrara and Stan Williams. Williams is incredulous, but Ferrara agrees that it just might be possible and suggests a way to detect the residual radiation that would be left behind if such a transformation by controlled mutation had really taken place. Zorn and Agar test the bee-girl detector at Grubowsky’s funeral and discover that several women, including the widows of the victims, have been transformed. Unfortunately, the bee-girls move quickly after the funeral to finish off the remaining Brandt scientists. Stan Williams’ wife had already become a bee-girl, so his death comes first. Ferrara is murdered by Dr. Harris in his office at Brandt, and Julie Zorn is tricked into the bee-girls’ lair by Harris, where she begins the transformation process.

Fortunately, agent Agar discovers Ferrara’s death and rushes to Harris’ lab to rescue Julie. Hoping that it’s not too late, he destroys the machinery with one well-placed bullet, and carries Zorn to safety. The bee-girls become trapped in the lab, and are killed as it is engulfed in flames and deadly radiation. Luckily, Julie Zorn had not made the transformation to bee-girl and she and Agar will live to see another day. The movie closes with a shot of honey bees on a bouquet of flowers accompanied by a few bars of Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*.

Cast and Crew

The movie was released June 1st, 1973 by Sequoia Pictures Inc., the production company that also brought us *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Black Belt Jones* (1974). *Bee girls* was produced by Fred Wientraub who also produced *Enter the Dragon* and produced/screenwrote *Black Belt Jones*.

The movie’s writer, Nicholas Meyer, also wrote three of the *Star Trek* movies (II, IV, VI) and directed two of them (II,VI). *Bee-girls* was directed by Denis Sanders, who’s only other commercial success was *Czechoslovakia 1968*, which won an Oscar in 1970 for Best Documentary. The original music in *Bee-Girls* was composed by Charles Bernstein who had worked with Denis Sanders on the music for *Czechoslovakia 1968* as well. Bernstein wrote the music for *White Lightning* (1973), *Cujo* (1983), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). His theme from *White Lightning* was used in the more recent Quentin Tarantino films *Kill Bill vol. 1* (2003) and *Inglorious Basterds* (2009).

The star, William Smith (Neil Agar) has had minor roles in several TV series and B movies, but remains relatively unknown. Victoria Vetri (Julie Zorn) played a minor role in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) and was in *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth* (1970). However, Vetri was better known for her appearance in a 1967 issue of *Playboy* and her selection as the 1968 *Playmate of the Year*. The only other actor in *Bee-Girls* that went on to success in Hollywood was Mary Sweeney (unnamed Bee Girl) who was an editor and producer for several David Lynch films and wrote, directed, and produced her own film in 2009 (*Baraboo*).

Historical Context

The early 70's were transformational years for the United States. Popular music, for example, in the early 70's was transitioning from the psychedelic rock and funk of the late 1960's to disco, which would see its first songs released in 1973. (Indeed, one can't help but wonder if Gloria Gaynor's 1974 disco hit "Honey Bee" wasn't inspired by the Invasion of the Bee Girls.)

This was a time of transition for the U.S. government too. It was transitioning from the years of secrecy and McCarthyism that had marked its activities since the beginning of the Cold War. In 1972, the year before Bee-Girls was released, J. Edgar Hoover's death ended his reign as the overzealous director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Watergate scandal was beginning to take shape as well, and the FBI (just before the 1973 presidential election) revealed the conspiracy linking the Watergate burglars to President Nixon's re-election campaign. The public's distrust of government agents (the sheriff, Brandt, and Agar) in Bee-Girls is clearly a reflection of the times. (It's interesting that our hero, Agar, was a State Department agent rather than an FBI agent. Perhaps the FBI had not quite won back the public's trust after the Hoover years.)

The 70's were also a time of growing fear of science and its creations. Science took men to the moon (1969), but had also created deadly radiation and poisonous pollution. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, which spurred a public backlash against chemical pesticides. This public outcry eventually led to the banning of the insecticide DDT in 1972, just a year before Bee-Girls was released.

Several other movies released in 1973 also exploited the public's general distrust of the government and/or science. *Soylent Green*, for example, portrays a future where the government controls every aspect of people's lives, from post-life care to their food supply. Also released in 1973, *The Crazies* features a small town that is placed under military quarantine because of a government medical experiment gone horribly wrong.

Social issues such as civil rights and labor were also relevant issues of the early 70's. Jimmy Hoffa was released from prison in 1971. In 1973 he was fighting to regain control of the Teamsters union, which he had led before his imprisonment in 1967. Hoffa would disappear in 1975 under nefarious circumstances. (It is a decidedly Hoffa-esque labor leader who expresses the most vocal opposition to the sexual abstinence suggestion made at the town-hall meeting in bee-girls.) Also, the "Women's Liberation" movement was heating up during the late 60's and early 70's and likely affected the writer's portrayals and the audiences perceptions of gender roles in Bee-Girls.

International events were also on the minds of the moviegoers of 1973. The Vietnam War was winding down and the Paris Peace Accord that established a cease-fire between North and South Vietnam was signed on January 27th 1973. The cease-fire would hold tenuously for the rest of that year, but it was finally broken on the 4th of January 1974. 'Guilty pleasure' movies like *Invasion of the Bee Girls* must have provided some welcome relief from the otherwise dreary daily news from both at home and abroad.

Commentary

For a low budget, campy, sci-fi thriller, *The Invasion of the Bee Girls* is not bad. The acting is not great, but who really would have expected it to be. The writing is so bad that good actors might have had a hard time saying the lines with a straight face. The scientific inaccuracies are many, and so extreme as to be ridiculous. However, it seems silly to criticize a movie for confusing spiders for insects, when the fundamental premise relies on the belief that radiation can create women with compound eyes who kill their mates through sexual exhaustion. It certainly has that intangible characteristic of all cult-classics which makes the movie better with each successive viewing. Actually, in this case it's not so intangible, it's probably the absurd dialogue being delivered by bit actors in the biggest roles of their careers. For example:

Agar: "Can you cross a man and a horse?"

Ferrara: "I told him you'd get a Centaur, mythologically speaking."

Williams: "Realistically speaking you'd get a summons for bestiality."

Fun Facts

"Balling" is a term used by beekeepers for the behavior that honey bees sometimes use to kill insect intruders in their hives. The bees form a ball around the intruder and the intruder dies within minutes from the increased Carbon Dioxide levels and heat produced inside the ball (Sugahara and Sakamoto 2009). This term is used in *Bee Girls* in reference to sexual intercourse.

In 1973, 500 gypsy moth eggs were placed aboard NASA's Skylab 4 by request of the secretary of agriculture. This was done for the purpose of studying the effects of zero gravity on insect diapause (Sullivan et al. 1976).

A picture of Victoria Vetri (as Playboy's Miss September 1967) was pasted into an Apollo 12 astronaut's pre-flight checklist (NASA 1995).

William Smith (Neil Agar) played Conan's father in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982).

References

Allmovie. www.allmovie.com. Accessed 2/1/2010.

Muir, JK. Horror films of the 1970s. 2002. McFarland, Jefferson, N.C.

NASA. Apollo 12 lunar surface journal: Halo Crater. 1995.

<http://history.nasa.gov/alsj/a12/a12.halo.html>, Accessed 3/29/2010.

Sugahara M, Sakamoto F. Heat and carbon dioxide generated by honeybees jointly act to kill hornets. *Naturwissenschaften*, 2009;96:1133-1136.

Sullivan WN, Hayes DK, Schechter MS, McIntyre T, Morrison DR, Fisher M. Space studies with insects. *Bull Entomol Soc Am*, 1976;22:15-6.

The Internet Movie Database. www.imdb.com. Accessed 3/29/2010.

Wikipedia. www.wikipedia.org. Accessed 3/29/2010.