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Insects & Cinema Movie Review: “The Swarm”

Introduction to “The Swarm”

“The Swarm” was produced in 1978 and cost an estimated \$21,000,000 to make, while only making \$10,000,000⁹. It was directed by Irwin Allen, who was known for his disaster (both natural and monetary) movies. He also directed The Poseidon Adventure, Fire!, Flood!, episodes of Lost in Space and many more⁴. “The Swarm” was an especially sensitive topic for Allen, reportedly he never wanted it mentioned around him because of all the money he lost.⁸ The screenplay writer was Stirling Silliphant, who started out as an advertising executive for companies such as Disney and Twentieth Century Fox, and later started writing screenplays for various TV shows, made for TV movies, and movies. Some of the screenplay highlights included episodes of Alfred Hitchcock, In the Heat of the Night and Fly Away Home⁷. “The Swarm” is based on a novel by Arthur Herzog Jr. He apparently has written other articles and books, but it’s surprisingly hard to find information on him or the materials he has written¹. Despite being a box office flop “The Swarm” was nominated and won an Academy Award for best costume design, which isn’t saying much for the costumes in movies for 1978⁸.



Plot

It is difficult to summarize the plot to this movie because of the lack of continuity and random unresolved side story lines that occur. The original theatrical release was 116 minutes; however, the only version available now is the extended 155 minute version⁸. One can only hope the theatrical version was easier to follow, and had something that at least resembled a plot.

“The Swarm” takes place and was filmed in Texas mostly in the small town of Marysville and later in Houston⁸. Apparently, a swarm of mutant African killer bees has made their way to Texas to wreak havoc. The movie starts off with a military base (which could have been a set

borrowed from Star Trek) where most of the personnel are dead. The military comes to investigate, of course finding the entomologist, Dr. Crane, already on the scene. They soon find out there is a massive bee swarm responsible for the attack, which is confirmed when the bees

take down 2 helicopters. Dr. Crane is naturally placed in absolute authority over the entire operation. Fortunately for the military he has come prepared for just such an occasion, armed with anti-venom and a list of scientists to assist him in neutralizing the bee swarm.

Before Dr. Crane even has time to act a family, at a picnic area is swarmed after they provoke the bees by swatting and spraying them. The only one to make it out of the attack alive is Paul, the young son.

Around the same time the first random side story is introduced which is the Maureen, Felix and Clarence, all local townspeople, love triangle. Unfortunately for us, we never find out who Maureen picks due to a mass bee attack on a train later on in the movie.

Hearing of the bee attack on Paul's family, the town of Marysville is put on high alert, while Dr. Crane and his posse work on eliminating the threat. However, Paul escapes from the hospital, meets up with friends and takes revenge of the bees that took his family by throwing fire bombs at them. Sadly, Paul's plan seems to have been more well-thought out compared to the military. However, this made the bees 'angry' and they head to Marysville. Of course the bees cause mass devastation to Marysville, which is surprisingly well equipped for such a disaster having hundreds of body bags on hand.

Around this time another random story line is introduced. Rita, widowed by the bee attack on the military base, is pregnant, and goes to Dr. Andrew after the traumatizing town bee attack. The doctor proceeds to creepily come on to her and eventually they end up falling in love later on in the movie when she delivers her baby.

From here the story line gets even worse and harder to follow, if that is possible. The bees, wanting to cause nothing but devastation, go on a rampage. They attack and derail a train and also blow up a nuclear power plant. Of course Dr. Crane and the military have some really brilliant solutions to solve their bee problem. First, to Dr. Crane's dismay, they drop pesticide pellets on the bees (which have to be ingested to work) but the bees surprisingly do not eat them. Next the military does a 'controlled' burning of Houston to try to eliminate the bees. This only leads to mayhem for Dr. Crane, Helena, General Slater and Major Baxter because the personnel doing the burning end up setting themselves on fire, as well as the building with all the leading characters in it. Dr. Crane and Helena narrowly escape after learning the frequency to the African bees mating sound. Using this knowledge Dr. Crane goes on to dump mass amounts of oil into the ocean and produces the mating sound from the middle of the oil slick. Of course, the bees come, and then the military bombs the oil slick causing explosions and fire. We can only hope the bee problem is finally solved due to Dr. Crane's expert skills and thinking with Helena by his side.

Characters

For the time, the cast had many big names in it, which was one of the only things going for it. However, a blank spot on the resume would look better than giving any hint of partaking in the production of "The Swarm".

The main character, Dr. Brad Crane, was played by Michael Caine⁸. As far as entomologists in movies go, he played a more suave, heroic one compared to the more nerdy ones seen in many insect movies. He showed relatively little emotion throughout the movie, even when his love interest, Helena, was seriously ill. However, when the use of pesticides was mentioned he went on an over-dramatic rant. Despite thinking pesticides would bring the next environmental apocalypse, he had no problem setting fire to cities and dumping mass amounts of oil into the ocean. In addition, he had almost supernatural entomological skills. When surveying the scene of a bee attack, he was able to tell just by small bits of plastic on the ground that the African bees had ripped apart plastic cups and were using them to insulate their hive. However, he was unable to find the hive which literally a small child, Paul, went on to do later.

Dr. Crane's love interest, Dr. Helena, was played by Katharine Ross⁸. She was supposed to be a medical doctor, however she may have gotten her degree through the mail. The most medical assistance she gives are tears and oxygen to a man with no heart beat. In addition, she played the more stereotypical role of 'the woman' in the movie for the time. She grew more helpless, clueless, and reliant on Dr. Crane as the movie went on.

The main characters for the military were General Slater, played by Richard Widmark, and Major Baxter, played by Bradford Dillman⁸. General Slater is the head military officer in charge of coordinating the bee swarm annihilation. Despite being an authority figure, he has trouble telling 'no' to anyone and was replaced as head officer by Dr. Crane under the orders of the president. Major Baxter is General Slater's second hand man, given the task of investigating Dr. Crane. In general, the military is seen as relatively weak and inefficient, unless of course they were directed by the hero, Dr. Crane. The best case in point is when military personnel are in charge of doing a 'controlled' burning of the entire city of Houston. Even though the task is ridiculous, as well as the outfits they're sporting, they don't even do it well. They end up setting themselves on fire as well as the one building they weren't supposed to burn because it had people in it.

Dr. Crane's second hand man, immunologist Dr. Walter Krim, was played by Henry Fonda⁸. His skills and reasoning as an immunologist leave much to be desired. Ultimately, he intentionally injects himself with a lethal amount of bee venom in hopes of trying an untested antidote. He goes into cardiac arrest and his heart stops beating. Unfortunately, for him the only doctor on

the scene is Helena who only offered him an oxygen mask, which isn't very helpful when his heart is not beating. Apparently, none of the doctors in the movie were trained to do CPR.

Olivia de Havilland played Maureen, who was school principal caught in a love triangle between Clarence (the mayor), played by Fred MacMurray, and Felix (handyman), played by Ben Johnson⁸. Maureen's acting contribution to the movie is a stunningly memorable overdramatic performance when she sees the children being swarmed by bees in the school yard. Regrettably, we never see the choice Maureen makes because all 3 of them are in a train wreck caused by the bee swarm.

Other roles that should be noted are Paul Durant, played by Christian Juttner, the boy who narrowly escaped the bee swarm and initiated the bee attack on the town, Rita, played by Patty Duke, Dr. Andrews, played by Jose Ferrer and Jud Hawkins, played by Slim Pickens⁸.

Cultural Aspects

There are a few cultural factors that may contribute to "The Swarm" in some way. First would be the environmental concern seen throughout the movie, at least toward pesticides. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962⁵, the Environmental Protection Agency was created in 1970³, and several environmental acts soon followed. This may contribute to the absolutely no-pesticides-attitude displayed by Dr. Crane. However, he didn't have any qualms about dumping oil in to the ocean. In addition, the Vietnam War ended in 1975 and the Watergate Scandal occurred in 1972. The public view of the military and government was low. This may be reflected in the movie when the military and government is not very effective in eliminating "The Swarm".

Bees

This movie used live bees for all their scenes, which was a huge undertaking. All the stingers had to be clipped off the bees⁸. The use of an insect, specifically bees, was very important to the movie. First, the public at the time was very scared of bees, specifically aggressive Africanized bees, so this played well into the movie watchers' fears. The fact the bees lived colonially and can attack in mass numbers also was crucial for the "The Swarm". Finally, they needed an insect that flies, so that they could be mobile and move from place to place relatively quickly.

There were quite a few entomological inaccuracies regarding bees throughout the movie. First, I thought the reactions to the bee stings were interesting. There was no swelling, which is usually a symptom⁶, but there were hallucinations and random, spontaneous relapses, which generally aren't noted as symptoms. In addition, they often anthropomorphized the bees in the movie, crediting them with revenge and strategy. They also made the bees attack without being

provoked and around 4 stings would be a lethal amount, both of which were inaccurate. Although numbers vary, to kill an adult who isn't allergic to bee venom takes between 300-1500 stings⁶, which is quite different from 4. Also, sadly, in the behind the scenes footage to the movie, many of the actors and the director actually believed that the movie was plausible or had accurate information in it.

In addition, there were a few entomological facts that were a little more accurate. For example, bees will sometimes go to larger bodies of water to get water. In addition, bees can attack in 'swarms' after releasing alarm pheromones.⁶ One scene showed Dr. Krim milking venom from the bees with an electric charge, which is an actual method used to collect bee venom², however the venom per bee would be much smaller than what was portrayed. In addition bees can bite, but more than likely not to the extent of ripping up plastic cups.

Conclusion

To say the least the swarm is definitely a memorable movie, not because it was so great, but because it was so bad.

Citations

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