

# The Bee Movie and Barthes' Myth

Leonid Jakobson, i7432481

*“Barthes’ essays in Mythologies offer a sense of how myth can be embedded within popular culture. Discuss his ideas of myth in the context of one example of popular animation.”*

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# Introduction

This essay's goal is to suggest the presence of mythology in a certain animated film.

First, I will analyse the plot and presentation of DreamWorks' animation *The Bee Movie*. In it, I will attempt to use Barthes' concept of *myth* for his work *Mythologies* to uncover the hidden signals and implications in the work. I will attempt to demonstrate and prove that there is a message in the movie that is beneficial to corporations and other interests vested in humanity's exploitation of nature.

Not only that, but I will argue that the message can be expanded to encompass the exploitation of third-world countries' labour.

Getting to choose a proper movie for such an essay always proves to be a problem. I believe that despite the cartoon's questionable popularity, the analysis I present here is nonetheless relevant.

## Relevance

Firstly, although the animation was not critically acclaimed, it featured a very strong advertisement campaign – from TV ads to cereal boxes to flash games to snacks, meaning that a large amount of children was exposed to it<sup>1</sup>. Younger children being more impressionable, it is possible that they would be affected by the movie's subliminal messages. Yet even if the children are not more susceptible to myth's effects than adults (which certainly are predisposed (Snyder, 1992, pp. 301-302)), those that grew up watching this and other similar cartoons will soon be the filmmakers, politicians, journalists, and activists of tomorrow, so the animation is indeed relevant to examine as one having some potential effect on the society.

## My understanding of Myth

Before advancing to analyse the movie it is important to establish a mutual understanding of myth in general (it being a complicated concept), and the specific aspects (myth being a concept rather large, multi-faceted).

Myth as described by Barthes in his collection of essays *Mythologies* is "depoliticised speech" (by political, Barthes refers to anything pertaining to power structures, not necessarily governments). Something that has a definite political goal is stripped of the political aroma and presented as something natural, ordinary, accepted.

Myth can be used to further as much a straightforwardly political agenda (patriotism for instance) as one purely financial (pasta advertisement); Barthes simply refers to both of those as relating to politics in its wider sense.

The way I approached this essay is that myth has to be useful to someone. If you can spot a vested interest between the lines of a text, it may be safe to assume that myth can be found there.

However, it is not within my authority or the scope of this essay to argue that such injection was, after all, deliberate. Whether the myth in the work at hand spanned from collective unconscious or was intentional is completely irrelevant. Most important is to remember that it is the viewers who infuse the work with meaning (as Barthes himself has highlighted in his work *Death of the Author* in 1967). So if we can spot an unobvious message or eidolon between the lines that would advance one agenda or another, but are unsure if the message was put there by someone or not, we can nevertheless safely call it a myth.

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<sup>1</sup> This data is based on the author's personal experience and memory, validated by such non-authoritative sources as forums and social media. As I have not been able to find any reputable reports regarding the advertisement campaign, or even the advertisement budget for the movie, it is urged that the viewer does not take this sentence at face value as they otherwise would.

## Short plot summary

The Bee Movie is best split into three acts.

1. A bee lives in a beehive. The system set up inside is oppressive, and the bee, not wanting to accept such a life, and finds a way to sneak out. Outside, it meets a human and communicates with her, something that also goes against the bee rules.
2. The bee finds out about shops selling jarred honey. Shocked, it looks for a source and discovers the honey industry. Once again, the protagonist cannot take the situation sitting down, so it alerted its kind and brought humanity to (humanity's own) court. There, it battled against a caricature bourgeoisie lawyer representing the honey industry. In the end the bees won, and claimed back the possession of all the honey.
3. As it happens, the "happy ending" wasn't so happy. The bees stopped working and grew lazy from the excess of honey that they now possessed, which resulted in flowers dying due to the lack of pollination. When the extent of the disaster was apparent, the bees managed to find the one last hope to save the flora. As a result, they realised the real balance of things (bees produced too much honey for themselves), and humans could once again partake in honey consumption. Except this time, everyone was happy.

The first two acts carry a strong anti-establishment sentiment, while the last one tries to even out the scales of justice after they were upset too far in the other direction, making everyone happy in the end.

## Plot analysis

Throughout the script we can trace a spanning non-conformist narrative. First was breaking free from the system of the beehive - where everyone is assigned a job for life, nobody except for a certain group is allowed to visit the outside world, and where no bee is supposed to talk to humans. Then the largest chunk of the film was dedicated to fighting the system put in place by our society where bees are exploited for their honey without any compensation.

From the above we could perhaps postulate a conclusion that the movie's message would carry a similarly rebellious note. What is interesting is that the movie manages to nevertheless send a message that empowers the exploitation of natural resources and poorer countries alike.

It is possible that the film's intention was to present an "anti-[blind-anti-establishment]" narrative. However, it, perhaps inadvertently, gives us a moral base that would promote abuse of animals and such without repercussion.

## Myths

The above is done in two ways.

Firstly, the movie presents the exploitation of bees (and by extension not only) as something natural for humans to engage with. Humanity is subtly implied to have a birth-given right to resources of their surroundings.

Secondly, the movie sends a message that people – end consumers of whichever industry – are absolved of any guilt related to its practices, shifting the blame purely on the corporations. Not guilty as they are, they can freely engage in further consumption. The myth's image is a just, kind, and responsible, as well as nice-looking human society, where everyone walks upright with their backs straight – something we can actually spot in many today's animated feature films.

## Are humans entitled to honey?

Whether it is smart or ironic, the fact is that this film manages to send a message of rebelliousness against the bourgeoisie, and to promote bourgeois ideas at the same time. While justice prevailed in the courtroom, the concluding message was still that people are entitled to use honey and other animal products because of none other but the natural state of things.

Going by the film, humans are meant to take the bees' "excess" honey, as to do otherwise would upset the natural balance. For some animals and fruit it is true, where the latter are meant to be eaten by the former, as the process is a means of reproduction of the plant (Mauseth, 2003, pp. 271-272). Moreover, it is indeed the case with humans and certain species of animals – where hunting is used to keep their populations under control and in balance with their environment, as is the case with deer culling (Mayle, 1999). However, when it pertains to humanity and food industries, the examples listed above are exceptions and not the rule.

It might seem that we are in a natural balance with the those we exploit – as they produce too much, we simply take the excess. However, symbiosis is a two-way relationship, whereas our contribution (taking the surplus, perhaps "disciplining" the workers) is very selfish and one-sided, especially considering the conditions under which we usually take the "surplus," if it exists in the first place and isn't a delusional rationalisation. When analysed critically, such a relationship is cruel and the myth stands up to no scrutiny. That is not surprising though – the very point of myth is to silently make its way into the consumers' minds, avoiding logical analysis, which it would not withstand.

In the end of the movie, the humans and the bees reached a consensus, where people would take the honey which the bees do not need. The treatment now became humane, it would seem, and both sides win – at least none lose.



Figure 1 – Do bees need us to exploit them, lest disaster befalls us all? *The Bee Movie*, 1:06:15



Figure 2 – "Bee approved honey" – why wouldn't they? *The Bee Movie*, 1:21:09

That is the surface – the logically sound structure. The myth underneath it is somewhat uglier than that. While it would seem that we have finally achieved a balance, the impression that the viewer takes home is that in the end, those taken advantage of today can and should be taken advantage of – just not in such a cruel form. This is not the case in reality – the bees draw no direct benefits from humans in the food chain.

The myth depicts *entitledness* of humanity to nature's resources. That it is enough to reason with us a little, and after some rearrangements we will make both sides profit. In reality, the idea that we are not entitled to some things does not bode well with humanity.

The same idea of justified consumption extends to most of the food industry and beyond. As people living in the first world, we rely heavily on the cheap labour provided by the developing countries - not just as a passing stage of our development, but as a permanent strategy of our economic existence, according to none other than Lenin in his work "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism" (Chase-Dunn, 1975, p. 722). This strategy is convenient to the inhabitants of the developed world, and beneficial to the relevant corporations. Thus, the movie merely offered an excuse to waive the responsibility that the end consumers carry and establish a false impression of symbiosis.

Of course, something as subliminal and subconscious as myth would not deal with such intricate concepts as "taking the excess product" and "justification of exploitation". Instead, it leaves a very simple, and a much stronger message – that we are simply justified in our mistreatment, and that it is possible to make the other party happy with that.

### Separation of evil – people and corporations

While the honey industry was presented as evil, the normal people – the jury specifically – were quite the opposite. They were cheering for the bees, and sighed and empathised with them whenever something bad happened.

As mentioned above, the industry was shown negatively. Their personification was a lawyer, taken straight from the anti-bourgeois propaganda of the past century (Boylson, 2003, p. 6) – obese and unattractive, dressed in a suit and only lacking a top hat. He is presented as both intelligent and foolish at the same time – formidable to fight against, but just vulnerable enough to defeat.

He would provoke the bees into committing acts that would jeopardise their case. For instance, at around the minute 55 he provokes the main character's friend in court to sting him, and then causing a scene, sabotaging their campaign.

At the same time, he would be shown as unintelligent and lost when presented with evidence against him, as happened at 1:00:00. When the main character gave him the bee smoker which was used to control the bees on the farms – damning evidence of the corporations' manipulative nature, the lawyer lost his composure, and then accidentally used the smoker on the bees present in the courtroom. The affected bees instantly fell asleep (while the movie even implied that this makes them addicted), ultimately showing that the lawyer has made the mistake that would cost him the case.



Figure 3 – The lawyer and the soviet anti-american propaganda.  
Left: "Krokodil" magazine's caricature; Right: The Bee Movie, 0:46:51

With that, it is clear that the lawyer was presented in an unfavourable fashion. It was implied that the clients whom he represented shared the same goals and thus were similarly evil.

On the other hand, the people – those juries who cheered on the judge's ruling, and by extension the rest of the world – were shown as positive characters. All the while, they were just as culpable in the honey industry's reign. Common people were buying their product, thus enabling them. Contributing to the profits and development of the honey industry.

Of course, people do change, and one could argue that after having been shown the practices of the industry, the people changed their prior stance. But such a change was not shown, it was just assumed the people would be on the bees' side – it is a good side after all.

While on the surface it might seem that the message is against the exploitation of natural resources, the movie tells people that they are not guilty of whatever it is they might be doing wrong, as evidently it did not blame the common citizen for consuming the honey, solely blaming the corporations.

So what was the myth? My claim is that the myth was that people as consumers in this society are absolved of all responsibility. The myth is the false sense of security; the image it sells is that of a happy, just, proud society.



Figure 4 –The people.  
*The Bee Movie, 1:01:19*

Everything from the very behaviour and manners of most people to their stances on the issue connote their justness, their good inside. Paints our society as a whole as an initially good mechanism, with only occasional bad apples (corporations for instance) spoiling the lot. It legitimises consumption (since whatever people do is fair by definition); if ever a problem surfaces, a scapegoat will be found and blamed in their stead.

This is echoed in real life, in the case of BP's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico for example, they became the scapegoat, the face of the oil industry's

irresponsibility, while the public who consumed their products seemingly campaigned for a greener, sustainable future. The oil industry is bad, but any person buying their products is in comparison quite innocent – humanity did not suffer a PR disaster as a result of this event. All the while, the case of the unapologetic industrialisation of the past two centuries, in which the first world took pride at the time, is very different. As soon as the public's perception shifted, we could see a change in the visions of the future and humanity – from mystical and prosperous megapolises of the science fiction, we went to dystopian visions of polluted and scorched earth, like in Terminator. Now people are irresponsible and unsustainable – all because the blame wasn't diverted in time.

## Note

It is important to remark that the compromise that the humanity and the bee-kind came to in the end of the film was most likely meant to be a positive influence. It promotes cooperation between the species that were before unfair to one another, and instead of endless back-and-forth reprisal it taught peace and love as something that would turn the page on past conflicts, letting everyone to move on to other problems unsolved. This animation, like any other piece of art or entertainment created by people, is not one-dimensional, and its elements will have to both positive and negative meanings and connotations. While analysing something and trying to spot something hidden and small, it is easy to lose sight of the big, obvious things. The myth brought up here might only leave a very small mark on those who've seen it.

However, there are currently no means of measuring just how strong of an impact it leaves short- and long-term. Hopefully in the future we will be able to better know the dangers and responsibilities associated with depicting certain views in even such innocent things as family entertainment.

## Conclusion

The Barthes' idea of Myth does indeed provide a rigid framework of understanding minute influences and messages in art, and is as relevant today as it might have been half a century ago.

The Bee Movie manages to present, among countless possible others, two myths. On the one hand, it empowers people in consumption of products of unfair labour, depicting one-sided exploitation as actual symbiosis.

On the other hand, it creates an impression that the end consumers would not be liable no matter what choices they make, as the blame lies with the corporations.

While on the surface, the movie was wrapped in a rebellious, anti-establishment/corporal sentiment, which would ease the consciousness of the viewers, it would meanwhile subtly present all of the aforementioned ideas to secure the imperialistic grasp of the first world's corporate powers.

Perhaps this opens a question – just how many works, from songs to maybe even political movements that wanted to rebel against “the system” actually played right into it, intentionally or not?

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