

VIDEO

Tamara KOTEVSKA, Ljubomir STEFANOV | *Honeyland*, North Macedonia, 2019, 87’.

In the past decade, the increasing number of episodes of apparently inexplicable bee losses in the US and EU has gradually led bees to take on the role of the symbol of the worldwide ecological crisis. As Lisa J. Moore and Mary Kosut (*Buzz: Urban beekeeping and the power of the bee*, 2013) pointed out, the fear for bee’s survival linked with the concern for maintaining the current food regime and lifestyles have brought beekeeping at the center of the “eco-political” discourse. Bees are everywhere now, and beekeeping has become a very popular practice, gaining a lot of attention in media, politics, as well as in the academic context.

Honeyland (2019), the multi-awarded film directed by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, it’s part of the ever more increasing number of fiction movies and documentaries dedicated to this topic. This impressive documentary offers the opportunity to reflect on the representation of cultural diversity produced within the context of the relationship between human and non-human beings.

The film opens in an extreme wide shot of a dry landscape where a solitary human wearing a yellow shirt is walking in a dirt-road. The epic notes that follow through the scene, seem to magnify the bewildering feeling of a human immersed in an overwhelming nature. On the next framing, a wide shot reveals the identity of the person that will lead us through her life-story: Hatidze Muratova, a woman in her mid-fifties.

We follow her steps moving along a rustic territory and climbing steep loess cliffs. A buzzing murmur on a close-up forewarns the reason for her journey in this arduous place. She came to collect a swarm to fill one of her empty hives. The way she attentively moves her hands to remove the rock slab for opening the small recess where the honeybee colony is nested proves her skills and expert know-how in beekeeping. With her bare hands and using only a knife, she carefully removes the honeycombs and locates



them inside an empty woven skep that she has brought with her. After she collects the rest of the bees with the top of a cut plastic bottle and pours them next to the woven skep, she finally wraps the hive in a cloth and moves back home. Hatidze seems to practice a form of “rock beekeeping” reported by Eva Crane (*The World History of Beekeeping and Honey Hunting*, 1999) in Macedonia and for the Balkan area where local beekeepers used recesses as bait hives to attract swarms for their apiaries.

The movie aims at offering an intimate gaze on the everyday life of Hatidze. A woman who lives alone with her ill elderly mother, in an isolated village located in a mountain region in the Balkans, 20 km away from Skopje, without roads, electricity and running water. As the story unfolds, the viewer learns to share with Hatidze her little moments of joy as well as to face the challenges of a life at the mercy of what nature provides. We participate in Hatidze’s excitement for the opportunity of sharing her expertise in beekeeping and local knowledge with the members of a family of nomadic cattle herders that settles in her village. As they become friends, sooner the patriarch Hussein develops an interest in beekeeping, sensing the opportunity to provide new incomes to take care of his seven children. Notwithstanding the attempt of Hatidze to help them with honest and expert advice, the different ways of living with “nature” rapidly barge into the two families, creating strong tensions and ruining the peaceful relationship they established before. Hussein’s craving for land and profit strongly interferes with Hatidze’s mean of living and seems to trigger in her a profound fear and sense of discomfort for her future. The tensions burst into the story when Hatidze finds thousands of her bees laying on the bottom of the wall hives and accuses Hussein to be responsible for their death. Eventually, after a few episodes that show the ambiguous reactions of the members of Hussein’s family towards the death of their animals, they decide to move from the village in search of a better place, leaving Hatidze to face another winter alone with her mother.

The impressive photography contributes to strengthening the powerful narrative structure of the film. The masterful use of natural light confers a lively mixture of realism and graveness that, in the contrasting shades, seems to revoke the masterpieces in Caravaggian style. The astonishing beauty of the movie combined with a certain intimacy through which the narrative is constructed could be the reason for its popularity. However, the film seems imbued with a form of environmentalism typical of “western” ontology connected with the strong opposition between nature and culture. As we learn from the synopsis, the directors intended to offer “a tough and

tender portrait of the delicate balance between humankind and nature”. It is precisely in the different relationships that Hatidze and Hussein establish with the bees that we can detect the traces of this implicit ontology.

In the movie, Hatidze takes on the role of a symbol of a “sustainable” lifestyle in harmony with the rules of “nature”, while Hussein’ inclination to a more capitalistic form of exploitation of animals seems to stand for an alleged loss of humankind to live in harmony with nature.

Furthermore, the gender opposition conveys the representation of the association between woman/nature as opposed to men/culture, contributing to offering another level of meaning to the relationship between Hatidze and Hussein. Indeed, rather than “tried-and-true beekeeping advice”, Hatidze offers to Hussein her expertise and technical knowledge on beekeeping. In taking half of the honey for herself and leave the rest to the bees, Hatidze shows to master a profound knowledge of the functioning of the colony as a superorganism. That is, she knows that harvesting all the honey without leaving any stockpile, would lead to the collapse of the colony. In this regard, the death of Hussein’s bees cannot be merely seen as the consequence of a “natural imbalance”, it should be considered instead of the result of inexperience and unfamiliarity with the world of the bees.

Thus, the contrasting relationship between Hatidze and Hussein should be read as a relationship between a master and a novice rather than two symbol-figures of the dichotomy between nature and culture. In this regard, the amazing images that portray Hatidze surrounded by thousands of buzzing bees, intent in singing a song to convince the insects to enter inside the woven skep she is holding, risk to offer an exotic gaze on the life of a woman depicted as “the last in a long line of Macedonian wild beekeepers”.

To conclude, notwithstanding the compelling story, a thick ethnographic research would have prevented the risk, implicit in the movie, to convey forms of exotic environmentalism connected to the myth of the *bon sauvage*.

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