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MOVIE REVIEW

## In Fields and Hives, Zooming In on What Ails Bees

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

If [bees](#) were to disappear from the globe, mankind would have four years left to live. That assertion, attributed to Albert Einstein but perhaps apocryphal, is voiced in “[More Than Honey](#),” a fascinating but rambling documentary about the decimation of the world’s bee population through the phenomenon known as [colony collapse disorder](#).

Directed and written by [Markus Imhoof](#), a Swiss filmmaker, the movie is a tutorial on the biology and social behavior of bees and their exploitation in the age of industrial agriculture. Mr. Imhoof is descended from a long line of beekeepers whose cultivation of bees and harvesting of their honey are still carried out in more or less traditional ways. The film approvingly contrasts Mr. Imhoof’s family tradition with the techniques of modern agribusiness in which bee colonies are trucked from place to place to pollinate enormous orchards.

The cinematography, by Jörg Jeshel, is spectacularly beautiful, whether the camera is contemplating the Swiss Alps or the interior of a hive, where bees are observed in enlarged close-up. But the film goes overboard with cartoonish slow-motion footage of bees in flight.

The documentary begins on a sentimental note as Mr. Imhoof discusses his clan’s history of raising bees. The process of pollination by bees attracted to the fragrance of blossoms is described in romantic words and images.

The film jumps to almond orchards in California, a state that produces up to 80 percent of the world’s almonds — a harvest dependent on bee pollination. A farmer looks on as a pesticide is sprayed and appears to disable a bee without killing it. When that bee returns to its colony, we are told, it will spread the pesticide.

If the film doesn’t directly blame colony collapse disorder on pesticides, it implies a strong connection. In a scene filmed in northern China, where pesticides are heavily used, bees have all but vanished, and peasants are reduced to laboriously importing pollen from the south and daubing it by hand on blossoms. Other contributing factors to bee depopulation are the varroa mite, which attaches to the bee and weakens it, and the stress of travel.

And what about the so-called killer bees, Africanized honey bees, that were discovered in the 1970s

and began entering the United States two decades ago? Demonized before their arrival as dangerous and unproductive, they may not entirely deserve the bad reputation, according to the film. They are prodigious honey makers.

The most intriguing observations are those of [Randolf Menzel](#), a German neurobiologist who views a bee colony as a single large animal. The worker bees make up the body, and the drone and the queen are male and female sexual organs. By this definition, a colony of 50,000 bees represents a single organism with nearly 500 billion nerve cells, as compared with the human brain's 100 billion.

## **More Than Honey**

*Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.*

Written and directed by Markus Imhoof; director of photography, Jörg Jeshel; edited by Anne Fabini; music by Peter Scherer; produced by Pierre-Alain Meier, Mr. Imhoof, Thomas Kufus and Helmut Grasser; released by Kino Lorber. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Avenue of the Americas, South Village. In English, German, Swiss-German and Mandarin, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 31 minutes. This film is not rated.