

More Than Honey

By Jay Weissberg

A Frenetic Films Zurich (in Switzerland)/Senator Entertainment (in Germany)/Filmladen Filmverleih (in Austria) release of a Thelma Film, Ormenis Film, Zero One film, Allegro Film, SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen/SSR SRG, Bayerischer Rundfunk, ORF production. (International sales: Films Boutique, Berlin.) Produced by Pierre-Alain Meier, Markus Imhoof, Thomas Kufus, Helmut Grasser. Directed, written by Markus Imhoof.

Helmer Markus Imhoof uses state-of-the-art filmmaking to illuminate the world's bee crisis in the handsomely lensed docu "More Than Honey." Colony collapse disorder (previously addressed in "Colony" and "Queen of the Sun") has decimated the bee population, with scientists still uncertain about the exact nature of the deadly phenomenon. Imhoof, who has a family history of beekeeping, traveled to three continents, interviewing apiculture players and examining the nature of the calamity as well as a possible solution. Surprisingly up-close images of bees at rest and in flight give buzz to an inescapably downbeat topic; fests and ancillary will be drawn.

There's an apocryphal quote from Einstein that if the bee population dies, then humanity itself won't last four years (Imhoof treats the Einstein origin as fact, whereas many experts think the attribution is phony). Whoever said it, the statement has merit: An enormous percentage of trees and flowers rely on bee pollination, and without the constant work of the little striped fellas, the world can kiss many of our natural comestibles goodbye. There's a tragicomic scene of farmers in China hand-pollinating fruit trees in an area where the bees have all died; seeing them painting each flower with pollen recalls St. Augustine's parable of the boy spooning water out of the sea. Sustainability is impossible.

What exactly is killing off the colonies remains a mystery, though scientists believe it's a combination of things: Pesticides, shipping methods (bees don't transport well), lack of genetic diversity and parasitic varroa mites all contribute to the problem, but as Swiss beekeeper Fred Jaggi discovers, even hives kept in clean Alpine air aren't immune. Seeing hives either mysteriously devoid of inhabitants or littered with thousands of dead carcasses is a dispiriting spectacle.

At least a partial solution lies with so-called Africanized bees, those angry insects commonly called killer bees, which caused quite a scare back in the 1970s (apiarist Fred Terry remarks, "Americans are always afraid of being invaded"). Far more aggressive than their gentler honeybee cousins, Africanized bees seem resistant to colony collapse disorder, though the docu doesn't make clear whether they could perform all the functions of their decimated relatives. Also absent is any mention of the effect honeybee decline has had on byproduct industries such as the lucrative market for Royal Jelly, used extensively in dietary supplements and skin creams.

Most striking in "Honey" are closeups of the bees in their hives, symbiotically working together in creating their new queen: Imhoof rightfully spends time detailing the extraordinary nature of bee social structure. Even more noteworthy are sequences of the bees in flight (unaccompanied by Rimsky-Korsakov), tagged by apiologists and whizzing through the air like a children's TV character. Apparently Imhoof hired a "bee whisperer" to guide their path, and CGI background effects clarify movements while lending an almost cartoonish element to the picture.