

# Honeyland

**Monday, February 17, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Justin Chang | L.A. Times | Not Rated | 90 Mins.

The opening scenes of “Honeyland,” a captivating and, finally, devastating documentary from the directors Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, are wondrous to behold. With practiced expertise, a middle-aged beekeeper named Hatidze makes her way along a rocky cliff and pulls aside a few stones to reveal row after precious row of golden honeycomb, shimmering like treasure buried in the mountainside. As rigorously observed as the movie is in the venerable tradition of direct cinema, in these moments, it also takes on the stirring quality of an ancient folk tale or myth.

Hatidze makes it all look startlingly easy, in ways that she and other skilled beekeepers would likely shrug off as insignificant, even as their methods remain reliable generators of tension and awe in the movies. She handles the honeycomb with bare hands and not a moment’s hesitation, and the bees seem thoroughly unagitated by her presence. Her humane, ecologically sound methods are rooted in traditions that seem as old and durable as the majestically photographed Macedonian landscape that surrounds her.



Back down on terra firma, Hatidze keeps a colony of her own in the remote, barely inhabited mountain settlement where she lives. The honey that she extracts, bottles and sells at a market in the distant city of Skopje earns just enough for her to take care of her 85-year-old mother, Nazife, who is blind and bedridden. The scenes of them together in their small hut, shot with extraordinary candlelit intimacy, speak movingly to their mutual devotion as well as their resourcefulness. They are accustomed to making the most of very little.

That philosophy extends to the way Hatidze treats her bees, whose survival, she knows, is closely tied to her own. “Take half, leave half” is an instruction she repeatedly mutters as she carefully removes what she needs (and nothing more), until the words begin to sound like an incantation. “Honeyland,” which won three awards at this year’s Sundance Film Festival (including the top prize for

international documentaries), is first and foremost a graceful evocation of interspecies coexistence, of lives lived in delicate balance with the natural world.

But it also becomes something more: a harrowing portrait of how quickly and easily that balance can fall apart. Kotevska and Stefanov spent three years filming Hatidze and ended up whittling down this 85-minute documentary from more than 400 hours of footage. The trust that they cultivated with their subject is more than apparent, and they are rewarded for their patience with a surfeit of dramatic incident. In Hatidze’s more unguarded moments, she notes her lingering regret that she never married or had a child — an acknowledgment that takes on a layer of irony when a large Turkish family takes up residence in a nearby lot, with small children and large animals in tow.

The heretofore sedate, steady camerawork by Fejmi Daut and Samir Ljuma turns suddenly volatile in clamorous scenes of the kids playing, quarreling and aggressively handling each other and the livestock. But some of the kids also befriend Hatidze, who, despite the noise and chaos, responds to her new neighbors with a warmth and an openness that feel entirely unfeigned. She also willingly shares some of her artisanal secrets with their cash-strapped paterfamilias, Hussein, who decides to try his hand at beekeeping. The results are, to say the least, disastrous. “Take half, leave half” is not a business model that everyone has the patience to follow.

Without ever departing from its gently observational bee-on-the-wall format, “Honeyland” can be a film of startling violence — viscerally so, in the occasional nerve-jangling shot of a toddler getting stung by a bee. But the more lasting violence that Kotevska and Stefanov capture is ethical and environmental. This is hardly the first documentary to sound the apicultural alarm (2009’s excellent “Colony” comes to mind), and others have taken a broader, more expository view of the grim planetary implications of colony collapse. But few have offered such an intimately infuriating, methodically detailed allegory of the earth’s wonders being ravaged by the consequences of human greed.

The movie doesn’t demonize Hussein for his clumsy inexperience or his eagerness to make a quick buck; the desperation of his family’s circumstances is plain enough to see. But if “Honeyland” refuses the convenience of easy villainy, it is no great leap to see Hatidze as quietly heroic. Whether trudging through snow or climbing back up that mountainside at film’s end, she is a principled and compassionate custodian, one of the last of a dying breed. This lovely, heartrending movie leaves you marveling at her history and thinking anxiously for her future — and wondering, perhaps, why her example of basic decency has become so endangered.

In Turkish, Bosnian and Macedonian with English subtitles.

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# The 19th Annual 16 INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED ANIMATED SHORTS ANIMATION SHOW OF SHOWS

Monday, February 24, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by John DeFore | Hollywood Reporter | Not Rated | 93 Mins.

An exceptional program that starts off strong and only gets better as it goes, the 19th Annual Animation Show of Shows overflows with charm while containing more provocative observations about the nature of existence than most prestige feature films do. Animators both obscure and famous show their wares here, in a program paced beautifully by Ron Diamond, who decided in 2015 to open his annual best-of DVD collections up to theatrical booking. Anyone who attends this third event will hope it stays public for years to come.

As usual in this and most other packages of animation, full-on abstract experimentation is hard to find. Viewers seeking that should look up the Center for Visual Music, which champions sound-meets-image abstraction (and sells DVDs) — but here, they'll enjoy Steven Woloshen's *Casino*, in which images are drawn directly onto film and set to some jaunty bebop by Oscar Peterson.



Elsewhere, experimentalism is put in the service of narrative, however loose and ambiguous the storytelling may be. In Elise Simard's *Beautiful Like Elsewhere*, for instance, expressionistic images accrue to depict dreamscapes or lonesome reveries. In Quentin Baillieux's figurative but ambiguous music video *Can You Do It*, a horse chase down an urban freeway speaks obliquely to race relations.

Some allegories are easily deciphered, as in *Next Door*, an early work by *Inside Out* director Pete Docter. Another entry drawn from the past, 1964's *The Hangman*, is a "first they came for the —'s" parable set in a de Chirico-like small town whose craven citizens blindfold themselves willingly to others' persecution, wrapped up like characters in a Magritte painting.

Other shorts offer pure pleasure. Max Mortl and Robert Lobel's *Island* looks like a picture-book you'd give to a very hip child; the faux-educational film *Our Wonderful Nature: The Common Chameleon*, would have that kid (and his adult guardians) guffawing in the aisles. *Gokurosama*, whose gentle physical comedy recalls *Tati*, takes place in a Japanese shopping mall where the physical world presents one obstacle after another — as it does in the crisply illustrated, tartly comic *Unsatisfying*.

Other small gems (like Lia Bertels' *Tiny Big*) are scattered around one or two films that might not deserve to be in this company. (Though technically polished and probably moving to Kobe Bryant's fans, *Dear Basketball* plays like self-hagiography in the guise of the star's fond farewell to the sport.)

The cosmic showstoppers fall toward the end. David O'Reilly's *Everything* looks like a computer game because it is: The film teases the experience of a critically acclaimed game of the same name, in which microbes and mammals and galaxies all share the same importance. As a movie, it functions a bit like a 21st-century version of Charles & Ray Eames' iconic *Powers of Ten*; adding audio from a 1973 Alan Watts lecture brings a heady philosophical quality to the action.



While Watts muses about "the illusion that it's utterly important that we survive," the highlight of *Show of Shows* turns existential malaise into something weirdly delightful (and 100% Scandinavian). In *My Burden*, Niki Lindroth von Bahr boils the aching loneliness of an entire planet down into the mundane complaints surrounding a single highway intersection. Here, cute stop-motion animals stand in for homely humans: Sardines wonder why they've chosen loneliness over companionship; monkeys cope with telemarketing careers; hairless mole rats mop the floors of a fast-food restaurants. And all do so while singing the oddly entrancing music of Hans Appelqvist. Whether you see it as a deadpan attempt to reconcile with angst or a laugh-out-loud suicide note, it is — like several films here — a reminder of the practically infinite possibilities represented by short-form animation.



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# VARDA BY AGNÈS

**Monday, March 9, 7:30**

Reviewed by A. O. Scott | New York Times | Not Rated | 115 Mins.

Admirers of Agnès Varda, who died in March at 90, may be looking for a fitting remembrance. Especially in the last two decades of her long career, she was an unusually and deeply companionable filmmaker. Her death feels like the loss of a friend, even to people who never met her. At the same time, those who are unfamiliar with and curious about Varda's work may be wondering where to begin. With characteristic generosity, her final film, "Varda by Agnès," answers both needs. It's a perfect introduction and a lovely valediction.



The movie, a blend of personal essay and greatest-hits album, finds her in a retrospective, ruminative mood. As she did in previous auto-documentaries — "The Beaches of Agnès" (2008) in particular — she intersperses clips from her back catalog with reminiscences and reflections on life and art. Speaking in front of audiences and also directly into the camera, she narrates a brisk, informative chronicle of a six-decade career of remarkable creativity. Both newcomers and hard-core Vardaphiles will come away with a list of films to see and re-see.

Varda's first film, "La Pointe Courte" (1955), set in the Mediterranean coastal city of Sète, was a bridge between the

neorealism of the 1940s and the French New Wave. Her friendships with Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais, her marriage to fellow filmmaker Jacques Demy, and her skeptical, energetic, unpretentious style linked her permanently to that movement. "Cléo From 5 to 7," from 1962, is one of its touchstones, even as it anticipates the feminist cinema of the 1970s.

She played a central part in that as well, but "Varda by Agnès" is above all a testament to her individualism. Not that she minimizes her political commitments, which are matter-of-factly feminist and bluntly democratic. She follows her younger self from France to California, where she made a documentary on the Black Panthers and a handful of hard-to-classify films. The distinction between documentary and fiction isn't always relevant to her work. Her best-known narrative features — "Cléo," "One Sings, the Other Doesn't" (1977) and "Vagabond" (1985) — have the sting of reality, and a compassionate clarity about the freedom, danger and pleasure that women face in their lives.

"Varda by Agnès" divides Varda's career into two major periods. The second begins in 2000, with "The Gleaners and I," the first of a series of personal, cerebral, altogether uncategorizable projects (encompassing still photography and multimedia installations as well as cinema) in which she turns the camera on herself. She is a playful, charming and quizzical presence, but also a rigorous investigator, a questioner of her social systems, collective memory and her own assumptions. If she comes across as a grandmotherly figure in those movies, she is less the kind of grandmother who spoils you rotten than the kind who sees through all your nonsense and loves you anyway.



She was also, as "Varda by Agnès" makes wonderfully clear, an enthusiastic mentor and an inspiring teacher, with a natural interest in and affinity for young people. Her discussion of her philosophy and her methods — the why and the how of her movies — is incisive and instructive. She helps you think about her art, which in turn helps you think about everything else.

In French with English Subtitles.

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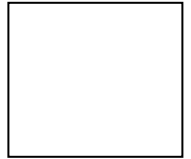
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*Honeyland*

"Contains worlds in one beautiful, seemingly  
simple story."

*The New York Times*

Monday, February 17 at 7:30 pm

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"A must-see for anyone seriously interested in  
animation."

*Bottom Line*

Monday, February 24 at 7:30 pm



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Monday, March 9 at 7:30 pm