

Honeyland transcends language and location

A Macedonian beekeeper's ordinary, mythical life

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue



Beekeeper Hatidze Muratova in *Honeyland*. Photo © Neon

Honeyland (directed by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov) is a documentary film that follows the life of a beekeeper, Hatidze Muratova, who lives with her elderly mother in an otherwise abandoned village in rural Macedonia. Nominated for Oscars for both best documentary feature and best foreign film, it is a visual masterpiece, introducing its viewers to an incredible, particular life and transforming that life, through its visual medium, into a myth of our moment.

When we meet Hatidze, she seems like a figure out of time. She dresses in peasant skirts and well-worn scarves. The small house she shares with her elderly mother is earth-lined and lacks running water, electricity, and indoor plumbing. She spends her days crossing a magnificent natural landscape—her body the only human figure in sight—to tend her wild beehives, which are nestled in high mountain crags or in stone ruins from the region's Greek and Roman past.

She is not, of course, actually out of time but an anomaly in a recognizable wider modern world. Her location in that world is slowly revealed as airplanes crisscross the sky above her and when she takes a bus to a much larger city to sell her honey in open-air markets. She haggles and jokes with the vendors, discussing the importance of cross-cultural understanding among Bosnians, Albanians, and Turks (she's the latter). These are hints of the geopolitical realities of the region that no doubt contributed to the emptying of her village, but they are never discussed. She buys bananas, a tangible reminder of the forces of globalization that link her honey to a system of worldwide exchange, and hair dye, which she scrutinizes for exactly the right shade of chestnut brown.

We don't know why Hatidze and her mother didn't leave the village when everyone else did. But she seems to have assessed the crowded poverty that would await her in the city and opted instead for the rhythms of a life set by her relationship with the bees, whose flourishing is intimately connected to her own. "Half for them, half for me," she explains when it is time to harvest the honey. This philosophy of moderation and conservation protects the social and productive order of the hive, and the bees in turn keep making enough honey to support their human partner.

Her interdependence with the bees, far more than her clothing or lack of electricity, marks her as not of her age. She refuses the logic of accumulation and profit, marking time not by efficiency and productivity, but by daylight, seasons, and ecological balance.

This balance is upset when a family of migrant beekeepers show up trailing livestock and children, both of which seem to keep multiplying. The family lives under extraordinary pressure from a greedy honey dealer to whom they are in debt. Hatidze's methods don't produce enough honey to pay their debts and meet their own expanding desires. Soon reckless, destructive practices are introduced that threaten Hatidze's bees and the ecological order of her small environment.

The filmmakers met Hatidze unintentionally when they were sent to the region to film a short documentary about environmental change. When they were making *Honeyland*, they intentionally hid their own presence despite their intimacy with the subjects. They slept in tents in Hatidze's front yard and followed her daily life for three years, but Hatidze never speaks directly to the camera. The filmmakers also did not speak Turkish, the language spoken by Hatidze and her neighbors, so they did not know what anyone was saying. Rather, they edited the film as a visual story

that could be understood without language. Translations and subtitles were among the final things added.

The result is a visually stunning film that has an allegorical and even mythical quality to it. There is something timeless about the struggle of rapacious greed to devour the land and resources it depends on. Hatidze, her neighbors, and the debt collector appear like characters in an ancient story, one we have never properly listened to or understood.

This film is invested in making us listen and understand, but the message is not one of direct political action. Its focus is highly particular, more so than almost any documentary I have ever seen. Hatidze's life is not exemplary—no one else is living it. But by framing her as a kind of mythical symbol, the film makes her story speak universally. It is a reminder that the forces of greed, profit at all costs, and disregard for the environment have covered the globe, reaching into the unlikeliest of corners.

Yet the film is a documentary, which reminds us that Hatidze's story ultimately is not an allegory. There really is a Hatidze. And we are better—beautifully, transcendently better—for having met her in this film.

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