

Vanishing of the Bees (2010)

Hive Mentality Films and Hipfuel, 87 min

Reviewed by Carol L. Glasser¹

Vanishing of the Bees is a documentary about Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). Within the first few minutes the audience is convinced that CCD, the phenomenon of entire hives of bees simply disappearing without a trace, is an issue worth caring about. The film, produced and directed by Maryam Henein and George Langworthy, tells a story that educates the audience and generates enough concern and sense of immediacy that some viewers will likely be motivated to take action, and both the film and the DVD case provide actionable items for those so inclined. This is a social movements documentary, aimed at spreading a particular perspective and encouraging people to “bee the change” needed to help fix this problem.

The documentary is a must-see, as it brings light to an important issue that is little discussed. At that same time, the film is problematic and disappointing for its failure to fully extend the compass of concern to the namesake of the movie, bees. What the film lacks will be glaring to a critical animal studies audience, but may be undetectable to other viewers—the plight of the bees matter only insofar as it effects human survival. Bees as subjects and as individuals are somehow absent from the story. There are a few moments in the film that discuss possible causes of and solutions to CCD that do take bees’ welfare into account; however, these segments are hurried and underdeveloped. The audience is encouraged to care about the fact that bees are disappearing, but are not taught to actually care about the bees themselves.

The story is told through interviews with beekeeper David Hackenberg, the beekeeper who first called attention to CCD in the United States, and beekeeper David Mendes. There are also prominent interviews with scientists who are studying the problem, food and farming experts such as Michael Pollen, and interludes from the narrator, Ellen Page. The film’s point is clear: bees are central to food production, their disappearances are likely because of chemical interventions in agriculture, and if CCD persists it will have a devastating impact on human populations due to a lack of food.

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Two-thirds through the film, Langworthy and Henein address systemic pesticides as the likely cause of CCD. The film promotes this explanation by taking the viewer to scientists, beekeepers, and even a bee keeping conference in Europe. Research into the link between systemic pesticides and CCD that has been done in other countries is briefly introduced and the reasons why this research is not conducted in the U.S. is also highlighted.

Two important concepts are discussed as necessary to ending CCD—synergy and applying a precautionary principle in agricultural management. *Vanishing of the Bees* presents the perspective that both need to be applied to farming and agricultural practices in the United States to ameliorate the problem of CCD. However, neither concept is extended to include an honest evaluation of how bees themselves are either being treated in practice or discussed in the film.

Through several interviews, the documentary presents the idea that monoculture has degraded past systems of farming, which were based on diversity. A return to agriculture based on a principle of synergy, where multiple aspects of a system function together, is encouraged; rather than acres of one crop, farms should have multiple crops and even bees that work together to create a successful, diverse farm. As the film highlights, the United States is currently reliant on monocultures that are typically managed with pesticides; more recently, systemic pesticides have been used. Systemic pesticides are integrated into the seed of the plant and remain within the plant itself as it grows, rather than being sprayed on top.

Vanishing of the Bees also highlights a distinction between how the United States and many other countries manage potential agricultural risks. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is responsible for protecting environmental health in the United States, relies on insufficient testing of pesticides. The pesticide companies conduct the research that the EPA uses to evaluate safety, rather than a third party or the government. Through interviews with experts, the audience learns that the United States relies on “risk assessment,” while the many other countries facing CCD have used a “precautionary principle.” The latter principle is premised on the idea that safety is the main concern and if there is a doubt one should err on the side of caution. Following this principle, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia have placed some bans on the use of systemic pesticides. The United States, on the other hand, relies on risk assessment—in the absence of certainty that something has adverse effects, a degree of risk to human health is tolerated—and so the EPA does nothing in regard to regulating systemic pesticides.

Though Langworthy and Henein present the idea that a lack of synergy, monoculture and not acting on a precautionary principle are problematic in the treatment of agriculture,

they fail to extend this argument to the bees. Just like with food production, mass production for profit with disregard to environment can be applied to the way the bees are treated and it may even be a cause of CCD. Unfortunately, this later point is only summarily addressed. About a third of the way through the film the audience is introduced to Günter Haunk, a farmer with a bee sanctuary, and Dee Lusby, founder of the Organic Bee Group. In this segment of the film, viewers learn that in order for beekeepers to make larger profits they engage in unnatural practices such as replacing a bee's honey with sugar water and killing a hive's queen bee (by pinching off her head) and replacing her with an artificially inseminated bee who has been filled with semen that is selected to reproduce specific, human-valued, traits.

The streamlining of preferred genetics through the murder of one queen and the forced insemination of another is a clear example of abuse to the bees. One of the most shocking scenes of the film is watching geneticist, Sue Cobey, artificially inseminating a bee. For people who feel equating the forced breeding of animals to rape is hyperbole, this scene might change their mind. Using tweezers, Cobey casually pries open an unconscious bee's vaginal cavity to the circumference of her body and pours in sperm to breed a bee with "desirable traits."

Though the unnatural practices enacted on bees for the sake of generating revenues may contribute to or be the cause of CCD, after the brief segment introducing this idea there is little discussion of it. Further, there is no blatant critique made of the beekeepers who engage in these practices. Rather, the heroes of the story are Hackenberg and Mendes, with 3,000 hives and 7,000 hives respectively; each are in the business of mass-producing bees and shipping them across the country on tractor-trailers to have them pollinate fields. In other words, our story centers on individuals who factory farm bees and treat them as commodities. The commercial beekeepers disregard anything approaching synergy; they want the EPA to embrace precautionary principles and synergy rather than supporting monoculture when it comes to agriculture, but they don't do the same when it comes to bees.

While the movie provides the audience with enough information to understand that corporate beekeepers are reproducing the same systems utilized by the monocropping system they blame for CCD, no clear critique of this is made in the film. A frustration about this is that the film does present the ideal, synergistic alternative briefly. The audience is shown small organic gardens and interviews with individuals who create habitable spaces for bees, though this is presented mostly through images and only briefly through interviews.

Some films might be able to levy the argument that they are merely letting the beekeepers speak for themselves, but Langworthy and Henein cannot. As previously noted, this

documentary is not concerned with presenting a story without bias. It is a social movements film, concerned with forwarding a perspective and motivating people to agree with, care about, and act on that perspective. However, the problems that bees, as a species and as individuals, face are not thoroughly presented beyond their application to human welfare and health. In one scene that receives no pause or critique, scientists put live bees into a plastic jar, seal the lid, put the jar into a cooler, and toss an icepack on top. The narrator's monologue goes on without any critique, as so many individuals were just doomed to a fate of slow suffocation or freezing to death.

Vanishing of the Bees is a good film for high school and college classes discussing agriculture, food sustainability, or other issues of food justice. It is also ideal for a community-focused screening, since CCD is an important issue for all communities to address. From a critical animal studies perspective the film is disappointing for its lack of critique of the mass production of bees and the way bees are treated. Henein and Langworthy provide all of the necessary footage and information for a critical viewer to make the connections I have highlighted here, but they do not raise these concerns to the viewer and only those already sensitive to the exploitation of other animals are likely to make these connections. Regardless of its shortcomings, *Vanishing of the Bees* does a number of things well—it conveys information about what CCD is, that it matters, and that a probable cause is the use of systemic pesticides. Most importantly, *Vanishing of the Bees* is a film motivated not just by a desire to educate the viewer, but also by a desire to fix a problem.