

Dina Iordanova, 'Underdevelopment, Coated in Honey,'  
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## “Underdevelopment, Coated in Honey”

Dina Iordanova



It is wrong to represent underdevelopment as an enchanting morality tale. And it has been wrong since the time Robert Flaherty made *Nanook of the North* a century ago. In a way, *Honeyland* (Tamara Kotevska and Ljubo Stefanov, 2019) is *Nanook* for the 21st century: a modern-day rendering of the Flaherty approach, wherein filmmakers who do not even speak the language of the native subjects come and film them. In this instance, a 50-year old ethnic Turkish woman, Hatidže, who lives in primitive conditions in the remote mountain village of Bekirlija in North Macedonia, where she stoically cares for her elderly mother and sustains

both by keeping wild bees, is filmed by two young local filmmakers, Tamara Kotevska and Ljubo Stefanov, both ethnic Slavs. The film observes Hatidže's complex interactions with people and nature and gradually builds her into a sage who follows the wisdom of the natural world. Hatidže is led to act and fit into a certain version of her own life, based on fact but framed poetically by the filmmakers. *Honeyland* – for which the directors say they [“stitched a visual narrative that made sense”](#) since they didn't understand Hatidže's speech – is a bona fide Flahertian re-enacted documentary. One can also call it “fake.”

*Honeyland* is one of the most awarded and widely distributed films of the current cycle, starting with a win at Sundance in 2019 and reaching the end of the year with two Oscar nominations, for best international feature film and for best feature-length documentary – a diagnosis of sorts, which confirms that documentary is as highly constructed as any feature film. The wide acclaim for *Honeyland* is a great success for two young filmmakers from an isolated small nation. But what this dual nomination reveals to me is that *Honeyland* is too fictionalized to be regarded as documentary. Or, put another way, the film is too contrived to stand as a “representation of reality.” Whilst showing the life of a poor ethnic minority woman in the “godforsaken” Balkans, it is driven by the desire to serve as a morality tale. *Honeyland* does not document; it preaches.



In casting golden light over Hatidže's poverty and dedication, over her ability to be accepting and to live in harmony with nature, the film endows her with moral superiority and depicts her lifestyle as something to be aspired to. Indeed, the proposition of a simple sedentary life, close to one's roots and respectful of nature's gentle ways, is a moral imperative for today. Hatidže's filial devotion is presented as so much superior to the mayhem that the family of settlers brings along – they are rushed, dirty and noisy, they are disrespectful and violent. Their young son disapproves and will, sooner or later, run away and cut ties with his stressed and disheveled father; through him, the film shows how the ideal next generation leans to Hatidže's ways. Indeed, the film seems to say, this is the lifestyle that we all ought to choose if we care for the planet and for the survival of humankind. We must drop jet-setting, stop being high-consuming high-flyers, slow down. Look at the sky and embrace the land. Bring the bees back. Meditate. Atone.

For its inspiring and enchanting message, *Honeyland* relies on a sugar-coated representation of underdevelopment. Another documentary could have been made with the same material and in the same place. It would show the extreme isolation and neglect of ethnic minorities

by their government, the abject poverty they live in, their limited life opportunities, their lack of basic amenities, and their shortage of schooling and health care. We see Hatidže go to market in Skopje to sell a few jars of her miraculous honey; when one looks up the place, one realizes it is 60 kilometers away from where she lives – so this is quite a journey and not the result of her casually popping into the city as the film shows it. She may sell a few jars of her honey for 15 Euro a piece – yet how many can she sell in a place where people have no money? Even if she managed to sell ten jars, it would be 150 Euro, her revenue for the season...

Hatidže's life of self-sustainability – like the lives of many at the margins in this part of the world – is not one of choice but one of lacking choices. The political realities of isolation, mismanagement, and corruption coerce her to be what she is – a beekeeper, looking for nourishment from nature, hiding in a ruined furrow with her mother. It is a story of survival, not one of the Rousseauist *retour a la nature*.

But if the filmmakers were to simply show the reality, most people would not have seen this film today nor would we be talking about it here. Filmmakers from isolated countries – and this is as true about the Balkans as it is about many other places – cannot gain attention unless they resort to self-exoticism. Stitching the narrative in a certain way and asking their subjects to re-enact certain aspects that enhance the enchanting moral tale are simple responses to market demand. This is what sells at festivals and what is in demand for international distribution, so this is what young directors like Tamara Kotevska and Ljubo Stefanov have learned to offer from early on. Nothing new here: this type of market demand has been driving some of the most successful filmmaking from the Balkans for decades now; the work of acclaimed surreal exuberance expert Emir Kusturica comes to mind. The young generation, too, have a good product – and one that sells better than wild bee honey.

