

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES

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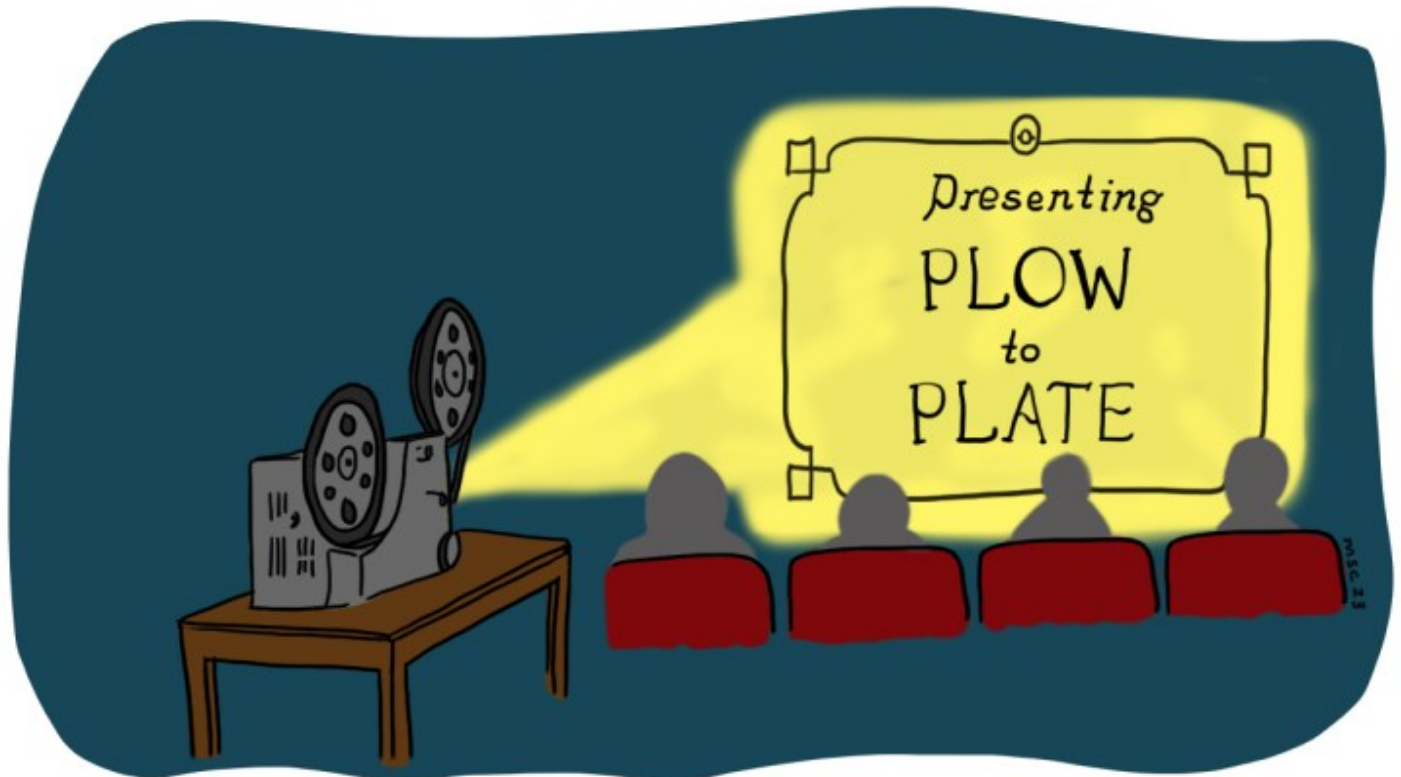


Illustration by Maggie Carson

More Than Honey

By Adam Rabiner

Having worked as a beekeeper in the Central African Republic right after college as a Peace Corps volunteer, I know a fair amount about bees, but I still learned a lot from the documentary *More Than Honey*. The filmmakers flew around the world four times and covered a lot of ground, literally and figuratively. Besides honey, topics include: modern Western beekeeping in the U.S. versus smaller-scale examples in Europe; queen breeding; swarming and colony splitting; the respective roles of male drones and female workers; modern scientific studies on the brain and mind of a bee, as well as the intelligence of an individual bee versus that of the collective hive; bee communication; bee diseases, including Colony Collapse Disorder; the role of bees (and humans in China) in pollination; and a lot more.

MODERN-DAY FILM CAMERAS CAPTURE BEES MAGNIFIED HUNDREDS OF TIMES SO THAT THEY APPEAR BIRDLIKE IN SIZE.

As much as the film is a veritable fount of entomological information, what I found most astonishing about the movie was the cinematography, especially when paired with its soundtrack, the combination of which is simply jaw-dropping. Modern-day film cameras capture bees magnified hundreds of times so that they appear birdlike in size. The cameras get inside the inner recesses of a bee's secret lair, showing her feeding a queen, molding a queen cell, emerging from one or performing a waggle dance to convey the direction and distance of pollinating plants.

Similarly, cameras capture a drone and queen in flight, mating in mid-air and the drone dropping to the ground dead from his sacrificial (and one would hope satisfying) act of procreation. The world is seen from the bee's point of view, as if a mini camera were mounted on her back. In one particularly poignant closeup, you see a bee, perched on an almond flower, being sprayed with fungicide. She clings to her branch, withstanding this chemical shower, but eventually succumbs and falls to the ground.

IN AN EXTREMELY SAD AND MOVING SCENE, WE WATCH BEEKEEPER FRED JAGGI, WHO HAS JUST BEEN TOLD THAT HIS COLONY WAS INFECTED WITH FOUL BROOD, SET ABOUT GASSING HIS BEES.

Apart from this technical virtuosity, cinematographer Jörg Jeshel captures all the natural beauty of the Swiss Alps and Austria. Traditional beekeeper Fred Jaggi looks like he could be a character right out of *The Sound of Music*. A genial beekeeper, Jaggi did not want to follow in his father and grandfather's footsteps because he did not wish to

get stung. He decided he was “no sissy” only when his father told him he would sell the hives if there was no one to take over the family business. In an extremely sad and moving scene, we watch Jaggi, who has just been told that his colony was infected with foul brood, set about gassing his bees. He then then sweeps their carcasses into a pit, along with frames and other equipment, and sets it all on fire—a devastating emotional and economic loss.

Jaggi’s counterpart is John Miller, owner of Miller Honey Farms in Newcastle, California. He, too, comes from a long line of beekeepers. But while Jaggi has kept things more or less small-scale, Miller has followed the capitalist imperative to grow the family business so that everything is ten-fold the scale it was in prior generations: the costs, the power used, the inventory, the number of hives, trucks, distances travelled, output, etc. Miller still cares about the bees, but he admits that he probably does not have the same emotional connection to them that he once did or that earlier generations of Millers did. They are more of a commodity to him. And given the devastation wrought to his bees by Colony Collapse Disorder, it would be too painful to take their deaths too much to heart. When listening to the buzzing of bees, he hears “the sound of money.”

Toward the end of the film, we are introduced to a third beekeeper, another American, Fred Terry. Unlike Miller, who is a stand-in for the straightlaced commercial beekeeper businessman, Terry seems like more of a laidback Arizonan ex-hippy. He talks about getting to know and gaining respect for the Africanized (killer) bees who escaped from a breeding experiment in Brazil many years ago and eventually arrived at our borders. Terry likens the fear of these bees to Americans’ distrust and suspicion of “the other,” namely undocumented migrants. He admires the ability of killer bees to survive and thrive under conditions that thwart the more mellow European bees he had been accustomed to working with, and he surmises that long after human beings are gone from this planet, “there will be bees.”

More Than Honey, May 9, 2023 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link: <https://plowtoplatefilms.weebly.com/upcoming-events.html>