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## Film Review:

# Japanese Obsession with Insects Examined in Documentary Film

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No, it's not a sequel to *Mothra vs. Godzilla*. *Queen Beetle Conquers Tokyo* is a documentary which examines the significance of *mushi* (bugs) in Japanese society. Not since the French documentary *Microcosmos* (1996) has there been a film so appreciative of the insect world. *Queen Beetle Conquers Tokyo* examines why insects get more respect in Japan than anywhere else in the world.

Produced by New York writer/director Jessica Oreck and entomologist Akito Kawahara, *Queen Beetle Conquers Tokyo* was screened at Toronto's Hot Docs 2011 film festival in May. The reflective film provoked one insectophobe in attendance to declare, "Wow, when you see them up close and you're learning about them, [insects] are kind of beautiful!" Canada has a world-class insectarium in Montreal, a smaller one in Newfoundland, and a Bug Zoo in Victoria, BC. But in

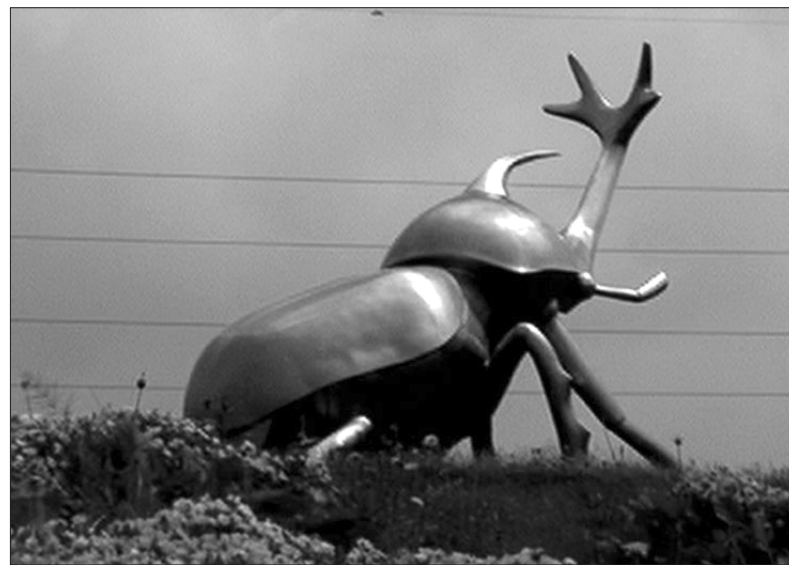
Japan beetle mania is everywhere, and Oreck's film examines the roots of this fascinating fascination.

Whereas the hero in a typical American bug film is Shatner (*Kingdom of the Spiders*, 1977) in Japanese films and anime the hero may have six legs. Sega's wildly successful *Mushi King* is the most famous of many Japanese video games featuring insects. In Japan, live beetles can be bought at shops or even from vending machines, but such delights are not limited to indiscriminate little boys (known as *konchu shonen*, "insect boy"). *Queen Beetle* shows a gleeful boy at home bowing to his new *kabuto* (helmet) rhinoceros beetle, but also follows a pair of women at Japan's Tokyu Hands department store shopping for bug-keeping supplies, a crowd gathered after dark at a firefly viewing site, and a lepidopterist who says his butterfly collection is "like a diary" through which he can trace a lifetime of memories. Bugs are big business in Japan, some large or rare specimens selling for hundreds or thousands of

dollars. A bug shop owner featured in the film shows off his Ferrari, purchased with his insect earnings.

The film is no mere freak show of sausage-sized grubs and the impossibly large Japanese Giant Hornet. Much of the film features a voice over by bestselling author and retired professor of anatomy Dr. Takeshi Yoro, described by *The Japan Times* as "one of the foremost thinkers on the condition of contemporary Japan." Yoro discusses the concept of "beauty in all things," or *mono no aware*, and its role in the Japanese psyche. Yoro says that, amidst rapid modernization and urbanization, Japan feels nostalgia for the disappearing rice fields. He discusses Shinto and Buddhist ideas about reincarnation and the ephemeral nature of life. "If you are open-minded toward insects, you will learn from them," he says, adding that in Japan an insect is more than a pet; it reveals the history of a culture.

*Queen Beetle Conquers Tokyo* can be purchased on DVD at the website: [beetlequeen.bigcartel.com](http://beetlequeen.bigcartel.com)



**Queen Beetle Conquers Tokyo** (dir: Jessica Oreck, 2009) was screened at the 2011 Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival held in Toronto from April 26 to May 6.

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