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Movie Review: Sweet Grass

By **Dan Ryan**

Sweet Grass (2009)

Produced by Ilisa Barbash

Recorded by Lucien Castaing-Taylor

A documentary tribute to the last of the modern day shearers, Sweet Grass follows the summer migration of a group of cowboys and their enormous flock of sheep. Set in the beautifully scenic mountains of South Central Montana, Sweet Grass tells the tale of the migration of a flock of thousands of sheep to their summer pasture located in the heart of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness. The film provides an in-depth look at the struggles of a family of sheep ranchers in rural Montana as they fight to maintain a massive flock of sheep. The film takes the audience through the life of a sheep rancher from shearing, to lambing, to the sheep drive. It provides a never before seen look at the lost tradition of driving sheep to summer pasture high in the mountains of Montana. As the film documents the epic journey from the small town of Big Timber to the high mountain pastures just north of Yellowstone Park, the struggles between man and nature, life and death, fear and hope are examined through the eyes of the Montana cowboy.

From the onset of the very first scene, it is obvious that Sweet Grass is a tale of the final frontier. The natural sound of the wind whipping across the hills permeates the theatre as the main character ambles onto screen. The fluffy, semi-white sheep are without a doubt the central focus of the film. The story line is introduced by a series of extended, static shots focusing on the sheep and the subtleties of their character. These shots establish the overall slower pace to the film, yet effectively draw the audience into the subject through the use of breath taking photography coupled with the humorous quirkiness of the livestock.

Castaing-Taylor uses the visual motion of thousands of sheep to advance the story of the Allestead family sheep ranch throughout the film. The ranch which had been in operation for over 100 years is truly the heart and soul of the Allestead family, it is the life force that keeps the family running. Castaing-Taylor is able to effectively portray the importance of the ranch to the well being of the family through the largest and last sheep migration into the Absaroka-Beartooth wilderness. The film really does use the tale of thousands of sheep to take a deeper look into the hardships and struggles of Montana's working class.

When it comes to the actual film making, the film was shot over the course of three years on a 35mm camera. The time it took to shoot the film was not the only obstacle, the real difficulty lay in the challenge of shooting a full-length film in the remote and rugged mountains of Montana. With the use of solar panels to power his batteries and an overwhelming desire to produce a visually stunning depiction of the struggle of shepherding, Castaing-Taylor was able to shoot a truly impressive film with only his ideas and his camera.

I really found this film to be beautiful depiction of the little known profession of sheep ranching. By weaving an intricate tapestry of majestic mountain views, interpersonal struggle, and treacherous terrain, the film is able to tell the story of Pat Connelly and John Ahernt as they fight to maintain their flock of sheep. Utilizing very little dialogue and only natural sound to back the pictures, I felt that the film did get rather slow from time to time. The natural sound of the sheep initially drew me right into the film, but as the story continued to progress the extended, high volume noise of the sheep began to take away from the characters. It was overwhelming at times and really made it difficult to understand the soft spoken cowboys. Another criticism I have of the film is that it didn't necessarily set up the importance and immensity of the sheep drive. I am familiar with the event and so I was quick to pick up on what exactly was happening, but I feel that a majority of the audience didn't quite grasp what was happening throughout the first half hour of the film. I think that by incorporating more dialogue from the hard working ranchers, would have providing a better understanding of the scenes when things like grafting, shearing, and tagging were happening.

Overall, I found the film to be both visually and artistically stunning. Really a one of a kind film, Sweet Grass mixes the utter hopelessness associated with being alone in the mountains for months on end, with the dry humor of the old time sheepherders of Big Sky country. This film will make you nervous, make you laugh, and make you think all within the time frame of 101 minutes. It really paints an intimate picture of the western frontier, a picture that you won't soon forget.

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