

A Cinema Guild Release

sweetgrass

a film by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor

101 minutes / 35mm / 1.85 / Dolby Digital 5.1 / In English / Not Rated
Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

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Synopsis

An unsentimental elegy to the American West, *Sweetgrass* follows the last modern-day cowboys to lead their flocks of sheep up into Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth mountains for summer pasture. This astonishingly beautiful yet unsparing film reveals a world in which nature and culture, animals and humans, vulnerability and violence are all intimately meshed.

About the Film

Sweetgrass premiered at the 2009 Berlin Film Festival. It has since played at the New York Film Festival, the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, and AFI Festival, among others.

Recordist's Statement

We began work on this film in the spring of 2001. Living at the time in Colorado, we heard about a family of Norwegian-American shepherders in Montana, who were among the last to trail their band of sheep long distances — about a hundred and fifty miles each year, all of it on hoof — up to the mountains for summer pasture. I visited them that April during lambing, and was so taken with the magnitude of their life — at once its allure and its arduousness — that we ended up working with them, their friends, and their Irish-American hired hands intensively over the coming years.

Sweetgrass is one of nine films to have emerged from the footage we have shot over the last decade, the only one intended principally for theatrical exhibition. As they have been shaped through editing, the films seem to have become as much about the sheep as about their herders. The humans and animals that populate them commingle and crisscross in ways that have taken us by surprise. *Sweetgrass* depicts the twilight of a defining chapter in the history of the American West, the dying world of Western herders — descendants of Scandinavian and northern European homesteaders — as they struggle to make a living in an era increasingly inimical to their interests. Set in Big Sky country, in a landscape of remarkable scale and beauty, the film portrays a lifeworld colored by an intense propinquity between nature and culture — one that has been integral to the fabric of human existence throughout history, but which is almost unimaginable for the urban masses of today.

Spending the summers high in the Rocky mountains, among the herders, the sheep, and their predators, was a transcendent experience that will stay with me for the rest of my days.

— Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Producer's Statement: How it started or The Last Sheep Drive

"I am the last guy to do this and someone ought to make a film about it." So spoke old-time rancher Lawrence Allested in 2001, about the fact that he was the last person to drive his sheep up into Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth mountain range on a grazing permit that had been handed down in his Norwegian-American family for generations. Filmmakers and anthropologists living at the time in Boulder, Colorado, we had wanted to make a film about the American West, and were instantly intrigued by the topic.

We drove up to Big Timber that summer ready to make a film called "The Last Sheep Drive." Our cars were loaded to the brim with three camera rigs, a bunch of radio microphones, our two kids, a dog and a babysitter. For the first few weeks we'd wake up at 4 a.m. to help drive the sheep through town and then up the roads towards the hills. It was a family adventure for us, and a family enterprise for the ranchers — with kids, grandparents, neighbors and passers-by all helping. It soon became clear, however, that because of the growing grizzly bear and grey wolf population, taking the kids up into the mountains would be impossible. So Lucien went up without us, hiking and riding, while I filmed other events in town—rodeos, dog trials, shooting contests, haying, the Sweetgrass County Fair...

When Lucien got down from the mountains that fall, he was unrecognizable – bearded beyond belief, 20 lbs lighter, carrying a ton of footage, and limping. He would later be diagnosed with trauma-induced advanced degenerative arthritis, caused by carrying the equipment day and night, and need double foot surgery. When we started to watch the footage, we realized that we had two, or more, different films. (And so many different points of view that I thought about calling the film "A Piece of the Big Sky.") We decided the most compelling story for a theatrical film was the original one we'd been interested in: the sheep drive itself — as ritual, as history, as challenge. Even then, we had a good 200 hours of footage to wade through. Little did we know that this would take us about eight years. In the meantime, we went back up to film lambing, shearing, the following year's sheep drive, and the one after that. We even moved to the East Coast. (We started joking that we'd call the film, "The Penultimate Sheep Drive.") Most of the footage, however is from that first summer. In 2006, the ranch was sold, along with most of the sheep. Now the film is finally finished. As for a title, we'd started using "Big Timber," as it was the name of the town where the drive began, but as fitting as that was for the title of a Western, it implied a film about logging. We finally settled on "Sweetgrass." While the journey is tremendously hard, it is undertaken not just for the literal goal of reaching (sweet) grass, but also to carry on tradition against all sorts of odds. There is a silent 1925 documentary, called *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) by Merian C. Cooper, Ernest Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison, about an heroic seasonal trek (transhumance) of herds and Bakhtiari herdsmen in Persia. *Sweetgrass* tips its hat to that film, and is a tribute to past and contemporary people who still manage to eke out a bittersweet living on the land.

Filmmakers' Biographies

Barbash and Castaing-Taylor's work seeks to conjugate the ambiguity and provocations of art with a documentary attachment to the immediate flux of lived experience. Working in Montana since 2001, they have deployed different stylistic registers in film, video, and photography to evoke at once the attractions and the ambivalence of the pastoral by juxtaposing monumental and mythological Western landscapes with multiple tracks of subjective synchronous sound. Forthcoming works in 2010 include *Hell Roaring Creek*, *Coom Bidy*, *Into-the-jug (geworfen)*, *Turned at the Pass*, *Breakfast*, *Daybreak on the Bed Ground*, *Bedding Down*, and *The High Trail*.

Previous works include *Made in USA* (1990), a film about sweatshops and child labor in the Los Angeles garment industry, and *In and Out of Africa* (1992), an ethnographic video about authenticity, taste, and racial politics in the transnational African art market, which won eight international awards. Their work has been exhibited and the subject of symposia at the Smithsonian Institution and the British Museum, and also exhibited at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and the James Gallery at CUNY Graduate Center.

Their written publications include *Visualizing Theory* (Taylor, ed., Routledge, 1994), *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking* (California, 1997), *Transcultural Cinema*, a collection of essays by the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall (Taylor ed., Princeton, 1998), and *The Cinema of Robert Gardner* (Berg, 2008). Taylor was the founding editor of the American Anthropological Association's journal *Visual Anthropology Review* (1991–94).

Ilisa Barbash is Associate Curator of Visual Anthropology at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Lucien Castaing-Taylor is the Director of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, and former Director of the Film Study Center at Harvard University, where he also teaches in Visual & Environmental Studies and in Anthropology.

Crew

Produced by

Ilisa Barbash

Recorded by

Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Sound Editing and Mix by

Ernst Karel

Digital Post-Production by

Patrick Lindenmaier

Featuring

John Ahern, Elaine Allestad,
Lawrence Allestad, Pat Connolly

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