

# PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: SWEETGRASS

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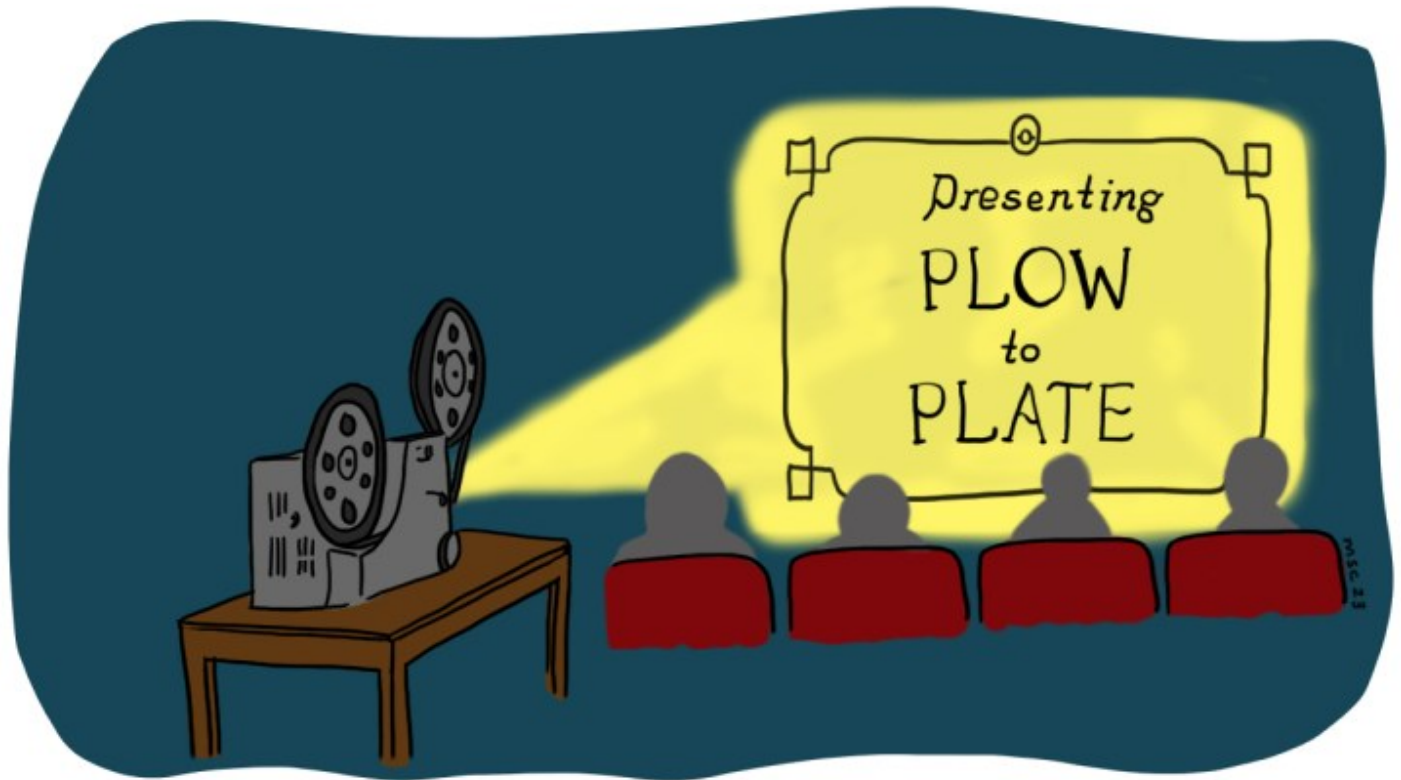


Illustration by Maggie Carson.

*By Adam Rabiner*

*Sweetgrass* is a documentary about the Allestad family's final sheep drive, the last one hosted in Montana, in the summer of 2003. Directors Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor are visual anthropologists whose style of ethnographic filmmaking bears witness to this dying tradition and way of life without resorting to voice-overs or title cards. The camera observes the action and conversations, and while the cowboys and cowgirls may speak (or sing) to the sheep, horses or dogs, they never address the filmmakers.

While sheep still graze public land and cow-people still exist, the social scientists captured the end of an era and way of life. When John Ahern and Pat Connolly drive their 3,000 sheep into the mountainous Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, first steering the flock down a rural town's saloon-lined main street like an animal parade, it's a journey that four generations of their ancestors partook in.

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They are aided by some modern-day technology—walkie-talkies, cell phones, flashlights, and telescopic rifle scopes—but at its core, the trip is the same it has ever been. Their main tools and companions are their horses and sheepherding dogs. They cook over a heavy, cast iron, wood-burning stove, build fires at night to warm themselves and carry a white cloth lean-to tent, supported by wooden branches and rope, that looks like something the Donner Party might have packed. Despite the few amenities, the odyssey remains as physically grueling and dangerous now as before.

As consumers of wool or meat, we are far removed from the animals. Our sweater or lamb chop is simply a commodity to be purchased and enjoyed. Not so for the humans in *Sweetgrass*. Their relationship is deeper and more complex. Though we see them helping to deliver a baby, assisting a newborn to latch on to a nipple or even hand-feeding milk to a lamb via a tube and straw, these animals are decidedly not pets. They are intimate, grappling with them while shearing their wool or straddling them to rustle to a particular pen. But while the farm dog is named Coco and a horse is called Jake, the sheep are numbered and marked with green paint.

The relationship between the humans and sheep ranges from affection, tenderness and protection to outright rage and frustration. In an early scene, before departing on their 150-mile trek to the mountainous pasture lands, one rancher says to a lamb, as he carries him to his mother, “Well, junior, we’ve got to find you some milk. Come here. Oh Lordy, Lordy. There you go.” A bit later, you see a man dressing another young lamb in a custom-fit wool sweater to keep him warm.

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On the other hand, in a later scene, already deep into the trip, worn down, exhausted and injured, a cowboy fires off curses that would earn this film an R rating. He screams at his wards, telling them they can “eat shit and die,” then calls his mom from a hilltop for consolation. He tells her his dog can’t walk and won’t leave camp, his horse is ribs and bones, his knee is popping, it’s bullshit, the sheep are ornery, and he’s miserable. He is at the end of his rope, on the edge of tears. You feel sorry for him. This scene, more than any other, reveals the immense physical and mental challenges that this voyage entails and why, ultimately, it is becoming a thing of the past.

Before getting off the phone with his mom, Pat tells her that he doesn’t want to grow to hate the mountains. Majestically beautiful when filmed from a distance, their steep slopes, which the sheep love to climb and must be wrangled back from, are forbiddingly dangerous. *Sweetgrass* is gorgeous to behold. It’s obvious why so many cowboy westerns are set in Montana. An image of the two men riding horseback on the crest of a hill at dusk, like shadows, or a morning mist lingering over the precious sweetgrass may stay with you long after you are done watching the movie. And a big part of the film’s soundtrack is the sheep’s conversations. The baas, bleats, mehs, and other bleeping sounds may ring in your ears for some time.

*Sweetgrass*, Tuesday, December 9, 2025 at 7 p.m.

Screening link >

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*From October 2025 through March 2026, Plow to Plate is exclusively featuring Grasshopper Film documentaries.*

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