



**CAPITALISM:** As he tries to keep his own afloat, competition from big companies, cheap labour from the East, and smart machinery all make life increasingly difficult for one Dutch shepherd.

**Emma Bakkevik**

Emma Bakkevik is a translator and freelance writer. She is a regular contributor to Modern Times Review.

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Sheep Hero

(Schapenheld)

Director(s) Ton van  
Zantvoort

Producer(s) Ton van  
ZantvoortMarc  
ThelosenKoert Davidse

Countrythe Netherlands

When I imagine a shepherd, I imagine a peaceful, nomadic existence somewhere in the mountains – a lonesome character surrounded by green hills and sheep. This ancient occupation, dating back thousands of years, is something I would have thought survived only in the most rural of places,

until I watched *Sheep Hero*, a documentary about modern-day shepherd Stijn from the Netherlands. As a result of the film, the hardships shepherds face in current society soon contrasted my romantic vision of sheep herding.

## Keeping tradition alive

Stijn became a shepherd because he wanted to keep the tradition alive, and in spite of everything, he still holds on to this ideal. When I talked to the filmmaker, Ton van Zantvoort, after the screening at Kosovo's *Dokufest*, he explains his reasons for making *Sheep Hero*. «It's not really about the sheep», he says, with a wry smile. «People laughed at me in the beginning, for making a film about a shepherd, but it's a universal story. Stijn, like everyone else, has to provide for his family, so he worries about his financial situation». Apparently, making an honest living is not enough if you want to survive in this dog-eat-dog world. «My purpose is always to criticize society. I want to make people think about which way we're going,» says van Zantvoort.

*Due to the free market, companies can hire someone cheaper to graze the land where Stijn lives.*

Does everything today have to be cost-efficient? In *Sheep Hero*, Stijn deals with countless challenges that have nothing to do with his profession; he is forced to become an entrepreneur, promoting his work at fairs and lobbying at political hearings. Due to the free market, companies can hire someone cheaper to graze where Stijn lives, resulting in him driving for hours looking for land for his own sheep. He has several such confrontations with «civilization»; at one point he is herding the sheep through town, in the middle of traffic, and people get annoyed. Then, the police give him a 300-euro fine for not picking up some droppings in the street. Things get more absurd when Stijn's own parents go to meet the police and clean up the poo. «Back in the day people would have fought over those droppings – it makes for great fertilizer,» van Zantvoort comments. I guess times are changing.

## A threat to the system

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Our sheep hero is a kind of anti-hero. In vain, Stijn tries to find more ways to earn money, by organizing barbecues and cutting the sheep's wool in public. He stresses over his financial situation and bickers with his family. I share his frustration – the pressure to make profit is forcing him out of his comfort zone. Does it have to be like this? Do we have to play by these rules? Stijn is not a political activist; he just wants to be a self-sufficient shepherd – but by merely being who he is, he poses a threat to the system. With this documentary, van Zantvoort invites us to see what he sees. «The question is, how to live in a world that conflicts with your ideals? And the conclusion is it's really hard. You have to follow the rules; only as long as you work, pay your rent and your insurance, and lead a 9-5 life, will you fit in». By always seeking more growth, our society model is limiting our possibilities. We are trapped in a rigid structure where there's no room for a sustainable lifestyle – because it's not profitable enough.



*Sheep Hero, a film by Ton van Zantvoort*

«The fact is, that even the shepherd today needs to function within a neoliberal system. People say, oh, he's not an entrepreneur – well exactly, that's why he became a shepherd,» says van Zantvoort. The filmmaker admits to being quite pessimistic. «We're stuck in this system. Stijn tried, and it didn't work. I'm hoping people will wake up, but if we don't change our economic system, we need to produce more and more, which is not sustainable – I mean, even a child can see that. But people prefer to put their heads in the sand.» I remember Stein's words early in the film, where he explained how the sheep keep the heathland healthy, while the machines brought in by competing companies destroy the soil and the biodiversity of the area. The traditional method is obviously better for the environment; the question is, if our cost efficiency-obsessed society is willing to choose quality over profit. What will it take to shift the focus from profit to what is actually beneficial for the natural world, and thus for us?

## Failure is not...

It's not over 'till it's over, though, and somehow, Stijn's story inspires me. Failure is not failing to win against the system – failure is giving in to the system. «As a documentarist, I feel a bit obliged; I need to tell these stories. And the film should speak for itself. Hopefully, it will make people think, and act. Because now it's up to you; I did my part.» van Zantvoort uses Stijn's story to say something universal, and his documentary is an invitation to take action. We should not be swayed into thinking like the economic system that represses us. After all, it's our life, and it's our responsibility not to sit idly by while our ideals get trampled.

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