

## **Review of *Chasing Wild Horses***

by Peter d'Entremont, 2008.

In the opening of the documentary titled ***Chasing Wild Horses***, fashion photographer Roberto Dutesco states "Beauty has a way of teaching us what matters in life".

The line is compelling. It raises a number of fascinating questions such as 'What is beauty?', 'How can beauty be a teacher?' and 'What exactly does matter in life?'

Unfortunately, the documentary teaches more about the life and trials of a photographer than wild horses or beauty. Roberto's story sometimes clashes and occasionally subtracts from a fascinating subject. The result is a story that often appears both pandering and presumptuous.

The essential weakness of the story is that Roberto stands between us and Sable, like someone talking about the Mona Lisa while obscuring our view of the painting. His quasi philosophic narrative compounds this construct while remaining an obvious editing room manipulation that attempts to connect a preconceived structure. Yes, I am interested in beauty and special places like Sable Island but do we really need Roberto to guide us?

The narrative occasionally sounds righteous and I wonder why the author is trying so hard to convince us of his noble ways. By the end of the film, the narrative takes on added meaning. Roberto states that he wants to 'touch people's hearts and bring to the surface those primitive instincts, some of that beauty that every one has'. This noble idea, however, transforms into the basis for a sales pitch, when his photographs are marketed at the end of the story.

The imposition of Roberto on the Sable landscape is as jarring as the narrative. Roberto ironically declares "Sable Island is a primitive place and if you go there with a keen eye to explore and just not intrude but just observe." Refusing his own advice, he chases and relentlessly stalks the horses with his many cameras. The title, *Chasing Wild Horses*, best describes Roberto's pursuit of 'beauty' and observational prowess.

When he pauses in his pursuit, Roberto laments that he cannot make a horse pose and admits that he may not treat them as horses but as fashion models. Incredibly, he justifies his approach saying that they are 'fashionable' horses. This imposition of culture largely defines his relationship with the horses. He photographs the horses as if they were fashion models requiring stage directions. 'Come on guys, play a bit'. 'Beautiful portrait guys.' 'A bit of biting, maybe?' 'One bite, a love bite. That would be perfect'. "Can you pose? One picture, maybe two."

All this constant chatter would be so much more tolerable if Roberto had not already declared Sable to be a non-verbal island.

There is no question that Sable Island, silent or otherwise, exposes suffering and death as common occurrences in the natural life cycle. At one point, Roberto revealingly refuses to photograph a horse with a broken leg. Is it because this is not a 'fashionable horse'? The fact that he did not capture this moment of impending death suggests that it would have betrayed the conceit behind the fashion and beauty industry.

Fashion photography and apparently horse photography may be more about using art to turn life into still life than 'teaching us what matters in life'.

***Chasing Wild Horses*** not only fails to explore beauty and meaning but most of its own philosophical narrative. Instead the story focuses on Roberto's personal discovery of the primitive nature of Sable Island, in particular the horses of Sable Island. This could have made a compelling story and provided some in-depth insight into this special place. Instead, it becomes a commercial preamble for the sale of Roberto's horse photographs.

The final photographs are described as 'gifts being offered on a plate'. In the last story act, people visit his NY studio to buy the 'gifts', now framed and sold as art. Roberto feels that 'each photograph reveals a section of their own soul' and that "this beauty will provide the compassion to leave Sable Island alone, untouched". Does this mean that the doors should now be closed to other exploiting commercial interests? How profitable would such an

exclusive arrangement be for Roberto?

The film justifies this exploitation through the argument that Roberto provides a service for the many people that can not experience Sable Island first hand. The flaw with this argument rests with the fact that we never get an in-depth view of Sable Island and that we must suffer Roberto perspective in order to 'see' Sable Island.

On the other hand, in Roberto's photographs we see only the horses, no Roberto. This still doesn't give credence to the exploitation argument despite the fact that more people will see the pictures. The wild horses of Sable Island are now a commodity and a curiosity for disconnected urbanites, available only to those that can afford such 'gifts'.

Ultimately, the objectification of Sable's wild horses like the objectification of women provides a sterilized view of life. It sells superficiality while disguising it as beauty. Is this the meaning of life or the teachings of beauty? Or is it just another clever way to exploit natural beauty, this time through wild horses?

Note: Peter d'Entremont is an award winning filmmaker. His documentaries include *Iceberg Alley* (Award for Science Communication, 1984, Canadian Science Writers Association), and *Teaching Peace in a Time of War* (World Peace Film Award, 2006, World Movement for Global Democracy, Lucknow, India). Peter visited Sable Island several times during the 1980s. ZL.