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HARVARD GAZETTE ARCHIVES



At Brown University, Ross McElwee majored in creative writing but the idea of telling stories on film had already begun to fascinate him. (Staff photo Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard News Office)

The world according to McElwee

A documentary filmmaker's unique personal vision

By Ken Gewertz
Harvard News Office

To anyone whose idea of a documentary film is an investigation of a specific subject using original footage, interviews, and archival images, the films of Ross McElwee may seem quirky, to say the least.

His latest, "Bright Leaves," might be loosely described as an exploration of the tobacco industry, but rather than delving into carcinogens and corporate cover-ups, McElwee dwells on the machinations that thwarted his tobacco-growing great-grandfather from founding a major cigarette dynasty and how that failure has impacted his own life. Along the way, he weaves together autobiography, philosophy, and social commentary, while parading before us an extraordinary cast of characters whose assertive individuality seems in no way inhibited by the presence of McElwee's handheld camera. The film has won numerous awards and made it into quite a few best film lists, including that of the New York Times.

McElwee has been teaching on and off as a visiting lecturer in the Visual and Environmental Studies (VES) Department since 1981. Beginning September 2003, he assumed a more permanent role as professor of the practice of filmmaking. The appointment assures that more students will have the opportunity to learn from one of today's most original and respected filmmakers.

Born and raised in North Carolina, McElwee earned his bachelor's degree from

Brown University. He majored in creative writing, but the idea of telling stories on film had already begun to fascinate him. After college, a job as a TV cameraman at a local North Carolina station proved a career turning point.

"I was standing behind this huge studio camera, shooting the news, the gospel hour, shows for housewives, but there was something about it that captivated me."

McElwee got the chance to work on a documentary about the elderly called "Six Million Missing Persons" in which quotations from T.S. Eliot accompanied shots of old men swinging metal detectors over refuse-strewn lawns.

"It was pretty dreadful," McElwee said, but the experience helped him define the sort of films he wanted to make.

McElwee was drawn to such cinema vérité icons as Frederick Wiseman, whose 1968 film "Titicut Follies" took an unflinching view of Bridgewater Hospital for the Criminally Insane; Richard Leacock, whose film "Primary" provided a behind-the-scenes look at John F. Kennedy's race for the White House; and Ed Pincus, whose "Diaries" explored the concept of filming the world from a first-person point of view.

McElwee enrolled in the film program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Leacock and Pincus were teaching. There he became a convert to the technique of solo filmmaking, using smaller, lighter cameras and synchronous sound technology to consolidate the roles of director, cameraman, and sound engineer into a single person - himself.

"It was a new way of making films, to eliminate the film crew. You lose some technical polish, but it's much more intimate and less intimidating to your subjects. It allows you to shoot with the autonomy and flexibility of a photojournalist."

The subjects on which McElwee trains his camera lens have changed and evolved, but he has never lost his initial fascination with capturing real life on film.

"I find documentary filmmaking endlessly engaging and intriguing. I'm astonished at how life can offer up new complexities and surprising situations."

He has made about seven feature-length films and several shorts, most of them enthusiastically reviewed by critics who praise his ability to summon artistic coherence from what appears initially to be a capricious tangle of themes and narratives.

Nowhere is this technique more in evidence than in his 1986 breakthrough film, "Sherman's March: A Mediation to the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation." In this movie, McElwee focuses initially on Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and the impact of his devastating Civil War campaign on Southern society, but no sooner has he begun than he seems to become distracted.

The fact that he has just been dumped by his girlfriend leads him to wonder about his problems with women, and presently, instead of filming Civil War battle sites or interviewing historians, he is recording his own often painfully revealing conversations with women he has loved and lost.

But somehow, in the course of this meandering narrative, Gen. Sherman never quite drops out of sight, but rather becomes part of a rich complex of images and ideas that transcends McElwee's tortured personal history. The result is a highly nuanced portrait of a society seen (literally) through one idiosyncratic lens.

In most of McElwee's films, the creator is unmistakably present, either as an off-camera voice, a musing narrator, or, occasionally, as an actor. When asked about this autobiographical element, he is apt to draw parallels with other art forms - Van Gogh's self-portraits or Wordsworth's massive experiment in self-analysis, "The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind." But in a more basic sense, the technique simply works for him.

"Something in me felt a strong disposition to interpret the world through my own experience. There is a danger of solipsism, but it can be a powerful way of looking at the world."

McElwee's films can also be hilariously funny, often at the filmmaker's expense, something else that saves them from being solipsistic.

"Without the comic perspective, I think they would become unbearable."

As a teacher McElwee tries to dissuade his students from producing imitations of his strongly personal style.

"I don't want them to copy me. I don't even show my work in class."

But he does encourage emulation to the extent that he urges his students to film things they're engaged by and avoid imitating Hollywood genres like action films or music videos, even as parody.

"I try to get them to consider other options, alternative ways films can be made."

In McElwee's introductory class the students move very quickly through the fundamentals of shooting and editing so they can begin making short films of one to four minutes duration. After four of these, they work on a more ambitious project, a film of eight to 10 minutes. These films along with those by more advanced students receive a screening at the Carpenter Center during four glorious nights at the end of the semester.

"It forces the students to see their film in a public context, so there's pride at stake. It's a very exciting time."

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