

Ross McElwee's Films: A Reaction By Ricky Leacock

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Ross McElwee is an easy filmmaker to love: His gentle voice, slight goofiness, and clear commitment to the people he films, whether they are friends, family or strangers, have easily made him one of the most important documentary filmmakers of our time and one of the South's favorite sons.

McElwee's films are singular accomplishments. The filmic essays on love, life, the everyday and the never-was that McElwee weaves together are almost always deeply personal and wryly humorous. They reflect on time, place and identity in ways utterly unique to McElwee's filmmaking practice. McElwee does most his own filming and sound recording. He also writes, narrates, does much of the editing and often appears in the frame. It's easy to see why people who love his films often think they know McElwee intimately.

And it's just as easy to see the public impact of his films, his influence on filmmakers across the documentary landscape, and why he's been called a national treasure.

So what's he been doing in Boston for the last 30 years? Raised in Charlotte, N.C., McElwee recounts in *Backyard* his initial departure from the South when he went to college in the Northeast. In his latest film, *Bright Leaves*, the filmmaker traces his family roots back to the great North Carolina tobacco years. His Southern homeland has emerged as character in its own right in films such as *Charleen*, *Backyard*, *Time Indefinite* and *Sherman's March*.

The impact of a new school of verité filmmaking in the early 70s headed by Ricky Leacock and Ed Pincus drew McElwee to the MIT Film Section's Masters Program, where he spent three years shooting as much as he could, often down South. *Charleen*, the intimate portrait of McElwee's former teacher and lasting friend Charleen Swansea; *Backyard*, a study of McElwee's family's class and race relations from the perspective of domestic interactions; and *Space Coast*, a portrait of life entwined with the Space Shuttle all started with film stock from the shelves of the MIT film school.

What distinguished McElwee's films from subjective filmmaking of the 60s and early 70s was a kind of leveling with the spectator and willingness to admit that filmmaking is an unexpected, unruly process, even an unwitting project of imperfect human subjects. So *Sherman's March*, which begins with a grandiose plan to trace General Sherman's murderous march through the South, ends up channeling Sherman as McElwee documents his own quest to patch a broken heart with the love of a good Southern woman. *Time Indefinite* was conceived as a chronicle of McElwee's engagement and marriage to filmmaker, Marilyn Levine. But the death of McElwee's father steers the film into a conversation with the inexorable passing of time.

The influence of Direct Cinema punctured by the honesty of a personal, subjective style make McElwee's work utterly poignant and determinedly entertaining. Never content to contain a film with a plan, McElwee, as in *Six O'Clock News*, invites the unpredictable elements of human existence by seeking out the people and the unkempt stories behind the formulaic treatment they receive on television news. McElwee's is a kind of documentary filmmaking that honors the bits of life that most defy tidy narration and finite resolution. A generation of filmmakers has been influenced by the bravery, humor and beautifully rendered self-reflection of this filmmaker. This award celebrates all of that and the many films surely to come.