

#52: Sherman's March

(USA, 1986; dir. Ross McElwee; cin. Ross McElwee)

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Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* may be the most convincingly lovelorn movie I have ever seen. When it was released on American screens in 1986, half a decade after McElwee lensed all of the footage, the movie would have made a terrific double-feature with Eric Rohmer's *The Green Ray*, a quiet, enormously compassionate, but wonderfully un-precious narrative about a lonely, attractive, but moody French thirtysomething who can't find anyone to go on vacation with her, doesn't feel comfortable in any of the places she goes, and very nearly resigns herself to a singleton's life. McElwee's memoir, filmed in the immediate aftermath of an unexpected breakup with his New York City girlfriend, offers a more homespun, masculine variation on similar themes, though McElwee's problem is not so much a dearth of companionship but a bewildering abundance of women who briefly "click" as lovers but who soon find reasons to part ways, except when McElwee beats them to it. *Sherman's March*, then, records his humorously hangdog sojourn through the American South: the director's home territory, densely populated with relatives, friends, and acquaintances who are trying to atomize his creeping dejection and couple him off with one Dixieland bachelorette or another. One of the first, funniest, and most revealing cuts in the movie carries us from McElwee's stark, empty loft apartment in Manhattan—a direct precursor of the one in *When Harry Met Sally...* where Billy Crystal passes the hours by throwing playing cards into a bowl—to a stationary shot in the lushly verdant North Carolina woods, where McElwee's extended family has convened an entire armada of eligible Southern magnolias, all under the flimsy pretext of a group picnic. As the women pass single-file by McElwee's camera, the military undertone of the shot is not accidental, and in fact it resonates with McElwee's other problem: when he was dumped, the nearly

bankrupt filmmaker had just collected a grant to make a historical documentary about General William Tecumseh Sherman's slash-and-burn cavalcade through the South during the American Civil War. McElwee is hugely, genuinely intrigued by Sherman's story, but in the face of long-lost girlfriends who turn out to be recent divorcées, and synchronized-swimming belles of Virginia, and guitar-playing sirens, and rockabilly blues women, and lavishly impatient matchmakers, who has any headspace left for history? *Sherman's March* strives admirably—sometimes poignantly, often hilariously—to teach us some things about the notorious Yankee marauder, but much to our slightly pitying delight, the gravitational pull of McElwee's broken, optimistic heart is far and away the strongest influence on the film.

One reason why McElwee's film so bountifully transcends its limited and narcissistic premise, distinguishing itself from the mid-quality Woody Allen movies to which mid-80s critics compared it, is that the women for whom McElwee pines emerge as layered, credible, unexpected figures in their own right—persuasive and interesting objects of love, rather than simple avatars of some generalized "womanhood" or empty mirrors in which the filmmaker sees mostly himself. Quite to the contrary, McElwee continually detects interests, expertises, energies, and even manifest foibles in these women that inspire him to be with them, and often to be like them. As much as his dashed hopes for romance provide the film's driving conceit, it is palpable throughout that he is hugely, creatively, and indeed hormonally inspired by his encounters with Mary, the middle-class fashion model for charity auctions; Pat, the deluded but indomitable aspiring starlet; Claudia, a kind and generous single mother with wispy premonitions of the Second Coming; Winnie, a doctoral candidate in linguistics living a hermit's life on a coastal island; Jackie, a onetime lover and now an anti-nuclear activist in South Carolina; Dedee, a singer and girl's-school teacher who gradually reveals her ardent Mormonism; Joyce, an affable rock 'n' roll

frontwoman and sometime lounge singer in red leather pants; and Karen, an introspective lawyer who can't make up her mind about Ross or about her longtime on-again, off-again boyfriend Ken, who collects life-sized statues of hippos and rhinoceri. If *Sherman's March* evokes Allen, albeit in an utterly different regional milieu, it conjures only the best: *Annie Hall*, with a whole cornucopia of very different Annies. The same energizing, appealing radiance also emanates from women in the film who aren't McElwee's inamorata, such as his sister Dedee, who confides conspiratorially about her recent eye-left and "fanny-tuck" surgeries; and the vulgar, protean, uproarious Charleen, a former teacher and mentor who threatens to castrate Ross if he doesn't put down his camera when he's on dates, and who tries to school her errant pupil in the ardent vocabularies of love. Inside of eight minutes, she advises the nebbishy Ross to intone to the ill-at-ease singing Mormon, "'You're the only woman I've ever seen, I would die for you, I live for you, I breathe for you!' It doesn't matter that you don't know her! That's irrelevant!"

Charleen means what she says, just like she means it when she refers to the Civil War as "the late, great unpleasantness," and just as everyone in this offhandedly riotous movie means every crazy, dreamy, downcast, eggheaded, space-cadet thing that they say. Pat's spontaneous account of her ideal starring role is an early set-piece—it involves her curing cancer on a tropical island with her Tarzan lover, before traveling to Venus over a score of Stevie Wonder songs, getting macheted at the neck by her jealous paramour, and returning to Earth as a floating head-cum-prophet of love. The utterly credulous Claudia introduces Ross to an amateur Civil War enthusiast who gripes that the Confederacy has gotten a terrible rap, and that its only mistake was that "slavery should not be enforced, it should be a right—if you want to be a slave, be a slave; if you don't, fine." By no means are the women only presented as figures of fun, in part because Ross is no more clued-in than they are about the functioning world of grown-ups, in part

because he is so sincerely and obviously attracted to them, and in part because a few of them, Winnie and Karen in particular, offer such shrewd and impressive retorts about Ross' own shortcomings and deceptively meek form of bullishness. Unlike a tedious exercise in detached, condescending picaresque like Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*, or even a comparatively wiser film like Payne's *Sideways*, *Sherman's March* is lovingly humane even when it mopes, pokes fun, or leaps to connect the dots between bachelorhood, battlefield violence, and nuclear proliferation. On repeat viewings, the film's tone and perspective gets more complex, while the jokes stay funny, and the technique evinces more craft beneath what looks like a resolutely on-the-fly chronicle. The "characters," if we want to call them that, quickly doff their guises of stereotype and show us sparkling, surprisingly, sometimes silly facets of humanity leading, for better or worse, with its needy, greedy, smiling heart.

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