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McElwee's March--As in Life, There Are No Scripts to Ross McElwee's Films and He Hopes To Keep It That Way

By Paula Hunt, *Movie Maker Magazine*, December 1993

MovieMaker

Ross McElwee had been making his own brand of independent films for a number of years when *Sherman's March* established him as a name in the cinema art house scene in 1985. Originally planned as a documentary recounting General William Tecumseh Sherman's infamous march through the South, its focus was derailed by the filmmaker's breakup with his girlfriend. *Sherman's March* became a chronicle of the women McElwee met on his own march through the South, with small concessions to the title character interspersed throughout the film.

McElwee's current film, *Time Indefinite*, follows the same general structure as *Sherman's March*, albeit more so than he initially intended. Beginning with the announcement of his engagement to fellow filmmaker Marilyn Levine, *Time Indefinite* was supposed to have recorded their marriage and a subsequent cross-country trip. But, again, life--in this case death--intervened.

The vagueness and intensely personal subject matter in Ross McElwee's films make them difficult to categorize. They are documentaries and yet they are profoundly subjective. McElwee completely exposes his family and friends to the audience in the--as he freely admits--genuinely closed-lipped society of the South. McElwee the filmmaker/storyteller creates works which are both uniquely his and completely accessible.

A native of Charlotte, North Carolina, McElwee studied filmmaking at MIT with Richard Leacock and Edward Pincus. He made his first film, *Charleen* (1978), as his thesis for the graduate program there. Freelance work as a cameraman and editor (for the series NOVA, among others) enabled him to support himself while working on his own projects. This year, he is teaching undergraduate filmmaking at Harvard University.

Although success has brought McElwee recognition and invitations to film festivals around the world, his four-year-old son Adrian has perhaps changed his life to a greater extent, not only in terms of filmmaking but of how he looks at life. *MovieMaker* caught up with Ross McElwee, his wife, Marilyn Levine, (who is finishing her own film project), and Adrian at the Vancouver Film Festival.

MovieMaker: Adrian is obviously a large part of your life now. How has he affected your work?

Ross McElwee: Having a son has affected my work, but it has also informed my work in that it's given me a new dimension in thinking about life. I can't help thinking about life in a whole other way. You feel a responsibility for a small child, but it also makes you think about the meaning of life and moving on from generation to generation. It's affected the way I think about film and making films and on a more mundane basis, it's caused me to slow down my pace a bit and adapt my schedule to a life that requires that I spend a certain amount of time with my son, not making films.

MM: You're still working, though. What is your current project?

RM: I've got a two hour cut of a film that's tentatively called *Six O'Clock News*. It's another autobiographical documentary whose modus operandi is that I go to various cities with a VCR, initially, and just tape local news shows until something of interest comes up, some person whose story, however brief, seems interesting to me. I then go find that person and film my interaction with that person over a couple of weeks. The resulting film will be a mosaic of these little video snippets along with filmed interactions.

The staple of the six o'clock news is, of course, catastrophe, disaster, and tragedy. The film director/protagonist in this case looks through the window of the six o'clock news and sees a very frightening world

out there. The tension that I hope I can build into the structure of the film will be created by juxtaposing the filming that I did of my son in his first six months with the window of the six o'clock news out into this frightening and bizarre world.

Time Indefinite was to have been the prologue to this film and it grew to become a separate, feature film because it was clear that I was about to find myself with a four-hour epic on my hands that would have undistributable.

MM: What is the connection between the two films?

RM: The continuity was that those deaths that occurred in *Time Indefinite* had a profound effect upon me, as they would have had upon any person. *Six O'Clock News* was a way I could look out and see that, in fact, catastrophe strikes everybody, or certainly very many people. It was originally to have been accompanied by looking over and looking out of the television, but there was no way to compress it into a watchable amount of time. Maybe when I was younger I would have said, "To hell with it, I'm going to make a four-and-a-half hour film and I don't care if anybody sees it." I don't feel that I can really afford to do that anymore.

MM: When you made your first film, *Charleen*, did you have an "I really don't care if anyone ever sees this attitude?"

RM: Well, I made it as best as I could as a film, as a documentary, and just assumed that people would want to see it if I made a good film. That's still pretty much how I operate.

MM: How does the fact that you now have an audience for your films affect your work?

RM: They expect me to keep on doing what I'm doing and as long as I enjoy what I'm doing, there's no conflict. *Charleen* isn't as groundbreaking, if you can use that phrase, as later films that I made, so it wasn't as if I was free to take more risks in *Charleen* than I was in my subsequent work. It wasn't until later that I really started to discover the ways in which I wanted to make films.

MM: When you film, do you just show up with your equipment, or do you call people ahead of time and let them know that you're coming with a camera?

RM: The latter. I never try to ambush people with the camera. In *Sherman's March* there were some ambushes that we did that were cut out of the film. There was a furniture store that I filmed in and the owner was really obnoxious to the woman who worked there. She was going to quit that day, so I just showed up with the camera and he kicked us both out of the store and I filmed the whole thing. That was great, it was a really good scene and I had no ethical qualms about doing it. Everybody else I felt connected to in *Sherman's March*, *Time Indefinite*, *Charleen* and *Backyard*, were my friends and family so I always gave them warning, saying "unless you tell me not to, I'm going to have the camera."

MM: Don't your family and friends consider your filming intrusive?

RM: Yes, but they put up with it. It's strange, but it's now harder for me rather than easier as the years go on.

MM: Why is that?

RM: Because you start to value your time with people a lot more and you don't want to impinge upon them with the camera. There's always that struggle.

MM: In *Sherman's March*, Charleen tells you to "stop hiding behind that camera." To what extent were you hiding?

RM: Well, of course, that's the whole notion behind cinema verite, that you can remain a silent observer behind the camera. There's a lot of truth to that. I think that I was playing with the irony of the notion in *Sherman's March*. That's clearly part of what the filmmaker's doing, he's hiding behind the camera. He's gotten scalded by life, his lover left him and he retreats into the mollusk shell of his camera and pokes his head out now and then. It's meant to be somewhat obvious and somewhat humorous. I think that there's also some truth, at least for me, that when life has been rough I've taken some solace in simply ceasing to try to understand it and simply recorded it, collect it, and store it away for future analysis.

MM: Would you have asked questions about your father's death if you hadn't been filming?

RM: It would have been different, in some way less formal, perhaps.

MM: If you weren't looking for answers, perhaps asking the questions was a way of working through your feelings about his death.

RM: Perhaps. I had to ask the question to ask it, maybe, and not so much because I needed an answer. I think that in the South there is a great tendency to not discuss these matters and I wanted to challenge that a bit, as well.

MM: Did you learn what you needed to?

RM: I was quite startled that my brother, in fact, didn't know how my father died exactly. I'd assumed he would have the answers to these questions for me because he was a doctor and also because he had been at home in Charlotte where my father had died when I was up in Boston. I thought that he would have more information for me, but, in some ways, maybe I should have known better. In *Backyard*, which is a short, forty-minute film that I made about my family, I asked my brother about how my mother died and he also didn't know the answer to that. I'd assumed he would know, but he didn't. So, fifteen years later the question and answer repeated themselves.

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