

## **Shermans March**

Ross McElwee

color, film, 157 minutes, 1985

First Run Features

### Description

The film opens on a map, with a sonorous narrator (McElwees film teacher and veteran observational cinema filmmaker Richard Leacock) summarizing the route of Union General Sherman's devastating and militarily effective march through Georgia to the Atlantic Ocean. Map fades to lithographs and photographs of ruined buildings and a photograph of Sherman. Suddenly Ross McElwee's voice is heard asking the narrator to read it again. He agrees and clears his throat. Over a black and white image of McElwee walking back and forth in an empty loft, McElwee says that he had gotten a grant to make a film on the legacy of Sherman's March when he broke up with his girlfriend and went to New York to stay in a vacant loft of a friend. McElwee is seen looking into a refrigerator, and then leaves the frame. He rarely reappears; he usually is behind the camera in the rest of the film.

Title: A meditation on the possibility of romantic love in the South in an era of nuclear weapons proliferation.

Over images of family members hiking in the woods, McElwee says his parents want to get him married, and have arranged a family-and-friends Scottish-heritage picnic with sons and daughters--mostly, it seems, daughters. The arch and wry narrator's tone will become a hallmark of the film. A bagpiper plays to the apparent enjoyment of all, but McElwee says he doesn't want to talk to the girls, because it depresses him. We watch men doing heroic feats of strength. Over images of a young woman paddling a canoe, McElwee tells us this is his sister. She gives him a stern talk about not falling for the psychological manipulations of his girlfriend. She tells him he might be having trouble with women because he doesn't tidy up or dress up. He should trim his beard, she says. At least his camera is a conversation piece, she says; I feel like a celebrity, she says.

Over footage of women playing croquet, he says an ex-girlfriend was working at a fashion show. His stepmother says they'll be going. His stepmother is shown chatting with other society women at the event. The model cracks up and the camera goes out of focus as she gives him a hug. She is seen at home; he talks with her behind the camera about childhood games playing Superman, and she says her seven-year-old plays that too. She mentions her 11-year-old, and the fact that her marriage is not good, but she doesn't believe in divorce.

Over images of lovely landscaping, he says that his interest in women has never matched theirs, and that he falls into listless contemplation of his single status, but that his stepmother has plans for him. She introduces him to an athletic young woman who shows him her cellulite exercises; in the middle of them, he accidentally turns off the sound, but the images continue. Over an image of a moon and to the sounds of crickets, he ponders the fact that she mentioned she wasn't wearing underpants. He then muses about his nightmares about nuclear disaster. He recalls (still over the image of the night sky) the detonation of the H-bomb when he was young. He thinks that the nuclear dreams return when his love life isn't going well. In daylight, the young woman

goes swimming.

On the deck, she talks about her screenplay, in which she stars. The screenplay is a conglomeration of fantastic episodes. He confesses, over shots of her exercising, that he feels a how shall I put it, primal attraction to her. We see her family at a family dinner, and then her reading his hand in a car. He says her family likes him because they think hes a nice Southern boy. She recounts her boyfriends abuse, and he asks her why she puts up with it, and she says she believes hell eventually make good on his promise. She confesses to the camera that she hopes to meet Burt Reynolds and have him fall in love with her. At her leavetaking, her mother starts to cry because her life is in disorder. Dad looks embarrassed.

In the car, she says her mother always does that when she leaves. The car is stopped, and she looks over a beautiful mountain vista. In a bourgeois living room, her girlfriends, she is filmed calling a contact to get her to Burt Reynolds. It doesnt work out. The two women prepare for audition interviews with exercises, and Pat applies makeup. The maid, Magnolia, appears briefly as they leave the house. We see them after the interview, drinking sodas; they gossip with each other about the experience. The women are shown exercising while they wait for a phone call. He says, over images of Pat swimming, that he has a nagging feeling he should get going on his movie about Shermans march. Over images of modern Atlanta--skyscrapers, slums, car lots-he recounts the shelling of Atlanta, a brutal episode. Pat and her friend Lee are in Atlanta because Pat got a three line role in an MGM movie. A park memorializing the shelling is shown, with Ross McElwee examining a monument. He confesses he feels attached to Pat.

McElwee, in a motel room bed, confesses to the camera that he misses her and doesnt know what he wants to do next. He says he is depressed about having two large empty beds in the hotel room. Over image of a night sky with a full moon, he says he dreads sleeping and broods about the hydrogen bomb test that he tried to glimpse as a child when his family was in Hawaii. He describes a seeing a flash, and the whole family falling into silence. He says his life is in limbo as is his film.

He decides to go sightseeing, but the touring train he is on breaks down, leaving the actors who stage scenes along the side despondently lounging on a fence. His brother shows him a sportscar he will loan him; McElwee tells us his brother believes this will help him get girls too. His sister confides in him the details of her recent two plastic surgeries, one for eyebags and one a fanny tuck.

While he waits for the car to be fixed, he hangs out with Claudia, a longhaired beauty he had known in elementary school. She offers to teach him how to rollerskate. She combs her hair as she talks about needing to look good when she goes out. They lace up their skates. Claudias daughter complains, as they skate unsteadily, that she doesnt have a friend. She plays with a dollhouse, with her black girlfriend. Men position a cross in front of a church, while Claudia and family look on in a crowd. Claudia and the minister talk about the promise of Jesus return, in a church basement, while Claudias daughter eats an ice cream sandwich. A man in an Easter bunny costume walks by during the discussion of the anti-Christ. At the garage, two black men work on the car. The owner talks with McElwee; they reminisce about the owners son when he was little. They talk about his daughter, who died of cancer, and about McElwees mother, who also died of

cancer.

Claudia and he go to visit friends in a militia community. A leader talks about building a fallout shelter. Others talk about not trusting communists or their own government, about going back to The Little House on the Prairie, about returning to the 30s, and winning freedom from regulation. Claudia shows him where the trout pond and the tennis court will be. She explains the Rapture, the end-of-the-world moment at which some evangelical Christians believe that all believers will be swept up to heaven. Claudias friend explains that she thinks slavery should be a right, and she still thinks the South was right.

At a costume shop, he picks out a blue Civil War uniform. He goes to the costume party, and after signaling Test, confesses to the camera that he is fascinated by Claudia and other women. He thinks he should follow Shermans route, because he is a tragic figure. He was plagued by anxiety, he says, and after ruthless military behavior offered gracious terms to the South, which only angered Northern politicians and forced his retirement. McElwee reiterates that he was a tragic figure.

He leaves in the new car, which fails after 40 miles. He ends up in the local jail, the only place to sleep. He films the repair of his car, and proceeds to a ferry that takes him to an island from which Sherman blockaded Savannah. Next we see a woman giving a dog a bath. She lives on the island. She explains snippets of linguistic theory while she does practical tasks (making bread, milking a cow), including ways that language can refer to imaginary worlds. In response to his question about sex with her professors, she says for a long time she thought linguistics and sex were the only important things in life. He says, over vistas of an abandoned cabin, that his interest in linguistics continues to grow. Her truck is stuck in the mud. They hike to the water, and she looks for ticks on her body, and then his. They discuss Shermans sense of failure. Dont you see the resemblance between me and Sherman? he says. She dismisses it.

The dog is shown in closeup, and then we see Winnie, the linguist, on the beach. He says that he left to make some money editing, and things werent the same when he came back. In a treehouse, she says he is living with another man on the island. He speaks to the camera, saying he sleeps in this treehouse alone, except for the insects. Winnie, in daytime at the washtub, laughs about the dreaded blood sucking insects. He asks why she left him, and she says that the other man lives here and he doesnt. He says he feels both jealous and friendly toward them both. He loses control of the camera, and swears. He says he dreams of nuclear war, to images of rain falling on the delta.

He shows himself watching TV in a local motel, and watching a hardworking but terrible band in a local bar. In Sumter, we see an elderly woman talking about the tragic fate of the young Confederate dead. She says war is all about death and destruction. The camera pans to a desolate motel. He says he meets with an ex-girlfriend. We see a speaker talk against manufacture of nuclear weapons. He focuses on Jackie, the ex-girlfriend, who is protesting nuclear weapons. He says that the protesters are also upset that the nations nuclear waste is dumped in South Carolina-by Northerners.

Jackie, who is white, is seen teaching art to elementary school kids, who are black. One of the

kids hints that he should get serious with the teacher. He says in narration he wants to talk to Jackie about their breakup. She is seen from the back in a boat. She refuses to engage him. We are introduced by McElwee to her boyfriend, an anti-nuclear activist. In her backyard, she says she wants to go to California, so she can live rootless. At school, a black kid says she'll lose her job because he'll tell that they're smooching on campus. He gets into a hammock, at her urging. They visit a monument against nuclear conflict, with writing in twelve languages in large slabs. Jackie's plane leaves.

A creeping psycho-sexual despair begins to overtake me, he says, but he hears that Burt Reynolds is in town. He films him waiting in front of a Holiday Inn. But it turns out that it's really a guy who's trying to get a job as Reynolds' stand-in. He's waiting to make a pitch to become a stand-in, but Burt Reynolds never appears.

Then we are in a McDonald's, with a woman berating him for being a failure at finding a woman. This is Charlene. He explains this is his former teacher as the camera travels down the street. She tells him in the car to put down the camera and get ready to meet his future wife. They meet her, and she demands he turn the camera off, putting her hand over the lens. This is not art, this is life! she says. She says he hides behind the camera. He says, This film deals with these kind of things. She tours the grounds of her house, on an old military base, and berates him for not being more aggressive with DeeDee, for being self-effacing and polite. She says passion is the only important thing in life. They go through a tunnel, which she says is like sex and death. She says everything comes to tragedy in the end, so passion is the way to get through it, pretend you're alive...not be alone and depressed.

At the girls' school where DeeDee is an administrator, she sings, I love you just the way you are, to the little girls. McElwee, taking a solitary tour of campus, says he has wandered into the very cradle of southern womanhood. Charlene tells them they must be married by December. At DeeDee's home, she shows him all the survival supplies, mentioning a warehouse that houses six weeks' worth of dehydrated food. Charlene and he tour the fort where Sherman stayed for four years. He tells Charlene Sherman liked the South; she is shocked. They go to the beach and see an attractive woman in a swimsuit.

At a restaurant, DeeDee says she's a Mormon and explains she is awaiting the Second Coming. She believes war and signs of war indicate its imminence. He films himself in silhouette at the fort, musing that he is not suited to DeeDee because of his depression, anxiety, and lust. Charlene, rocking on the porch, believes DeeDee would have given up her Mormonism if she were in love with Ross. But Charlene, as the film runs out, says she has another darling candidate. His camera scans the remains of a church Sherman torched. It seems I'm filming my life in order to have a life to film, like some primitive organism that somehow nourishes itself by devouring itself, growing as it diminishes. The camera meditates on the ruins.

In a white suit, in front of a river, McElwee describes how Sherman's troops prepared to attack Columbia, South Carolina. He descends toward the river, and falls; the sound of him grunting and slipping accompanies the image of the river bank. He has slipped out of sight. At a strip mall, a rock band plays. He says he becomes a groupie of the lead singer. We see her getting a massage in a bar, at home, practicing, and preparing nervously for an audition. He talks to the black kids

in the neighborhood, who ask if they are married. She curls her hair and talks about wanting to move to New York.

We watch the women training a dog to attack intruders. She leaves for touring in a station wagon; freeze frame on the station wagon. He visits his friend Karen, seen briefly. The camera tracks the road as he describes an off-again-on-again relationship. In a rocking chair, she says she had wanted people to take care of her, until they did; this is a recent revelation, she says, as the camera moves in to a close up. She goes off to a big party of her ex-boyfriend; we watch the scene without sound, because, as he explains, he had forgotten to turn on his tape recorder. He narrates the conversation they had. He talks to her roommate; Karen, it seems, has gotten back together with her boyfriend. At a dinner party, Karen talks about working as a woman with men. She and her friend agree that women should act like women.

We see Karen at an ERA rally. With consummate timing, I insist on talking to Karen about our relationship in the middle of 10,000 angry Southern women, says McElwee in voiceover. On camera, she talks to him about how much she loves her ex-boyfriend. She says she never believed she and Ross could be lovers.

He speaks to the camera, quietly because Karen is next door. He says its very hot, and he cant sleep. Dreams of apocalypse, he says, as we see a moon obscured by drifting clouds. Karen is seen mopping the floor. Next, we see an abandoned battleground of the Civil War. Karen is seen in a confrontational moment; she demands he stop filming. There follow a series of jerky moments in which Karen cannot articulate her relationship choices; she says shell just see what happens. He says he meets her boyfriend when his car runs out of gas, and he comes to help. Cam and a friend are lifting up a large plastic rhinoceros. He says he spends a few days with Cam and his friends, who seem to trade these large plastic animals. To an image of Karen drifting on an inflatable raft, he says he tries like a lawyer to convince Karen, a lawyer, to love him. He decides, he says in narration, to return to Charlotte; his car, broken, stays. The Confederacy, he says to an image of a monument, died in Charlotte. His film, he says, is over, and he has no real life anymore. His interest in life, he says, is piqued when Burt Reynolds comes back in town. He tells us he wasnt permitted to meet with Reynolds, as we watch fans enthusiastically wave to the actor and accept signed photographs. Reynolds, in a race car drivers suit, meets with dazzled fans. The production staff threatens him with arrest, he tells us. Sherman, he says, gave speaking tours and published his memoirs. A statue of Sherman is shown, with McElwee perusing it. McElwee recounts Shermans death from pneumonia, as the camera focuses on the statue. We see footsteps in the snow. McElwee says he has returned to Boston to teach filmmaking. To images of leafless trees, he says that the project of finding a perfect person to fall in love with now seems foolish. He shows himself in a class on music history. He says he finds his teacher attractive; the camera slowly moves in on the teacher in class. She sings; he films from the back of the concert hall a choir singing the Messiah, and tells us that she is in the eighth row. He says he asked her out for a movie. Credits come up.

### **Style/Structure**

The film is structured as a journey of discovery; McElwee, a scion of the Southern elite, intends to trace the steps of a man who both loved and wrecked the South. Irony is built into the film from the start, with the contrast between the public stature of Sherman and the private,

undirected life of the aspiring filmmaker. Of course, McElwee does not discover a way to resolve the anxieties that keep him from making a commitment to any path or person in the world; the viewers expectations are frustrated. The films very structure, therefore, exemplifies and performs the problem of finding a way to be a grown-up man, an autonomous self, in this world. Throughout McElwee involves the viewer in constructing the film, as he shows the viewer what he is seeing, exposes the viewer to the problem of getting cooperation from the subject, to the coercive nature of the relationship between the recorder and the subject. His confessional sequences are confessions of failure of will, lack of direction, depression, and failure to construct narrative generally. The viewer is therefore turned into his analyst, and an analyst of the problem of constructing a narrative. The film rescues itself from self-indulgence by thus empowering the viewer to become critical (Charleen is an extreme form of this reaction, and his sister is a mild one) of the persona McElwee creates. McElwee also uses exaggeration humorously; the contrasts between himself and Burt Reynolds are used to comically dramatize his search for full manhood, as is his personal tiff with his ex-girlfriend Karen, conducted in the midst of an ERA march. Lucy Fischer (1998) calls his stance mock-heroic. This stance is demonstrated as well by the shape of each sequence, in which events conspire to further depress him and reveal his inability to connect with people.

The film boldly announces its distinctive stylistic choices in the very first sequence, when a classic educational documentary seems to begin. It signals its arch self-referentiality immediately, when it records the request to rerecord, and then again shows the viewer what the movie will not be, by providing a short black-and-white sequence of McElwee walking back and forth in a loft. This stark, avant-garde, repetitive image, an art-school reference, is then overthrown after the subtitle for a home-movie approach. That this is a choice, and not merely the sign of incompetence, has already been registered by the introduction.

McElwee positions himself as the passive trigger for others self-revelations. The one person who does not know what he is doing in the world exposes for us the delusions and pretensions of those around him. In his loneliness--signaled often by his visits to Sherman-related parks and memorials, always alone, and by his late-night confessionals--he is both a seeker and an outsider looking in. His diaristic entries reveal, more than they express, social categories he sees as constructs: Southern womanhood, honor, class, race. Repeatedly he encounters people who choose an apocalyptic rejectionist or oppositional approach to the problem of living in a complex society in an era of nuclear weapon proliferation. His observational stance is implicitly critical, since his subjects take their social location for granted. Charleens formulation of the purpose of life--that it is all a tragedy, but we must pretend--is one that he provokes by goading her into articulating. His confusion, his depression, his refusal to engage come to seem at least as appropriate a response to the challenges of connecting with other people in an age of nuclear proliferation as militias, fashion shows, or survivalism.

### **Background on Director/Film**

McElwee grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, in a doctors family. After undergraduate years at Brown University, he took a filmmaking degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in a program headed by venerable observational documentarian Richard Leacock (himself trained by Robert Flaherty). He featured Charleen, his ebullient high school teacher, in one student film, and examined his family relationships, especially focusing on his fathers expectations of his sons, in

another.

The making of *Shermans March* benefited from subsidies by government and foundations, public television and from media arts centers. McElwee made *Shermans March* with the benefit of a range of funders, including Boston Film/Video Foundation, a media arts center; the New England Regional Fellowship Program, through the taxpayer funds allocated to a National Endowment for the Arts/American Film Institute grant; a grant from the private foundation John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; the Massachusetts Artists Foundation; the taxpayer-funded Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities; the Pinewood Foundation; and a public television resource, the WBGH Educational Foundation.

Warm critical reception to *Shermans March* established McElwee as a producer, and his next three films, *Time Indefinite*, *Something about the Wall* and *Six O'Clock News*, continued the saga of his finding of himself. McElwee commented on a public television website, Each of these films explores new territory for me, but in almost all of them, members of my immediate and extended family reappear over a 19 year span. This fact adds, I believe, an additional dimension to my work, providing a record of both how much and how little my family has changed over time.

McElwee has been a visiting filmmaker at Harvard University since his completion of *Shermans March*. He has been awarded fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

### **Production Context**

The South had long been treated in national media as a distinct cultural region, stereotyped as backward, folkloric and oddball. *Shermans March* appeared when a vigorous movement for economic growth was recharging the economies of major cities such as Atlanta and Charlotte. At the same time, fascination with the more grotesque cultural features of the South was registered with, for instance, the best-seller *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989), and the attachment of a white working class commitment to Confederacy nostalgia was indicated in controversies over Confederate flag displays. McElwee's choice of Sherman is a deliberately perverse one, since it stirs up all the Confederacy nostalgia and regional loyalties that his middle class interlocutors rarely discuss openly.

The movie was developed and filmed at a time of massive rededication of national resources to the defense and military, with the Reagan administrations renewed anti-Communist concern. At the same time, the Nuclear Freeze movement, which drew in many veterans of antiwar protests of the Vietnam era and environmental activists of the later 1970s, had provided a counterpoint and high media visibility for public concerns over nuclear issues. The Nuclear Freeze movement called attention to dangers not only of nuclear warfare but of nuclear weapons storage, pollution and dangers of production. The film reflects anxieties reflected pervasively in mass media at the time, and addressed by independent filmmakers in such films as *Dark Circle* (1985) and *Building Bombs*. Both these latter films were denied carriage by public television, by programmers who charged them with being unbalanced. (Producers argued that programmers were applying rigid and inappropriate standards, perhaps for fear of coming under attack by Reagan administration and Republican officials eager to find public television biased; a revised version of *Building Bombs* was later shown on P.O.V.)

It was developed in a time of virulent political backlash against the consequences of the great civil rights struggles that accomplished legal victories for African-American civic equality. Racial divisions in the South are ever-present in the work, but never openly; the occasional appearances of African-Americans highlights the whiteness of McElwee's middle class networks. Finally, the film expressed a rejection of traditional male roles and confusion over the alternatives available to the narrator; indeed, he sinks into neurotic and depressed behavior often associated with women. In this, the film is located in the backwash of the major feminist movements of the 1970s, after the fierce ideological and political battles for greater equality for women at work and at home. The women McElwee meets do not use the vocabulary of feminism, but their very choices reflect the repositioning of women in public life over the preceding two decades. At the same time, Southern society maintains archaic divisions that put McElwee, a Southern man educated in the North, out of synch with many of his class and age peers.

### **Reception/Distribution**

The film debuted at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won Best Documentary. It was released in theaters to rave reviews; J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* called it The funniest road film since *Lost in America*, and Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* called McElwee an exceptionally comic film-making personality. In *Newsweek*, David Ansen called it a delightfully rueful and resonant American odyssey. It has been widely adopted in media centers and school libraries.

### **Discussion**

What does McElwee's search for love have to do with nuclear proliferation?

Is McElwee a likeable character? Who in the film is your favorite, and why?

Is McElwee fair to the people he films? Does it matter?

What is McElwee's problem? Why can't he find love? Why does he have nightmares?

Why is McElwee's story interesting? What issues does McElwee's journey raise?

### **Further Reading**

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