The Filmmaker-Persona in the Essay Film: Sherman’s March

By Victoria Dawson

This article presents a case study of American filmmaker Ross McElwee’s documentaries with particular reference to Sherman’s March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation (1986). Sherman’s March follows two narratives: the path of General William Sherman’s destructive march through the U.S. South during the Civil War and McElwee’s search for a girlfriend, aided by his family members who would like him to find “a nice Southern girl” (McElwee 1986). These complementary storylines provide a humorous foil for McElwee’s reflections.

McElwee describes his work as “…a kind of nonfiction essay filmmaking … [that] owes something to [cinéma-vérité]. But then I do have conversations with people from behind the camera, and I employ a highly subjective voice-over narration which, of course, [cinéma-vérité] eschews. So I’ve just taken different things that seemed to work for me and blended them into a style which also includes a kind of performance … where I talk to the camera at points that seem critical during the journey that the filmmaker’s on” (Stubbs 2002: 97).

The autobiographical films of Ross McElwee exemplify domestic ethnography and canvas a range of issues including his own subjectivity and relationship to wider society. A notable feature of his later documentaries is the construction of an ironic persona for himself that plays a prominent role in these films. McElwee’s films are analysed here with respect to the relationship between the filmmaker and his filmed subjects; the idea of the essay film; and the construction of the filmmaker-persona and his relationship with the viewer.

Sherman’s March, probably McElwee’s best known film, was shot largely over a four-month period and follows a journal entry format. McElwee meets with and films old girlfriends as well as women he has just met and this is interspersed with visits to historical sites and battlefields along the path of Sherman’s Civil War march. Events are shown in chronological order and first person voice-overs and monologues to camera by McElwee provide commentary and linkages between these events.

Development of McElwee’s filmmaking style

McElwee’s film methodology—beginning with Charleen (1977) and leading up to Bright Leaves (2003)—parallels developments in American documentaries from Direct Cinema in the 1960s through to the self-reflexive autobiographical documentaries of more recent times. McElwee studied film at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the 1970s where his teachers included Direct Cinema

Direct Cinema developed in the US in the 1960s, at a similar time to cinéma-vérité in France. Robert Drew—a former *Life* magazine journalist—described older forms of documentary cinema as “lectures with picture illustrations.” Drew was interested in “recording live events as they happened, communicating with audiences the experience of ‘being there’; storytelling in place of argument, expert summary and information” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009: 28). The Direct Cinema movement developed alongside technological advances in camera and sound recording equipment that enabled filmmakers to use lightweight, mobile equipment with synchronised sound. Filmmakers were able to take the camera off the tripod, move with the subject and shoot using available light. The filming process in Direct Cinema was less controlled than in previous documentary making. A groundbreaking and influential documentary in the Direct Cinema style, made by Drew Associates, was *Primary* (1960) which followed John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in their attempts to become the Democratic candidate for the US presidency.

Film theorist Michael Renov writes that the Direct Cinema approach to documentary filmmaking “shunned all traces of the makers’ presence. There were to be no voice-overs, no interviews, no direction of the film’s subjects” (Renov 2004: xx–xxi). Direct Cinema is also referred to as the observational mode (Nichols 2001). It’s clear that McElwee absorbed ideas and working methods from Direct Cinema filmmakers such as Drew, Leacock and Pennebaker. McElwee’s first documentary, *Charleen* (1977), is in the observational, Direct Cinema style: there are no voice-overs or audible questions by the filmmaker.

Self-reflexive autobiographical documentaries, as exemplified by McElwee’s later work, developed in the US from the 1970s onwards. Film historian Jim Lane highlights three influences on this development: the first was American avant-garde filmmakers, particularly Stan Brackage and Jonas Mekas, in their use of “minimal crew or single-person shooting and editing, and … noncommercial autobiographical themes, specifically the everyday events and domestic scenes of the filmmakers lives.” The second influence was a reaction against Direct Cinema, “which excluded the presence of the filmmaker and the cinematic apparatus”, and the third was …the European experiments in reflexive film … especially the work of Jean Rouch and Jean Luc Godard … Inspired by these experiments, autobiographical documentarists used reflexive strategies to represent the private everyday world of the filmmaker (Lane 2002: 11–12).
Cinéma-vérité in France rejected the pretense of the invisibility of the filmmaker practised by the Direct Cinema proponents in the US. Renov observes that the French ethnographer/filmmaker Jean Rouch:

chose to ‘generate reality’ rather than allow it to unfold passively before him. … Rouch pushed participant observation to new levels of interactivity; he saw the camera as a ‘psychoanalytic stimulant’ capable of precipitating action and character revelation. … Here it is most important to recall Rouch’s rehabilitation of that most-disparaged documentary device, the voice-over (Renov 2004: xxi).

Filmmakers in the US sometimes use the terms Direct Cinema and cinéma-vérité interchangeably to describe Direct Cinema. McElwee’s description of his filmmaking style as employing “a highly subjective voice-over narration which … [cinéma-vérité] eschews” makes it seem that he is referring to Direct Cinema as opposed to French cinéma-vérité. Paul Henley highlights this confusion in the following description of a meeting that took place in Lyons, France in 1963 between French documentarists including Rouch and members of the Direct Cinema group including Richard Leacock. At this meeting it was:

… agreed that in order to avoid further confusion, the term cinéma-vérité would be abandoned. From then on, the French documentarists would refer to what they did as cinéma direct while the North Americans, who had previously used various terms to describe their approach, including ‘Free Cinema’ and ‘Uncontrolled Documentary’ as well as ‘Cinéma Vérité’ (often without the hyphen, sometimes without the accents) or even simply ‘Vérité’ (with or without the accents), would refer thereafter to what they did as ‘Direct Cinema’ (Henley 2009: 250).

The French and US groups differed in their ideas about how the filmmaker should be represented within the documentary but they also had common elements in their praxis. Both groups aspired to reduce the amount of mediation involved in documentary filmmaking. This included reducing the amount of equipment employed in the production of documentaries—which both groups acknowledged inhibited relationships between filmmaker and subjects—but also reducing the amount of directorial intervention involved on the part of the filmmaker. Rouch and his French colleagues “considered it crucial that it should be the subjects themselves who decided what their performance for the camera should be since this choice … would be revealing of those inner realities that they hoped to be able to bring about by the act of filming” (Henley 2009: 251).

We can observe McElwee’s use of voice-over in his film Backyard (1984)—which is about his family, their home in North Carolina and the African-Americans who work for them—as an integration of first-person voice-over with Direct Cinema
observational style. *Backyard* begins with a series of still photographs of McElwee and his father, while McElwee’s voice-over describes their relationship:

When I graduated from college, my father, who is a doctor and conservative Republican, asked me what I planned to do with my life. I told him I was interested in filmmaking but that there were also several other alternatives such as working with black voter registration in the South or getting involved in the peace movement or possibly entering a Theravaden Buddhist monastery. My father thought this over for a minute then said, “Son, I think your concept of career planning leaves something to be desired, but I’ve decided not to worry about you anymore. I’ve resigned myself to your fate.” I didn’t exactly know how to respond to this but finally I said, “Well Dad, I guess I have no choice but to accept your resignation” (McElwee 1984).

This ironic, playful voice-over tone is repeated throughout McElwee’s later documentaries including *Sherman’s March* (1986), *Time Indefinite* (1993), *The Six O’Clock News* (1996) and *Bright Leaves* (2003). Michael Renov writes that in recent decades the voice-over has:

> been deplored as dictatorial, the Voice of God; it imposes an omniscience bespeaking a position of absolute knowledge. Current notions of knowledge as more properly “partial” or “situated” seem at odds with the authorial voice-over. Yet in the hands of Rouch and others such as [Chris] Marker, Michael Rubbo, and Ross McElwee, the filmmaker’s voice has come to imply not certainty so much as a testimonial presence tinged by self-doubt or bemusement. (Renov 2004: xxi)

*The relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed subjects*

The subjects that appear in *Sherman’s March* range from family members and old girlfriends with whom McElwee has existing long-term relationships as well as people he has recently met in the course of making the film, including new and prospective sexual partners. It is useful to look at the relationship between McElwee and his subjects in *Sherman’s March* in relation to the films of Jean Rouch, notably *Chronique d’un ete* (*Chronicle of a summer*), which he co-directed with Edgar Morin (Rouch & Morin 1961). While Rouch and Morin differed in some respects in their understanding of the term *cinéma-vérité*:

> Where they agreed was that *cinéma-vérité* consisted of the truths brought to life through the interactions between filmmakers and subjects that take place in the course of making a film. As a result of these interactions, the subjects are inspired or provoked to express thoughts and feelings that they normally keep hidden and may be only partially aware of themselves (Henley 2009: 174).
Rouch had an idea of “shared anthropology” and believed “that any filmmaking
project should take place within a collaborative relationship between filmmaker and
subjects” (Henley 2009: 248). In order for this relationship between filmmaker and
subjects to develop, Rouch believed that the filmmaking crew should be minimal, that
the use of a tripod should be avoided, that there should be no scripts and subjects
should not repeat a take.

In *Sherman’s March*, McElwee provides this stimulus to the thoughts and feelings of
his subjects through his questions from behind the camera. These questions are
informed by his knowledge of the subjects based on the relationship he has developed
with them. He works with a crew of one—himself—and minimal equipment and this
enables him to achieve a level of intimacy with his subjects that would not be possible
with a film crew in tow. He is able to film his sister while she rows him in a boat on a
lake and simultaneously advises him about his love life; to interrogate an old
girlfriend about why she isn’t in love with him and to ask a more recent girlfriend,
Winnie, why she is now having an affair with someone else.

In *Sherman’s March* there is constant movement between the filmmaker being viewed
by the camera and being the viewer of what is seen. A common device that McElwee
uses throughout *Sherman’s March* is to set up a wide shot of a scene, often a
battlefield, and then walk into the scene himself while his voice-over speaks on the
soundtrack. Jim Lane writes that this is typical of the autobiographical documentary:

> The views of the camera … are retroactively ascribed to someone’s authority in
> the world of the film. … The views are ascribed to a body. The act of filming
> becomes an act of scene narration, which is one level of documentary voice.
The exchange of the camera becomes an exchange of views, views anchored in
an understanding of who people are, both in the documentary narrative and
where they are in actual space. The camera is no longer a free-floating
omniscient machine whose presence is absented by continuity editing (Lane
2002: 30).

An exchange of views and the representation of the body of the filmmaker are
illustrated in *Sherman’s March* through McElwee’s often physical interaction with
subjects while he is filming them. For example Pat, the aspiring actress, gives the
filmmaker a palm reading in the back seat of a car while he films the exchange
showing both of their hands. McElwee attends a fashion show where his childhood
sweetheart recognizes him behind the camera and comes up and hugs him. The
camera is on his shoulder and he continues filming while they hug and talk and we get
a shot of the side of her face and then the camera points at the ceiling. She talks to
him rather than to the camera and he’s off to the left side of the frame.
McElwee’s focus on his family positions him as a domestic ethnographer—a filmmaker producing documentaries about family and friends and placing himself in a position between “insider” and “outsider”. Renov writes:

…these works could be said to enact a kind of participant observation that illumines the familial other while simultaneously refracting a self-image; indeed, the domestic ethnographic subject exists only on condition of its constitutive relations with the maker. Here there is little sense of tacking back and forth between insider and outsider positions, the ethnographic norm. For the domestic ethnographer, there is no fully outside position available (Renov 2004: 218-219).

There are numerous examples in Sherman’s March of McElwee’s insider/outsider status. McElwee attends a costume party dressed as Sherman and following the party gives a monologue to camera, still dressed as Sherman. Many people in the South of the U.S. are still unhappy about the outcome of the Civil War, so dressing as Sherman may be construed as a provocative act. McElwee is close to many of the people who appear in the film but, at the same time, by dressing as General Sherman he is positioning himself as “the enemy” and on “the other side” from his subjects. This extends the theme of alienation from his Southern ancestral home expressed in his earlier documentary, Backyard (1984), in which he observes that his move to Boston has led to him becoming a kind of stranger to his family: “My brother had even taken to calling me ‘the Yankee’” (McElwee 1984).

In my own documentary I am also conscious of my potential status as insider/outsider. For example, the development of my relationship with the contemporary missionaries is similar to McElwee’s relationship to the subjects he meets during the filming of Sherman’s March, such as the actresses Pat and her friend Lee who he spends time with in Atlanta where they have gone to attend an audition. My mother will also be a character in my documentary in the segments about Reverend John Cross in the same way that McElwee’s family members are characters in Sherman’s March. In these encounters I will be constructed as an ‘insider’; I also plan to appear as a character in my documentary although it is impossible to predict at this early stage of research-filming how often I will appear or what kind of ‘persona’ I will be.

The contrasting ideas of the Direct Cinema filmmakers and Jean Rouch are present in my mind as I begin to film the activities of the contemporary church planters—the Direct Cinema group wanted to reduce their impact on the subjects as much as possible while Rouch hoped that the presence of the camera would lead the subjects to revelation. When I’m filming a group activity of the missionaries that will take place whether I’m there with the camera or not, for example their Sunday fellowship meeting or their Port Kembla bible study group, I have a choice as to how much I affect the pro-filmic event by deciding whether to speak or not and if I do speak, what
to say and equally importantly, what not to say. A quote from Rouch that I find useful to think about when filming people is: “[try] not to theorize about people in such a way as to introduce a gap between observer and observed, but to try to ask good questions, the answers to which will open up new questions” (Henley 2009: 1). When the missionaries pray for the success of my research project at their fellowship meetings I know that we are engaging in a process of shared anthropology in making the film.

The essay film

McElwee’s initial intention with Sherman’s March was to make a film about the U.S. South and the extent to which it was still haunted by the Civil War (McElwee 2010). As well as being autobiographical, the documentary is also a record of a particular period in U.S. history: people and events depicted include peace rallies and protests against nuclear weapons, a group who have moved into the woods in preparation for the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust, religious fundamentalists, the cult of Burt Reynolds and women pursuing careers in acting and music.

Laura Rascaroli has discussed the frequent use of the term “essay film” to describe the “recent proliferation of unorthodox, personal, reflexive ‘new’ documentaries. … [The essay film] is “a hybrid form, which crosses boundaries and rests somewhere in between fiction and non-fiction cinema” (Rascaroli 2009: 21). Other features of the essay film include commentary by the author/filmmaker, digression, asking questions but not providing clear answers and forcing viewers ‘to acknowledge a conversation’ with the filmmaker (Phillip Lopate, 1998 [1992], ‘In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film’ in Totally, Tenderly, Tragically, Amsterdam, Anchor, quoted in (Rascaroli 2009: 30).

Sherman’s March contains all of the elements of the essay film mentioned above. It also combines many of the modes of documentary described by Bill Nichols—the observational mode, the participatory mode through McElwee’s interactions with his subjects, first-person autobiographical reflexivity, the performative mode and the expository mode through subjective voice-over narration (Nichols 2001). Sherman’s March is a long film but holds the viewers’ interest by moving between a variety of documentary modes.

The filmmaker persona and McElwee’s relationship with the viewer

In Sherman’s March McElwee reads from letters and other first-hand accounts of the Civil War in voice-overs and often moves directly from these to his thoughts and feelings about the women he is interacting with and musings on his own emotional state. McElwee was influenced in this autobiographical approach by another of his teachers at MIT, Ed Pincus, who is known for his film Diaries (1971–1976), which is an examination of Pincus’ role as husband and father during the emerging women’s
movement of the early 1970s. It is of interest that McElwee’s documentaries combine the different approaches of two of his teachers at MIT: the Direct Cinema of Richard Leacock and the autobiographical journal entry format of Ed Pincus.

McElwee’s voice-over narration is in both past and present tenses and sometimes speaks for other characters. According to Lane “the effect of this type of narrative strategy is a tendency to deny its actual source in a postsynchronous recording. It may be read as a simultaneous interpretation of the events as they are being filmed” (Lane 2002: 71-72). An example of voice-over movement between the present and the past tense and its comic timing with images can be seen on YouTube in this excerpt from Sherman’s March: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuFLCqWArTY&feature=related).

In the first shot McElwee is behind the camera to the side of a forest path, filming as his family and friends walk past. He speaks to his siblings who respond as they pass him. This is followed by a voice-over, in which he speaks about how his family have taken him to a festival and invited family friends and their sons and daughters, “mostly, it seems, daughters”—this is spoken over a shot of a long line of young women walking on a narrow forest track past the camera. McElwee’s tone is playful and ironic. The voice-over has been added during editing but if follows the journal entry format and seems as if it has been recorded close to the time of shooting. In fact, it may have been recorded months later, as McElwee edited Sherman’s March over a two-year period (McElwee 1986).

As Jim Lane observes:

McElwee’s playful narrative marks a more complex interrelationship of events and representation. The imposed continuities and other posterior interventions—in other words, anything that happened other than at the moment of shooting—therefore do not so much undermine the film’s referential linkages as they reveal an autobiographical subject in an ironic position to life events (Lane 2002: 72).

In another scene from Sherman’s March, McElwee is filming on a lake in a canoe being paddled by his sister who advises him to use his camera as a way to meet women. The relationship between McElwee and his sister in this scene reverses the relationship that often exists between filmmaker and subject, in that the filmmaker is being questioned and advised by his subject. This reversal is characteristic of Sherman’s March and of McElwee’s methodology; subjects in the film often question his authority and purpose. In one scene his father, whom we know from Backyard does not approve of filmmaking as a career choice, asks what McElwee has been filming and he replies “common things”. His father then asks him how he will make a film out of this. Charleen Swansea, who plays a role in Sherman’s March as well as in Charleen and many of McElwee’s other films, exhorts Ross to spend less time making films and more time finding a wife and mother for his future children.
As discussed earlier, McElwee uses a particular first-person narrational style combining voiceover with direct to camera monologues. McElwee says he was not initially enthusiastic about stepping in front of the camera to perform monologues:

But as I finished my first month of shooting in North Carolina and realized that this film was going to be more directly autobiographical than I had anticipated, I began filming monologues. I thought it would be best at least to get them on film. I could decide whether to use them later.

The first test screening of any material from Sherman's March was comprised of scenes from my meeting and pursuit of Pat, the aspiring actress who was in search of Burt Reynolds. After the screening, there was a sense that something was missing, so I reluctantly cut a monologue into the version I had shown, and it seemed to work. I then processed all the other monologues I had shot on the road and ended up using most of them. I got over my camera-shyness and my reluctance to put the filmmaker in front of the camera. (An excerpt from “Southern Exposure: An Interview with Ross McElwee” by Scott McDonald, Film Quarterly, Summer 1998) (McElwee 2010).

In the scenes in Sherman’s March where McElwee speaks directly to the camera as a kind of confessional, it does seem to provide a ‘psychoanalytic stimulant’ for him to express thoughts and feelings that would usually remain hidden. McElwee’s filmmaker persona often expresses uncertainty about what he should do next and whether what he is doing will make a good documentary. This includes a focus on the personality and experience of General William Sherman to whom McElwee explicitly compares himself. Both he and Sherman love the South, suffer from anxiety and insomnia and are misunderstood.

These scenes often take place at night when everyone else is asleep, notably the scene where McElwee is dressed as General Sherman and whispers to the camera in his father’s house. McElwee talks of his confusion about his love life and whether he should stay in Charlotte, North Carolina or continue on his quest to film the path of Sherman: “I like Claudia. And I’m infatuated with Pat Rendleman, and I guess in many ways I’m still in love with Ann. … It’s all very confusing to me. I don’t know what to do right now (McElwee 1986).” Another direct to camera monologue is filmed at 6am where McElwee is in bed in a tree house after a sleepless night plagued by insects. He tells the viewer that he’s in the tree house because his former girlfriend Winnie is now having an affair with another man, Michael, and they’re sleeping together in the main house.

Is this a deliberate strategy of McElwee to appear lacking in competence and control or is this a reflection of how he is feeling at the time of filming? At times McElwee’s character appears bumbling such as when he forgets to turn on his tape recorder, at
times he’s indecisive and yet at other times he’s assertive such as when he continues to film the conversation with his old girlfriend Karen after she asks him to stop. The voice of the filmmaker changes throughout the film—while it is often melancholy, it is also playful and humorous. Which voice is the authentic Ross McElwee in this play between performativity and realism?

Edgar Morin describes the difficulties with the idea of truth that he encountered in making *Chronique d’un ete (Chronicle of a summer)*:

… there is no given truth that can simply be deftly plucked, without withering it (this is, at the most spontaneity). Truth cannot escape contradictions, since there are the truths of the unconscious and the truths of the conscious mind; these two truths contradict each other. … The fundamental question that we wanted to pose was about the human condition in a given social setting and at a given moment in history. It was a How do you live?’ that we addressed to the viewers (Morin, ‘Chronicle of a Film’ in) (Rouch 2003: 263).

Paul Arthur describes the “myriad malfunctions” that McElwee experiences in *Sherman’s March*: “The car breaks down, he forgets to turn on the tape recorder for an important encounter; an amusement park train ride runs into technical difficulties; he cannot frame or adequately follow certain subjects with the camera. Constant self-effacement and irresolution assume the shape of a dramatic device” (Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity [Three American Moments]” in (Renov 1993: 129).

One of the themes of *Sherman’s March* is the lack of control that the filmmaker has over events that occur during the shooting of the film. The filmmaker persona is moving on a continuum between being in control and not being in control. These representations of McElwee are reminiscent of the scene in the documentary *Waiting for Fidel* (Rubbo 1974) where the filmmaker Mike Rubbo is criticised heatedly by another character in the film, radio and television owner Geoff Stirling, for being a bad filmmaker, unprofessional and using too much footage. However in both the cases of Rubbo in this example and McElwee in *Sherman’s March* it is the filmmaker who makes the decision to include the footage in which they are criticised by others in the final film.

In a discussion of the way contemporary artists of the 1980s dealt with historical subjects or public events, Renov writes:

… the ‘return of the subject’ is not, in these works, the occasion for a nostalgia for an unproblematic self-absorption. If what I am calling ‘the new autobiography’ has any claim to theoretical precision, it is due to this work’s construction of subjectivity as a site of instability—flux, drift, perpetual revision—rather than coherence (Renov 2004: 110).
Carl Plantinga proposes, “we consider a difference between … the formal, open, and poetic voices of the nonfiction film. This typology is based on the degree of narrational authority assumed by the film.” Noting Sherman’s March as an example of a documentary that “speaks” with the “open voice”, Plantinga states:

Non-fiction films of the open voice differ radically from their formal counterparts; instead of asserting a high degree of epistemic authority, we may characterize this voice as epistemically hesitant. … the open voice … often formulates no clear, over-arching question, or if such a question is generated, it offers no answer, or a tentative and ambiguous answer. (Plantinga 1997: 107–108)

McElwee’s filmmaking style in Sherman’s March draws on the lineage of Jean Rouch and cinéma-vérité. Rouch’s idea of ‘shared anthropology’ is evident in the relationships between McElwee and his subjects and the examination of these relationships in Sherman’s March. McElwee also incorporates elements in common with cinéma-vérité and Direct Cinema, such as minimising the filmmaking apparatus by working with a filmmaking crew of one, in order to develop closer relationships with his subjects. Sherman’s March is an essay film in that it is hybrid of documentary modes, ranges across a wide variety of subject matter and contains personal reflections by the filmmaker.

McElwee constructs the filmmaker-persona in Sherman’s March through his relationships with the filmed subjects, his subjective voice-over narration and his direct to camera monologues. His voice-over narration is developed through many drafts over months during the editing of the film: “I’m creating a persona for the film that’s based upon who I am but isn’t exactly me” (Beattie 2004: 112). The uncertainty and instability of the persona may appear spontaneous and natural but they are part of a deliberate construction by the filmmaker. McElwee’s persona speaks in a voice that is “epistemically hesitant”, opening a space for the viewer to engage with the concerns of the film.

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