

Bright Leaves

A Documentary by
Ross McElwee

USA, 2003; 107 min; Color



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SYNOPSIS

This film describes a journey taken across the social, economic, and psychological tobacco terrain of North Carolina by a native Carolinian whose great-grandfather created the famous brand of tobacco known as "Bull Durham."

Bright Leaves is a subjective, autobiographical meditation on the allure of cigarettes and their troubling legacy for the state of North Carolina. It's about loss and preservation, addiction and denial. And it's about filmmaking - homemovie, documentary, and fiction filmmaking - as the filmmaker fences with the legacy of an obscure Hollywood melodrama that is purportedly based on his great-grandfather's life.

Bright Leaves explores the notion of legacy - what one generation passes down to the next - and how this can be a particularly complicated topic when the legacy under discussion is a Southern one and is tied to tobacco.



Bright Leaves
Filmmaker Ross McElwee on location in North Carolina tobacco field

Bright Leaves is Produced, Directed, Filmed and Written by Ross McElwee
Edited by McElwee and Co-editor Mark Meatto
Associate produced by Linda Morgenstern

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 1975, as a graduate student at MIT's Film Section, I began filming 'chapters' from my own life and the lives of people close to me. Those chapters coalesced into two films, "Charleen," about my wise and flamboyant high school teacher, and "Backyard," about my relationship to my surgeon father and my medical school-bound brother. "Backyard" reveals my father's pride in my brother's choice of careers, as well as his somewhat puzzled concern about my choice--making documentary "home movies."



He would say to me "Why don't you try to make films about nature?" Instead, I went on to make "Sherman's March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love In the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation," an absurd title, but one which aptly summed up the major themes of the film. In it, I retraced General Sherman's destructive Civil War route through the American South, interweaving this journey with portraits of seven southern women I met along the way.

"Sherman's March " achieved wide acclaim, and led to a sequel, "Time Indefinite," in which I document my somewhat awkward shift into adulthood, getting married (finally), and then having to confront the sudden death of my father. At the end of the film, I become a father myself. In "Something To Do With the Wall," my wife and I reflect upon growing up in the shadow of the Cold War as we film life along the Berlin Wall. "Six O'Clock News" is a film about local television news and the fears a father can have about raising a child in a society such as the one we see reflected in the six o'clock news. "Bright Leaves" describes a journey taken across the social, economic, and psychological tobacco terrain of North Carolina by a native Carolinian whose great-grandfather created the famous brand of tobacco known as "Bull Durham." "Bright Leaves" is a subjective, autobiographical meditation on the allure of cigarettes and their troubling legacy for state of North Carolina. It's about loss and preservation, addiction and denial. And it's about filmmaking - homemovie, documentary, and fiction filmmaking - as the filmmaker fences with the legacy of an obscure Hollywood melodrama that is purportedly based on his great-grandfather's life.

Each of these films explores new territory for me, but in almost all of them, members of my immediate, extended family and close friends reappear over a twenty-five 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.

REVIEWS

“A reflective, wise, often hilarious movie. Birth, death, illness, family and social history, childhood and old age, moviemaking, geography and commerce are among the topics Mr. McElwee weaves into a dense but surprisingly orderly bundle of information, memory and conjecture. *Bright Leaves* leaves you feeling invigorated by the boundless curiosity, humor and high spirits of its creator.”

- **Stephen Holden**, *The New York Times*

“Ross McElwee makes another witty, thoughtful and illuminating visit to his Southern roots in *Bright Leaves*. A rewardingly personal docu in which the filmmaker deftly uses his specific family legacy as a jumping off point for wry ruminations on American history, the tobacco business, public health and cinematic license, this warmly engaging feature has a bright future indeed wherever documentaries are welcome on screens large and small.”

-**Todd McCarthy**, *Variety*

“An engaging mixture of family album, social history and human eccentricity. *Bright Leaves* is one of his most entertaining and accessible films. Somehow, the real life that McElwee uncovers is always infinitely more quirky and comical than the fictional worlds that most screenwriters create. Idiosyncratic, funny and genuine, *Bright Leaves* is a little gem.”

- **Allan Hunter**, *Screen Daily*

"A 100-minute docu-doodle from the director of *Sherman's March*, that one-time cult curio, about life, cinema, McElwee's family and the North Carolina tobacco industry in which he almost grew up. It's a kind of down-home DIY *Magnificent Ambersons*, sweet, thoughtful and often hilarious.”

-**Nigel Andrews**, *London Financial Times*

"A thoughtful mix of humor, intelligence, and self-reflection is what makes McElwee's films such a joy to follow. *Bright Leaves* blends nostalgia, economics, and personal reactions to new information at a perfect pitch that allows for laughter and deeply felt affection." "

-**Rachel Gordon**, *Filmcritic.com*

"Cigarettes are still a rich subject for drama, and once in a while the movies are up to the task. *Bright Leaves* is a fascinating diary-documentary by McElwee"

-**Richard Corliss**, *Time Magazine*

BIOGRAPHY



Ross McElwee has made seven feature-length documentaries as well as several shorter films. “Sherman's March” has won numerous awards, including Best Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival. It was cited by the National Board of Film Critics as one of the five best films of 1986. “Time Indefinite” won best film award in several festivals and was distributed theatrically throughout the U.S. “Six O'Clock News” won best documentary at the Hawaii International Film Festival. These three films were broadcast in the U.S. over PBS and nationally in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Australia.

McElwee's films have been included in the festivals of Berlin, London, Vienna, Rotterdam, Florence, Sydney, and Wellington. . Retrospectives include the Museum of Modern Art; the Art Institute of Chicago; the American Museum of the Moving Image, New York; and États généraux du film documentaire, 1997, in Lussas, France.

McElwee has received fellowships and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Film Institute, and the Massachusetts Arts Council. He has twice been awarded fellowships in filmmaking by the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 2000, Sherman's March was selected for a Cinéma du Réel retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and four of his films were featured in a selection of western documentaries shown for the first time in Tehran, Iran. “Sherman's March” was also chosen for preservation by the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2000 as an "historically significant American motion picture."

McElwee is a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University's Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, where he teaches a course in filmmaking.