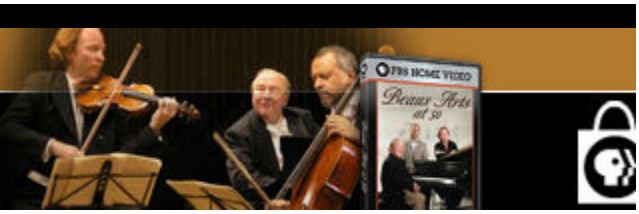

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POINT OF VIEW

On Personal Filmmaking

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Acclaimed essayist Phillip Lopate reflects on Ross McElwee's approach to personal filmmaking and the growing complexity of his films over the past 20 years.

For over 20 years, Ross McElwee has been performing with rare success a cinematic high-wire act of daring and complexity: the personal essay-film. From his poignant 1984 *Backyard*, which examined the immediate circumstances of his Southern upbringing, to the hilarious *Sherman's March* (1986) about his romantic misadventures, to the delicate "Time Indefinite" (P.O.V. - 1994), wherein our hero settles down and confronts the tradeoffs of middle age, to *The Six O'Clock News* (1996), which take in the larger world's sorrows, and now "Bright Leaves," McElwee has generously unwrapped for us his mental and physical landscapes. These autobiographical meditations (not to be confused with documentaries) are all the more unusual in that McElwee seems so obviously a modest, self-effacing person, not given to show-off displays of narcissistic self-aggrandizement in the vein of Michael Moore. His decision to keep returning to his unsensational life and plumbing its meaning evinces a faith in the mystery of the everyday — adjusting to family life, making a living, falling in love, puzzling out one's responsibility to strangers and neighbors and meeting sickness and death, when it comes, with some shred of stoic dignity.

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How to take these quiet, plain materials and give them entertainment value, without over-dramatizing his persona? McElwee, like all good essayists, has become a master of tweaking his language with a humorous spin here, an irony there, and digressing in such a way that will expand and deepen the bigger picture.

His latest work, "Bright Leaves," is a triumphant braiding of the small and the large, the personal and the general. He returns to North Carolina to consider his familial connection to the tobacco industry, for better or worse. In a sense McElwee has always been a regional (or should I say, bi-regional) filmmaker, an émigré from the South to New England who keeps ruefully reflecting on the abandonment of his home ground.

A veteran personal essayist is faced with the double challenge of

finding new autobiographical material, having cannibalized much of his life already, and at the same time using his I-character to retrieve chunks of the world at large, so as to avoid a claustrophobically narrow self-absorption. This time he reaches back to his great-grandfather, John Harvey McElwee, a 19th-century tobacco grower who originated the popular Durham Bull brand and then lost his business to the more competitively ruthless James Duke. McElwee, the most filial of filmmakers (a tender regard for his surgeon-father animates almost all his work), takes up the chivalric cudgels here for his great-grandfather. But he does so with tongue planted firmly in cheek, letting us know *he* knows every family has its neglected genius-ancestor whose invention has been stolen by another. So it is with self-mocking chagrin that he declares, gazing at the Duke Mansion: "If things had gone slightly differently, this would have been all mine. I'd be sitting on a considerable fortune." On discovering an old Warner Brothers costume picture, *Bright Leaf*, directed by Michael Curtiz, he becomes convinced that the Carolina tobacco grower played by Gary Cooper must have been based on his great-grandfather, which occasions even more grandiose musings: suddenly he is the fourth generation love-child of Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal!

some shred of dignity.

Gary Cooper in *Bright*

McElwee balances this comically resentful family pride with a guilty awareness that the cigarette habit has killed millions. He takes us into the hospital wards, following his doctor-brother (the third generation of McElwee physicians) on his grim rounds. But solemnity is never allowed the final word: the filmmaker's voiceover slyly comments that even if his tobacco-growing great-grandfather did not deed them a fortune, "he did leave behind a sort of agricultural/pathological trust fund" in the form of lung cancer patients. That "sort of," by the way, is a typical syntactical hiccup, part of McElwee's hesitantly comic delivery, as well as his refusal of dogmatic certainty.

Brian and Emily

"Mixed feelings" is the answer an interviewee gives on camera about the tobacco industry: bad for your health, good for North Carolina's economy. And indeed, everything McElwee touches in this film becomes imbued with a warm ambivalence, signaled often by the split between image and sound. The visuals of green tobacco fields are both lush and slightly sinister, like mutant cabbages. Some of McElwee's most beautiful shots have a melancholy tranquility that simultaneously declares: "You can't go home again" and "You can't *not* go home again." The filmmaker's friends Brian and Emily, an extremely likable couple who keep popping up in the movie, trying to kick the nicotine habit and failing, embody this conflicted irresolution. (They do, however, finally get married.)

Some of McElv beautiful shots melancholy tra that simultane declares: "You home again" a can't *not* go ho

In the midst of it all, McElwee cunningly inserts a stick of dynamite: Vlada Petric, his film-theorist friend, bursts in with acerbic Eastern European energy, demanding to know what the point of all this dithering is. Petric insists that everything in a film be harmoniously integrated into a single "cinematic vision;" by his purist standards, even Michael Curtiz is a sloppy hack. What, then, about Ross McElwee and the gently meandering film we are watching? McElwee confronts this auto-critique audaciously, and even surmounts it, by shifting the focus slightly from tobacco to filmmaking itself.

In the second half, the picture becomes more self-reflexive, inviting speculations about the purpose of filming anything. In a lovely, candidly anti-narrative moment, he admits: "Sometimes I feel it's such a pleasure to film, especially down South, that it almost doesn't matter what I'm filming." The pertinent and the

accidental (a dog running into the shot and "spoiling" it) have, existentially speaking, equal weight. He compares filming to smoking a cigarette, a narcotic habit that makes time seem to stand still. The urge to "preserve a moment" is thus allied with the hope of staving off loss and arresting death. Yet he acknowledges that when he watches footage of his deceased father, the man is beginning to seem less and less real to him, almost a fictional character. He admits that he filmed his son Adrian incessantly, when he was a tot, in part to keep him from growing up so fast — to no avail: you can't arrest the onrush of time by "capturing" it on celluloid. On the other hand, he wonders if even the most wildly fantastical Hollywood movie has secret elements of documentary truth — about the off-screen relationships between the actors, perhaps.

McElwee contemplates have been had his gre been a success.

So McElwee arrives at the same liberating awareness that was the great Montaigne's: namely, everything is connected to everything else, if in no other way, then via the mind of the essayist. The true subject of any essay is ultimately the author's flow of consciousness. McElwee's drive, to uncover the underlying meaning of his native land's tobacco fix by investigating his roots, gives way eventually to a calmer acceptance of entropic helplessness and curiosity for its own sake. "Bright Leaves" is, in the last analysis, the happy work of a free artist.

Next: Find out more about Ross McElwee in our exclusive interview »

Phillip Lopate is an essayist and film critic, author of "Waterfront," "Portrait of My Body" and "Art of the Personal Essay," and a member of the New York Film Festival selection committee.

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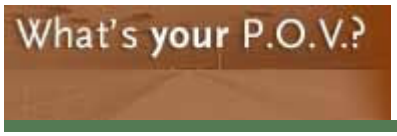

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Posted August 22, 2005 | Updated August 23, 2005