

Polar Star Films, Intrepido Films & Steamroller Media AIE
in association with SWR-ARTE present



McCURRY

THE PURSUIT OF COLOR

A Film by Denis Delestrac

Spain | 90 min. | 2021

INT'L SALES
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LOGLINE

For the first time, celebrated American photographer Steve McCurry opens up about the stories behind his iconic images and reflects on the defining moments of his extraordinary life and forty-year career.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

MCCURRY: THE PURSUIT OF COLOR is the first intimate feature length portrait of the contemporary photojournalist Steve McCurry. The one thing more poignant than McCurry's pictures is his tumultuous 40-year career, which he's spent travelling the globe essentially alone, capturing candid snapshots depicting the complexity of human life. Exclusive interviews with family, friends, colleagues, and with the photographer himself, bring to life the stories behind some of the most iconic photographs of the 20th century. With unique access to the photographer's creative process and unpublished images, we discover how McCurry's vulnerabilities set him on the path to greatness and we witness first-hand his commitment to record what defines and unites humankind - a race against time in an increasingly fractured and culturally homogenous world.

LONG SYNOPSIS

MCCURRY: THE PURSUIT OF COLOR offers an intimate portrait of the life and work of one of the world's most celebrated contemporary visual storytellers. For the first time, McCurry opens up on film to tell the extraordinary stories behind his most iconic images and reflect on the pivotal moments of his life, which defined his fifty-year career.

We journey back to his formative years in India, his experiences photographing the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan and learn how he came to take his most famous photograph, "The Afghan Girl". We also meet the photographer's family, friends and long-time colleagues, including writer Paul Theroux, former Director of Magnum Robert Dannin and National Geographic picture editor Elie Rogers, who offer their own insight into why McCurry's images continue to resonate so strongly with audiences worldwide.

Alongside his professional accomplishments, the film also explores the personal challenges McCurry faced in his life; a difficult childhood, a physical disability and a deep sense of isolation. These obstacles informed the photographer's defiant and adventurous character and the striking nature of his work. However, his success has come at a personal cost; as a lone traveler for decades, he has nowhere to call home.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR

Nearly 20 years ago, budding documentary filmmaker Denis Delestrac was creating his first-ever episode of the documentary series, *Nomads*, which chronicled modern-day travelers. Delestrac, who spent nearly a decade working as a photojournalist in the United States and his native France, naturally set out to get a hold of McCurry, who had turned wandering the planet into an art form. At that time McCurry was already a legend in photography and Delestrac knew it would be almost impossible to pitch his idea without first going through the photographer's team of gatekeepers; numerous agents, secretaries, and personal aides.

What he didn't expect, however, was that McCurry would pick up his own telephone. After freezing momentarily, Delestrac seized the opportunity to quickly discuss the documentary's theme. McCurry, who doesn't like to waste time, tested for Delestrac's sense of adventure: "Grab a piece of paper," he said, as Delestrac quickly scribbled notes about a rendez-vous in Rajasthan, where the two creatives would spend a month traveling together across northern India and Nepal.

Today, almost two decades after that fateful first phone call, Delestrac is an award-winning director and producer with dozens of projects under his belt, including *Pax Americana and the Weaponization of Space* (2009), *Sand Wars* (2013) and *Frightened* (2016). And McCurry, if at all possible, is an even greater legend; an International Photography Hall of Fame-honored photographer respected and praised worldwide.

What inspired you to make a full-length documentary about Steve McCurry?

As I got to know Steve better, he shared all these incredible stories about his travels and the people he had met so I'd always talked to him about the idea of making a feature-length documentary. He is a very private person, but as one of the most prominent visual storytellers of our time, I felt strongly that his story needed to be told. The day we pressed the rec button for this film, we already had a 20-year friendship behind us. It felt like the right time. Over these two decades, Steve had gone from being a very important photographer to becoming a legend. So, one morning, I messaged him: 'I'm ready.' We started shooting one week later in Asia, and we shot over a period of 5 years after that.

Do you see parallels between your life-story and that of Steve's?

The short answer is no, because I don't think anybody's life story can really compare with Steve's. We are good friends and we're very comfortable with each other, so much so that sometimes I forget everything he's been through. We'll be wrapping up a shoot, joking around, and then it just hits me and I remember, he's seen it all: he's travelled all the continents, across different eras, he's experienced wars and has lived and worked amongst the rarest cultures and traditions... he's seen the brightest and the darkest sides of humanity. He's seen it all, which I think is pretty rare. I'm impressed by his stamina and what he's achieved. He's always had his camera with him, shooting pictures all the time. He calls it "the family album of our species". There aren't many people left like Steve, and I feel we're tremendously lucky that he recorded everything he did over all those years. He has an innate skill, or maybe it's a curse, to be right where the action is happening. He witnessed some of the most significant events of the 20th century, so many wars and

revolutions, as well as moments of joy. He was in New York on 9/11, there when the Berlin Wall fell, in Kuwait during the war, there for the Soviet Invasion in Afghanistan...

Our life stories differ, but we do have traits in common. We both love telling stories through images, finding stories in unknown places and sharing that with the rest of the world. If I had to pick one thing, I'd say we share the same empathy and respect for our subjects and for wanting to tell the real stories that are able to shake you or touch your heart.

What is it like to work side by side with Steve?

You'd think that 50 years of travel would wear Steve down, but actually it's the opposite. I'd say his drive really inspired me and my team. The first thing you learn when you meet him is that he's the most serious, punctual person and a complete perfectionist. He takes his job very seriously; he works more than anybody else and at 71 he's in amazing physical condition. It can be quite daunting! This man keeps you on your toes. After a long day of shooting, 10-15 hours, he's still raring to go, and you're dead tired and just want to go to your hotel and clock off.

He's insatiable in a way that is really, really impressive. "Life is short" is kind of his mantra. He wants to make the most out of his life and that feeling eventually becomes contagious.

What have been some of the challenges you've faced?

When you make a film with a photographer, it's tricky because you don't want to interfere. He's shooting his pictures and I'm shooting him shooting pictures, so we had to find the right balance in order not to bother each other. This was especially true when Steve was working, when he's shooting he's very much in his own bubble so we didn't want to disturb him, or distract his subjects. We tried to respect the kind of meditative state of connection that is established between the photographer and the subject. At the same time, sometimes I had to step in and direct. It took us a bit of time to find that non-verbal balance and learn to "dance" together, but we found it based on observation, hard work, and occasionally raised voices...

I also wanted to avoid using the photographer's narrative code, because his pictures use framing and light a certain way. And I didn't want to apply the same codes to the film, firstly because I can't compete, but also because live footage tells a story using its own codes. In terms of color, light and framing, it operates differently. I applied my own personality and pace in order to distinguish my style from Steve's very clear identity. The result is a marriage between our different sensibilities which has created a unique film.

What do you feel drives Steve McCurry?

From a young age Steve wanted more from life, and I think his destiny was unavoidable. One way or the other he wanted to live outside his comfort zone, to meet people and to see how differently we all live. I think he's mostly driven by human stories; what people do and feel during their time on earth. He's interested by the life on this planet, and that includes how people eat, sleep, celebrate, grieve, read the newspaper on a park bench, how babies cry, or how kids are playing football in a village in Papua New Guinea ... Everything is interesting; even the simplest of actions, that we usually take for granted, are wildly revelatory about us. Steve wants to explore the world and ultimately the idea that, paradoxically, it is this simplicity which makes us such a complex and captivating

species. Few people know that he also shoots landscapes, wildlife and everything else. He's interested in our planet as a whole. And because we find ourselves in a world that is undergoing a homogenization process through globalization, I think Steve is racing to capture what still feels authentic and traditional. I don't think he'll stop anytime soon, that's where his drive and ambition comes from.

How has Steve McCurry helped you grow as a filmmaker?

We live in a fast-paced society where lots of people are chasing fame and recognition. You want attention? - go on reality TV show or make a viral video and maybe you have a shot at short-lived stardom. I think this is a rather upsetting illusion. When I met Steve, I realized achievement meant something very different to him. He finds a deeper fulfillment in what he does, he has a relentless need to keep going deeper, into his photography, into human stories, into new territories. He's worked this way for half a century; he's set the example. He's persevered, taking the good with the bad and has never truly been satisfied, that's why he hasn't retired. I think that's something you learn with him: don't be complacent, don't accept normality or mediocrity and always try to reach excellence and make every minute of your life count. I think I've been really lucky to have this close relationship with Steve and to have been able to travel all seven continents with him. Each day is a masterclass on how to live the most fulfilling life, and that's priceless.

BIOS

DENIS DELESTRAC - Writer, Director, Producer

Denis Delestrac is a multi-award-winning director, author and producer. Born in France (1968) and partly raised in the United States, he is best known for creating feature documentaries on highly topical subjects such as *Pax Americana* (2009), *Sand Wars* (2013), *Banking Nature* (2015) and *Frightened* (2016), which have earned him critical appraisal and recognition. Delestrac has won over forty international awards among which a Gold Panda, two Greenpeace Prizes and a Canadian Academy Award. Delestrac has directed nearly twenty films and series broadcast on television or in cinemas worldwide. In May 2017, he was invited to become a member of the European Film Academy, to work – among others – alongside Wim Wenders, Paul Greengrass, Ridley Scott, and Ken Loach to promote European cinema in the world.

denisdelestrac.com
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PRODUCER'S CV'S

Polar Star Films is an independent production company with more than 20 years' experience in the production of international feature length documentaries and fiction films, along with establishing a strong reputation in the advertising industry. The company is led by its founder Carles Brugueras, while Marieke van den Bersselaar oversees the company's Documentary Department.

Polar Star Films' documentaries always seek to explore challenging themes and bring fresh and relevant stories to audiences. To date, our projects have explored little known environmental, historical and technological issues and they are typically co-produced with many of Europe's top international broadcasters, and more recently with Netflix Originals.

Having gained ample experience in the production of one/off documentaries, we are presently developing our first documentary series (included in this proposal). On the other hand, the fiction films we've produced include "real life" elements, such as real-life main characters, non-professional actors, or reference important historical events.

FEATURING

BONNIE McCURRY REUM

Sister & Studio President

MICHAEL CARROLL

Childhood Friend

PAUL THEROUX

Writer & Friend

ANTHONY BANNON

George Eastman Museum of Photography - Director 1992-2012

ROBERT DANNIN

Magnum Photos - Editorial Director 1985-1990

ELIE ROGERS

National Geographic Magazine - Illustrations Editor 1969-1994

BRUCE DUFFY

Nonfiction Novelist & Friend

JOHN ECHAVE

National Geographic Society - Senior Editor 1988-2009

ANDIE BELONE

Photo Curator

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Additional Sound Mix
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Catherine Van Der Donckt
Jérémie Jones

Steve McCurry Photographic Archive
All photographs courtesy of the author
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Additional Photographic Archive
Deborah Hardt
McCurry Family Collection
Lauren Stockbower

A
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Intrepido Films
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