



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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Long Shots

Margaret Atwood: Once in August; Atwood and Family

In 1984, Rubbo directed a documentary on Margaret Atwood as part of an NFB series on Canadian authors. The film, *Margaret Atwood: Once in August*, was completed that year and is a television hour in length. In 1985, he cut a shorter version, with some changes, called *Atwood and Family*. Their subject, Margaret Atwood, was—and still is—Canada’s most celebrated author. Her most famous novel up to that point, *Surfacing* (1972), is narrated by a woman who feels alienated from a society that pressures her to assume traditional gender roles and a culture that is at risk of being dominated by American culture and media.

Margaret Atwood: Once in August begins with Rubbo typing a letter to Atwood asking for permission to film her for a series on Canadian authors initiated by the Film Board. In narration, Rubbo describes Atwood as the author of five novels, ten books of poetry, two books of criticism, and three collections of short stories. As well she is an advocate of various causes. “People become very excitable or ... nervous in her presence,” he adds. While the letter-typing scene was staged after the fact, in his actual letter to Atwood, dated 5 May 1983, Rubbo acknowledged the CBC’s aversion to his films, warned her of his “quirky and personal” filmmaking style, and made clear that he wasn’t

interested in an approach that was reverential or even deferential. He proposed what amounts to an encounter between equals, and which comes close to expressing Rubbo's sense of documentary ethics:

A writer has a very special relationship with his or her public. A documentary filmmaker of my sort also has a special relationship, a sort of unwritten contract, with his subject. There is an exchange of valuables. One gets close access in return for a subtle self-affirmation, self-referencing of the subject. Famous writers have no need of this, but famous writers could well be interested in the phenomenon. After all you do set your characters in interesting and well-researched life situations.

His request accepted, Rubbo tells us he will spend several days with Atwood and her family on the family island in a lake in Ontario. Her partner, Graeme Gibson (also an author), her parents, and her children are there. Rubbo and his crew will get there by canoe and camp out in a tent.

The central story line is Rubbo's attempt to discover an underlying, psychological motive, perhaps rooted in unhappy childhood experiences, that impels or at least informs Atwood's writing. He's convinced one exists. Time and again, he attempts to probe for it only to be repelled calmly, patiently, but firmly. Of Atwood's *Surfacing*, Rubbo tells her he can't help but wonder if it is autobiographical. Atwood replies that the book "is fiction, Michael." Rubbo suspects her childhood might have been repressive, but Atwood says that she grew up without a sense of limitation. Rubbo tells us, in narration, that he has been wanting to ask her "why her characters are often so cold, so trapped. ... I've *wanted* to ask her this, but ... haven't dared, for fear that it would sound ... more critical than I mean it to be." When he finally says to her that he finds lots of victims in her books, people who don't seem in control of their own lives, she calmly replies, "I don't happen to agree with you on that." Perhaps she had particularly in mind *Surfacing*, in which the main character rebels against victimhood; its most famous line is, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim." The woman who says that, the book's narrator, earlier says, "I had a good childhood."

(The same year that *Surfacing* appeared, Atwood published a survey of Canadian literature, *Survival*, which identified victimization—i.e. failure—as the major preoccupation of Canadian writers. She urged Canadian authors to confront and transcend it.) Atwood points out to Rubbo that most of her characters are women, and that women are more limited in Canadian society than men. But then why, Rubbo asks, doesn't she write occasionally about an *accomplished* woman, like herself? "Ah, that's the George Eliot question," Atwood replies, alluding to the fact that George Eliot never wrote about a successful female writer. Then why not, Rubbo rejoins, write about women in, say, the anti-nuclear movement, which Atwood supports? Because, she says, it is not, in a dramatic sense, a Canadian issue; a Canadian can't write about it except as an observer. But, Rubbo persists, her novels are peopled with "a bleak cast of characters, no?"

"Well, look at the statistics, Michael."

Dispersed among Rubbo's interrogations of Atwood are various scenes in which he pursues other avenues to the mystery he is certain lurks behind her writing, but they only reinforce Atwood's assertion of normality. The family seems to enjoy being together. Her father answers Rubbo's question about his parenting philosophy by saying the main principle was fairness. Her mother, while preparing a pie, remembers having praised her daughter's early creative efforts. While Rubbo is elsewhere, Atwood observes to his "collaborator"—Rubbo's term—Merrily Weisbord, who is also an author, that an eagerness to make an author's story specific to the author's life takes the reader, and society, off the hook. Here's a clue for Michael, Atwood tells Weisbord: her inspiration was the nineteenth-century novel, such as those by Dickens and Eliot. A novel is an interaction with society. It's as simple as that.

About two-thirds into the film, Rubbo does something surprising, unorthodox, daring, and somewhat challenging in the days of 16mm sync-sound shooting: "Admitting a certain defeat, we turn the film equipment over to the Atwoods. They can go ahead and make their own portrait." Rubbo's crew taught a member of the family how to work the equipment, then absented themselves for a while. The family improvises a simple scene around a table at night. The camera is locked down on a tripod, framing Atwood, who is flanked by family members. There appears to be just one light for illumination. In a single

continuous shot, Atwood analyzes Rubbo's approach. "Michael Rubbo's whole problem is that he ... thinks of me as *mysterious*, and a *problem* to be *solved*, and for that reason he spent a lot of the time so far trying to get the *clue*, trying to solve this *problem*. ... This afternoon, he was off on a tack that somehow my family had been 'repressively benevolent' [she laughs] and ... he's trying to find out why some of my work is somber in tone ... and he's trying for some simple explanation of that in *me*, or in my *life*, rather than in the society I'm portraying." This is a remarkably lucid, simple statement about her work. And on Rubbo's part, it was a stroke both self-effacing and brilliant, first to cede control of some of the filming to Atwood's family, and then to include in the film her withering rejection of his film's premise.

Nevertheless, Rubbo—or at least his on-screen persona—appears not to have understood, or perhaps to have understood but disagreed. As the film comes to a close and the crew leaves the island, Rubbo is dismayed that Atwood "had *eluded* us. Yet that is her right. Why should she reveal what haunts her, if anything does? Especially when she knows quite well that we like it much *better* when she remains private ... and mysterious. For me, she's an island on which no boats land. They circle. They peer after her. But no boats land. That's how I have seen her—through binoculars."

Rubbo may have seen Atwood "through binoculars," but what if that perspective reveals her accurately? Other than Rubbo's insinuations, there's nothing in the film that suggests Atwood is hiding something or that she wants to remain mysterious. The film contains no objective hint that Atwood the writer is other than what she says she is. She comes off as having a clear sense of herself and an ability to communicate it. A fair-minded viewer of the film would likely think Rubbo *has* revealed her, far more successfully than he realizes. If she seems mysterious, maybe that's part of her nature, a natural reserve, not the result of a deliberate intention. When the editing was in its final stages, Rubbo sent Atwood a VHS copy for her to review along with a covering letter (9 April 1984) in which he wrote, "You may be interested to know that the reaction here at the board is that you remain totally mysterious, but that somehow my failure to pin you down is itself richly revealing." No need for a microscope. Binoculars were fine.



10.1 Atwood pulls a paper bag over her face. Screen grab. *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* (1984). The National Film Board of Canada.

A striking moment in *Once in August* occurs when the Atwood family discusses Rubbo in his absence. Atwood pulls a paper bag over her face as if to mock Rubbo's insistence that there lurks something murky in her psyche. It's an irony on which Rubbo, in his narration, doesn't comment: his two most recent full-length documentaries, *Yes or No* and *Daisy*, had featured characters and their "masks." But in both films, Rubbo had respected the characters' right to their masks, and did not assume or imply something sinister or dark lurking underneath. He exhibited the same tolerance in films where the masks were metaphorical rather than literal, as with Stirling and Smallwood in *Waiting for Fidel* or Blaker in *Persistent and Finagling*. There are literal masks in *Wet Earth and Warm People* and figurative ones in *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*. He and Robitaille donned political masks for a brief scene in *Solzhenitsyn's Children*. *Once in August* is the only film in which Rubbo is not content to respect the persona his subject has chosen to project. Yet his vain attempt with Atwood yields a terrific portrait. Seeking to penetrate Atwood's depths, he renders her surfaces, and in so doing, renders her whole. His talent seems to lie in observation and



10.2 Sketching beside the lake. Screen grab. *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* (1984). The National Film Board of Canada.

reflection, not exposure. Perhaps he is best at revealing character and suggesting truth through the surfaces of things, like a painter.

There is a pleasant scene in the film where Rubbo and Atwood, sitting on a rock beside the lake, are each sketching something. Atwood asks Rubbo what he is drawing. “Something very difficult,” Rubbo says. “I’m doing *you*. But I can’t see you, you see.” “Very symbolic, isn’t it?” she answers. Atwood is probably referring merely to Rubbo’s frustration that he is not getting to know the “real” or “inner” Atwood, but the scene could serve as a broader metaphor, not just for this film but for Rubbo’s films in general. He sees things as a painter, not a psychiatrist, anatomist, or investigative reporter. Painters paint what they see; they paint surfaces.

Even so, there is more to the film than its ironic depiction of an author who maintains she has no secrets which, if disclosed, would illuminate her work. Rubbo’s framing adds a storytelling aspect that helps him create a sense of mystery. His use of the island—the family’s private island—as a metaphor lends his film an atmosphere reminiscent of many an adventure story in film and literature. He and his

crew approach the forested island silently in canoes. Rubbo explores the island, fails to penetrate its mysteries, and leaves. In his closing narration, he asks rhetorically why Atwood should “reveal what haunts her *if anything does?*” Those are my italics. Intentionally or not, Rubbo is acknowledging that there may be nothing hidden to reveal, no secret to discover. His quest, at least to some extent, is a construction, a way to turn his portrait into a story, one with mystery, thus enhancing the portrait. Carlotta Valdez (the portrait that purportedly haunts the woman Scottie Ferguson has been hired to keep tabs on in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*) it is not, but the purported mystery has kept us interested. And his concluding admission of at least partial failure is reminiscent of his acknowledgments of unfathomed secrets in several of his earlier documentaries, such as *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, *Wet Earth and Warm People*, and *Solzhenitsyn’s Children*.

In the shorter version, *Atwood and Family*, Rubbo is less intrusive than he is in the original version. He doesn’t back away from his search for some hidden cause of the bleakness of much of Atwood’s fiction, but, partly because the film is shorter, he comes off as less insistent. Most of the footage in *Atwood and Family* was seen in the original film, but the way Rubbo introduces some of it changes noticeably. He doesn’t identify Merrily Weisbord as his collaborator, but simply says, before the first scene in which she, not Rubbo, interviews Atwood, “It was good having Merrily Weisbord. She would relate differently to Margaret.” Before the scene in which the family films itself, he now says only that Atwood “was bothered by my rather narrow view of her work. This came out in some filming they did ... one evening when I wasn’t there.” And although he ends the shorter film with the same description of Atwood as like an island on which no boat lands, whom he has seen only through binoculars, this passage is preceded not by saying that “she had eluded us,” and that she likes remaining private and mysterious, but rather by “I got to like her ... but not to know her.” These changes make the shorter version feel more like a detached portrait of Atwood than an encounter between filmmaker and author. But while the result is a pleasant portrait, it lacks the impact of the longer version. In the shorter film, we haven’t seen enough of Rubbo’s interactions with Atwood for his comment that Weisbord “would relate differently to Margaret” to carry much meaning. Rubbo’s new

introduction to the scene shot by the family in his absence suggests they took it upon themselves to shoot the footage, perhaps even without his permission, while in the original version we were told that the equipment was deliberately turned over to the Atwoods so that they could film without Rubbo and his crew around. And the new ending, with Rubbo saying that he got to like Atwood but not to know her, carries less impact than it might have in the longer film, with its numerous scenes suggesting that he and Atwood were not connecting well.

The two Atwood films would be the last documentaries Rubbo would direct for sixteen years. Had he felt there were no more methodological barriers to break? Or was he simply getting tired of documentaries? Neither was precisely the case. His attention does seem to have turned inward since *Solzhenitsyn's Children*. Reviewing Rubbo's major films up to but not including the Atwood films, which hadn't been released at the time of his writing, Piers Handling found Rubbo's recent work problematic. Handling detects in the later films a withdrawal from social and political concerns and "a detached, external and often amused point of view." He notes the ambivalence of *Solzhenitsyn's Children*. He regards Rubbo's admission in *Yes or No, Jean-Guy Moreau* that he's worried about his own future in a separate Quebec as a retreat into personal concerns. He wonders if *Daisy* is "a regressive portrait of women or a condemnation of society as a whole." He finds it hard to tell where Rubbo stands on the issues at the core of the three films. "There is," he writes, "a sense of suspended judgment to these films, as if Rubbo has shied away at the last moment from the full implications of his subjective treatment of the chosen material."¹ One would guess that, had he seen them, the Atwood films would represent for Handling an even further retreat from wider concerns.

And yet, in the very next paragraph, Handling writes:

To my mind he is one of the most important documentary filmmakers in the world. His formal innovations and questionings, his intervention as a social actor on the image-track, and his acknowledgement of his role as instigator, creator and manipulator are central to the documentary debate, yet are questions being addressed by few filmmakers. If there is a radical element to Rubbo, it lies

with this desire to question and perhaps rupture the illusionism at the core of documentary.²

Handling's analysis strikes me as remarkably acute. He discerns in Rubbo a retreat from sociopolitical concerns but acknowledges his continuing innovations. Rubbo is less passionately engaged. But the quality of suspended judgment that Handling detects in Rubbo's later films is also present in the earlier ones, with their underlying mood of doubt. And I would quibble with Handling's tone of disapproval regarding Rubbo's apparent withdrawal from political issues. Given Rubbo's openness to experience and his predilection for doubt, it was probably inevitable that he would turn to situations less contentious and complex. But he certainly engaged with these situations. *Daisy* and *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* (which Handling hadn't seen) are beautiful, provocative films each in its own way. As for formal innovations, which Handling praises, Rubbo would resume his experimentation with them, sometimes radically, when he returned to documentary directing in 2000.

