



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

D. B. Jones

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A Break from “Reality”

*The Peanut Butter Solution; Tommy Tricker
and the Stamp Traveller; Vincent and Me;
The Return of Tommy Tricker*

By 1985, Rubbo had been with the National Film Board for roughly twenty years, and he had thrived there. In film after film, he had chipped away at documentary conventions. He had mastered the form and developed a distinctive personal style. He had become extremely comfortable with his on-screen persona and in using it to find and shape a story. The on-camera director in his later NFB films seems as relaxed as one could imagine possible in a pressured situation like shooting a documentary film for which he will be accountable.

Despite occasional instances of bureaucratic sluggishness or pockets of indifference to its mission, the Film Board had been a very good place for him. Ten years earlier, after he had made his two Cuban films, he expressed to *Sightlines* interviewer Steve Dobi the special advantages a job at the Film Board provided someone like him:

Apart from the freedom to say what one wants (most of the time), there is the equally important freedom from financial worries. Most directors have to waste enormous amounts of energy financing their films and fitting their

film conceptions into financeable packages. Not so at the board, and that must have an effect on my work. I think that it means that the personal character of the filmmaker tends to come out in the films. It gets closer to being self-expression, closer to painting. In the world of commercially made films, and more controlled documentaries, the “personal” gets averaged out into something which will supposedly appeal to a greater number of people. ... There are no pressures on me to be like that, and so I have just gone my more natural way.¹

And at the NFB he could go on his natural way with a comfortable salary, job security, first-class budgets, and terrific craftsmen involved at all levels of production. It was a dream situation, the envy of many a documentary filmmaker who was familiar with the Film Board. But he walked away from it.

Various factors contributed to his decision. For several years, he had enjoyed teaching stints at Harvard, which took him out of production. There he tried to get going on a pair of environmental films, but couldn't find support. His marriage was breaking up, and he was engaged in a stressful custody battle with his ex-wife about their son. The Film Board itself was entering a stage of gradual downsizing. His beloved mentor and favorite producer, Tom Daly, was retiring. The internal politics at the Film Board drained energy from filmmaking. Rubbo says he was “not popular because I took a position that we shouldn't have tenure, that there should be something at stake in our jobs, some security but not a guaranteed job for life. There were people there who just collected their salaries. My judgmental streak came to the fore.”

Meanwhile, a new filmic interest was developing. Rubbo had always had an interest in stories for children. Six of his first seven NFB films were made either for or with children, or both. In 1967, he published an article on children's films in the Canadian film journal *Take One*, in which he called for children's films that were less protective than they typically were in the English-speaking world.² He had been involved at an early stage with a popular NFB feature film, *Christopher's Movie Matinee* (1970), directed by Mort Ransen but largely improvised by the

teenagers who act in the film and are its subject. In 1979, he proposed a coproduction with WGBH-TV Boston on the childhoods of famous people. In the 1980s, he unsuccessfully urged the Film Board to create a program of quality feature films for children. In an undated, unpublished interview in the 1980s—in it he mentions *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, which was released in 1982—he suggested that engaging in honesty with children might be “worth a nightmare or two.” The Film Board wasn’t interested, but there was a movie producer in Montreal, Rock Demers, who had founded a company called La Fête devoted to making feature films for children. Rubbo happened to meet Demers when he visited the Film Board, and they hit it off. With Demers as producer, Rubbo, after leaving the NFB, wrote and directed four children’s features: *The Peanut Butter Solution* (1985); *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* (1988); *Vincent and Me* (1990); and *The Return of Tommy Tricker* (1994).

It is a common thing for documentary filmmakers to want to try their hand at fiction. But when documentarians venture into drama, they tend to be more comfortable with realism than with fantasy. Not Rubbo. The stories in all four of his features are utter fantasy. No one would have guessed that they were the work of an accomplished documentary film director.

Rubbo’s first feature, *The Peanut Butter Solution*, contains a nightmare or two. Eleven-year-old Michael and a friend are taking a painting class under a tyrannical teacher, Sergio (called Signor), who insists that his students paint exactly what they see. They are not to use their imagination. When, later, Michael dares to enter an abandoned fire-damaged house, something frightens him. He falls down a chute used for cleaning out debris and is knocked unconscious. When he wakes up the next morning, he is bald. His classmates humiliate him with their teasing. One night he encounters some friendly ghosts in the family kitchen. They give him a recipe heavy on peanut butter but otherwise sounding like a witch’s brew. They say it should restore his hair. It proves so effective that his hair not only grows back, it won’t stop growing and must be constantly sheared. But Signor, recognizing an opportunity, kidnaps Michael and about twenty other children, employing the latter as slave labor to make magical paintbrushes from the never-ending supply of hair that Michael produces. Michael’s friends

trace him to Signor's secret factory. With one of the brushes, Signor paints a huge canvas depicting the burnt house. After the painting morphs three-dimensionally, Signor enters it, suffers a fright similar to the one Michael had experienced, and turns bald himself. At that instant, Michael's hair stops growing because, we're told, his fright was passed to someone else. Michael enters the painting, goes back into the house, and sees only the friendly ghosts. Soon Signor is captured and the children are freed. As the story transitions back to comparative reality, Michael says in voice-over that what he discovered in that house was that the biggest part of a fright lies in your imagination.

The Peanut Butter Solution resembles a cross between a fairy tale and a dream. Waking up bald, then having hair that won't stop growing, a tyrannical authority figure, enslavement—these are the stuff of scary fairy tales. But they are put together in a surrealistic way that jumps from one situation to another more by free association than by conventional cause and effect.

Although the film didn't make much of a mark when it came out—Rubbo remembers the English-language reviews being dismissive—it had a haunting effect on many young children who saw it. When, in 2009, the film was posted on YouTube, almost all the commenters were pleased to have a chance to see it again. Several remembered it as being a dream, not a film, and are relieved to have the matter cleared up. The most common theme in the responses, however, is the scariness of the film. Someone self-identified as kirstleeh reported that “growing up in our house with four young children, we were all very scared [by] this movie.” One JonL said that the movie “scared the crap out of me as a kid.” Willie Brown remembered “seeing the trailer on HBO ... and waking up like 3AM to watch it before school. Big mistake [because] it freaked me out for weeks after that.” “It scarred me as a kid,” reported chrisjamesknapp, “I was so terrified.” It was, for kimmyfreak 200, the “weirdest movie ever it gave me nightmares as a kid.” Baby Jane, however, evidently somewhat logic-bound, exclaims, “I'm five minutes in wtf is going on.”

Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller shares *The Peanut Butter Solution's* whacky causality. Ralph, who stutters, collects stamps. He is told by an eminent collector who is visiting Ralph's father, also a collector, that stamps have the power to lift a package and send it

anywhere in the world. Later, Tommy Tricker, a young hustler, persuades Ralph to trade his father's prized Bluenose stamp (depicting a schooner, it is considered Canada's most beautiful stamp) for some colorful but worthless stamps Ralph has coveted. Tommy then sells the Bluenose to a dealer for \$300. Ralph's friend Nancy tracks it down, but the dealer won't sell it back for less than \$600. To placate Nancy, he gives her an unopened package containing an album that he presumes to be worthless, which Nancy gives to Ralph. They discover a letter in it that says there is a valuable stamp album in Australia. The letter instructs the reader to use his imagination to shrink himself so small that he can fit onto a stamp and ride it to the letter's destination. After following the letter's specific instructions, which include chanting "I have no fear, I have no fear at all," Ralph becomes a two-dimensional being and shrinks onto the stamp. Through a series of misadventures, the stamp gets removed from its envelope and affixed to a letter addressed to China, where Ralph winds up. A boy who befriends him takes him on a boat ride on a lake where dragons are said to live. The boy falls overboard and Ralph dives in to save him, but the apparent accident turns out to have been merely a test of Ralph's courage. Ralph is now ready to be reshunk onto another stamp on an envelope addressed to Australia. In a visually lyrical sequence, the envelope is caught up in the tail of a dragon kite, soars upward, comes loose, falls like a leaf into a postal worker's mail cart, and is sent to Australia. In Sydney, Ralph discovers that the valuable album had just been picked up by Charles Merriweather, a boy they had seen on the Bluenose stamp. The album is now in the hands of one Mad Mike, who after losing his prized menagerie of animals, became a crazy hermit. Mad Mike, they learn, has captured Tommy Tricker, who somehow learned of the album's whereabouts, travelled on a stamp to Australia, and tried to steal the album from Mad Mike. Ralph takes a koala bear to offer to the animal-loving Mad Mike in trade for the album. Tommy Tricker is forced to acknowledge that the album belongs to Ralph. The album now in his hands, Ralph's stuttering clears up. Somehow, Ralph gets shrunk onto a stamp on an envelope addressed to his home in Canada, a kangaroo mails it, and Ralph arrives back home with the album. It is full of valuable stamps, to the delight of his father, who also, somehow, has gotten the Bluenose back.

Like *The Peanut Butter Solution*, *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* had a lasting effect on many of the young children who saw it, but in this case a comparatively benign one. Posted on YouTube in 2014, it has drawn a number of comments from grown-ups pleased that it had been made available. 90schick posted, “One of my favorite movies when I was 6-7. Thank you so much for uploading.” “Thanks so much for posting this movie,” writes SLDragon, “When I was younger, it was one of my favorites.” Donald Dahl wrote, “I remember this movie and can’t wait to watch it with my boys.” Memories of the film were further triggered when Rubbo uploaded a song, “I’m Running,” that Rufus Wainwright, later a famous singer-songwriter, had written and sung for *Tommy Tricker* when he was a teenager. Everpod “watched this movie every day when i was a kid.” Laura H and her siblings “used to watch it at least once a week when we were growing up.” For kevins-takes13, *Tommy Tricker* is “One of my all time favorite movies.” And some of its once-young fans are now adult fans: “I am 25 years old and I still love it,” writes sveccha15, “as does my 24 year old sister. We still watch it to this day.” Says dj26000, “Great movie I saw it in 1989 when I was 5 on TV and still watch it today ... they don’t make movies like that anymore.”

The film’s sequel, *The Return of Tommy Tricker*, is similarly structured, with whatever causality Rubbo pulls out of a hat to carry the story quickly forward. Told by an old man that the name of the boy on the Bluenose stamp is Charles Merriweather and that he has been stuck there since 1930, Ralph and his stamp-collecting friends decide to free him by putting the stamp on a letter mailed to themselves. But once again, Tommy Tricker manages to steal the stamp. After a short-lived effort at establishing an island nation on a swampy spit of land, where he had intended to print his own stamps to sell to collectors, he mails the Bluenose to himself. He sells it, but the buyer has it snatched from him by Cass, who is a friend of both Tommy Tricker and the other kids, and who takes it to Nancy’s house. The kids bar Tricker from the house. Somehow they free Charles Merriweather from the stamp, but he turns out to be a she—Molly, his sister. She explains that Charles had gotten sick, so she took his place. She is pretty, but when the mask she is wearing at a party is removed, we see that she has aged rapidly and is almost an old lady. Tricker, feeling partly responsible,



11.1 Rubbo directing Rufus Wainwright. *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* (1988). Still photograph by Jean Demers, courtesy of Productions la Fête.

has found a letter explaining that a certain dart, which was in Molly's satchel, will take you, if thrown at a large map, to wherever it lands. The dart lands at London, which just happens to be where Molly lived in 1930. Tommy and Molly ride the dart through a galaxy of stamps, but instead of London they land on a tropical isle, one of the Cook Islands. They make friends with a native boy, who takes them for a

canoe ride on a lagoon. Molly falls in the water and the boys rescue her. Swimming underwater, Tommy notices a single-engine plane on the sea floor.

Molly falls ill and is taken to a traditional healer—who just happens to have a stamp collection. The healer tells the boys to go into the forest and get a certain plant that has special healing powers. At some risk, because the medicinal plant is surrounded by other plants deadly to the touch, Tommy uproots it and delivers it to the healer. Then, in a village square, he encounters a crowd of young stamp collectors engaged in showing and trading. They have more Bluenose stamps than any of them want; the stamp is common here, because missionaries used to get them on overseas mail. Tommy trades some cheesy modern dinosaur stamps for their Bluenoses, which he then hides. Molly, though, is not getting any better. The healer says the only cure is to cover her body with stamps. Tommy reluctantly turns over his Bluenoses. She is cured, and goes to watch a traditional marriage ceremony featuring much native dancing. One dancer, however, turns out to be Charles, her little brother. They embrace.

Tommy and his friends go to retrieve the plane. Tommy sits in the cockpit underwater as his friends start the boat to tow the plane to the surface. The tow-rope snaps. The kids on the boat chant, “He has no fear, he has no fear at all,” and then the plane, its engine now running, rises, breaks the surface, and soars into the air. Tommy metamorphizes into a stamp on an envelope addressed to his house, and he returns home.

The Return of Tommy Tricker, although less compelling than the first Tommy Tricker film—largely because Tommy is played by a less-engaging actor—shares the attraction to fantasy and advocacy of imagination that permeate Rubbo’s first two feature films, and it also has the same surreal or dreamlike continuity, the kind of sequencing that makes sense in a dream but seems absurd upon awakening. It also contains the same appeal to courage: have no fear. The one element that the two Tommy Tricker films share with Rubbo’s documentary work is their attraction to foreign lands and cultures—the China sequence in the first Tommy Tricker film, and the Cook Islands sequence in the second. Both sequences convey an enchantment with the visited culture and affection for its people.

Vincent and Me, which Rubbo directed between the two Tommy Tricker films, may be a children's film but it stands apart from the other three. Jo, a talented small-town girl, is off to Montreal to attend a summer arts school. She loves the work of Vincent van Gogh and wants to paint like him. At the school, she is asked to design a backdrop for the school play. She designs a backdrop copied from Henri Rousseau's "The Dream," except that in place of the nude woman she paints her bespectacled friend Felix. The teacher chastises her for copying. Use your imagination, she exhorts, giving her no credit for the displacement of the nude woman by Felix.

When not in class, Jo likes to sketch people she sees around Montreal. A man notices her, follows her, and is intrigued by the sketch, which is in the style of van Gogh. He buys the sketch and asks her to bring to him any others she has. They meet at a Chinese restaurant. He buys the other sketches she has brought along. But when Felix, dressed as a waiter, takes a photo, the man raises one of the sketches to hide his face.

A few weeks later, when the school play proves to be a great success, Jo's teacher, aware of her love of van Gogh, shows her a magazine article about the recent discovery of early sketches by van Gogh, one of which was sold to a Japanese businessman for \$1 million. Jo immediately recognizes the drawings as hers and the "discoverer" as the man who bought them from her. No one believes her. She is accused of lying and is about to be expelled from school when Felix appears with the photo he took at the restaurant. The sketch that the buyer had held up to hide his face is the sketch pictured in the magazine article.

Now with support, Jo and Felix will go to Amsterdam chaperoned by Tom, a journalist from Jo's hometown who is a friend of her father. Their visit to Amsterdam coincides with news of the recent theft of a valuable van Gogh painting. While the journalist pursues the story of the falsely attributed sketches, Jo and Felix become friends with a Dutch boy who lives on the smallest houseboat in Holland. Exploring an abandoned boat, they discover a secret belowdecks compartment in which a young artist is held hostage producing, under threat of bodily harm, copies of the stolen painting. He must finish by the next morning—or else. Jo helps him. They finish. Jo and Felix tell Tom about this and swear him to secrecy. But the next day, they see a television



11.2 Rubbo on break with “Vincent” (Tchéky Karyo). *Vincent and Me* (1990). Still photograph by Jean Demers, courtesy of Productions la Fête.

news report about the arrest of the art thieves and the retrieval of the painting. Tom has betrayed them and taken all the credit.

Asleep, Jo dreams of van Gogh. Her spirit leaves her body, soars toward the stars, and lands in a field in Arles, where van Gogh is painting. He is skeptical of Jo’s claim that she is from the future, but she gradually convinces him. He is enormously gratified to learn that he, who can’t sell any of his work, has become famous in the future. At his house, Jo gets him to write a disclaimer on the photo of the sketch in the magazine article. When he surprises Jo with a smile, she remarks

to him that he rarely smiled. “Every painter likes to be remembered,” he explains.

Framing the story is a pair of scenes with an actual person, the 114-year-old Jeanne Louise Calment, who at the time the film was shot, in 1989, was the only living person who had once met van Gogh. At the beginning of the film, she merely says that he was rude to her. That’s all she remembers about him. At the end of the film, after waking up from her dream, Jo takes the high-speed train to Arles to meet Calment. They talk briefly. Jo says van Gogh was nice to her. Calment, who repeats that she found him rude, can’t believe that Jo could have met van Gogh, since she is only thirteen years old.

Except for Jo’s dream sequence with van Gogh, the film’s continuity is, compared to Rubbo’s other three features, straightforward, if hardly more believable. Like the other films, it is constantly inventive, and like them, defies concise summary. It was shown on American television in 1992 and won an Emmy for Outstanding Children’s Special. Adults can enjoy it, too.

The only obvious element of Rubbo’s documentary style in this quartet of children’s fantasies is the quasi-documentary set of bookends in *Vincent and Me*. Calment and the interview are real while Jo is a fictional character. The device recalls Rubbo’s periodic use of imaginative contrivances in his documentaries. An echo of Rubbo’s fascination with masks appears in *The Return of Tommy Tricker*, when Molly’s mask is pulled off to reveal the face of an old woman. The two Tommy Tricker films reflect Rubbo’s love of travel and fascination with other cultures.

Overall the features share another characteristic with Rubbo’s documentaries: enormous energy. The films move fast, and they look like they were shot quickly—not that they appear carelessly shot, but that a lot of filming seems to have been compressed into long shooting days. There are numerous twists in the films, and they happen quickly, seemingly frenetically. Their plots sometimes race along faster than the viewer can keep up with them.

More intriguing is the question of how rooted these four children’s features might be in Rubbo’s own childhood or adult life. Stamp collecting plays an essential role in the Tommy Tricker films. In his childhood, Rubbo collected stamps. Their fascination lay in their evocation of faraway places. “I loved stamps as a kid, had an album and

daydreams pretty much like the kids in the movies. I noticed that each country had a particular style and that you could get a good idea of the country's geography and appearance from them." But by the time he left college, he had long abandoned stamp collecting for the real thing, having traveled abroad several times.

Both *The Peanut Butter Solution* and *Vincent and Me* feature painting. Rubbo is also a painter. He produced all the "van Gogh" pieces for *Vincent and Me*. We had seen him sketching with Margaret Atwood. Rubbo's mother was an accomplished painter. And Rubbo's Italian-born grandfather, Antonio Dattilo Rubbo, was a painter as well as a gifted and inspirational art teacher in Sydney for most of the first half of the twentieth century. In 2011, the Art Gallery of New South Wales put on an exhibit of his work. The exhibit catalogue, as of this writing available on the gallery's website, included twenty-four illustrations, a scholarly essay by Emma Collerton, and a family remembrance by Rubbo.³ In the late 1980s, Rubbo combined his own love of painting with his memories of the allure of stamps. For sending letters to friends, he would create miniature oil paintings that he pasted on the back of envelopes. On the front, he'd put old mint stamps, ones he remembered from his childhood and which he now would buy from dealers. "I sent many such letters around the time of the Tommy Tricker films," he said. "It was a way of carrying on the sort of game of the movies in my own life. Like in the movies, the risk aspect intrigued me. Would one see an original oil painting and steal it, since it was not protected in any way? Or steal the stamps? Most got through. Later, I took some to an art fair in New York City and had a stall, selling a few."

But there could be a deeper connection between Rubbo's fascination with painting and the one theme the four films share: fear. The lead character in *The Peanut Butter Solution* is named Michael. The painting teacher is to some extent modeled after Rubbo's memory of his grandfather. Unlike the painter in the movie, Antonio Dattilo Rubbo exhorted his pupils to be creative. But like the movie character, "He was called 'the Signor' by his students," Rubbo says, "and he would walk around behind his students acting a bit like you see in the movie. I was scared of him as a kid. When he was an old man, he would tell me about the duels he fought [in Italy], and he would pull out of his pocket something brown and shriveled, and say in his heavily accented



11.3 Rubbo's letter art. Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

voice that it was part of a human ear that he had nicked off in a duel. Looking back, I think it was actually a piece of dried apple.” And no doubt Rubbo, like any kid, experienced various other episodes of fear that remained imbedded in his memory, consciously or not.

Fear and the necessity of overcoming it feature explicitly in the two Tommy Tricker films as well. But since fear is an emotional element in most children's films, there's nothing unusual in its role in Rubbo's first three features for children. And if Rubbo was a fearful child—I have no reason to think he was—he surely overcame it before he reached adulthood. He wasn't afraid to travel to and explore non-Western countries. His large Film Board budgets, for which he was accountable, didn't intimidate him. He would throw himself into projects and situations that many would shy away from. He could deal with uncertainty and reversals in the midst of shooting. He could withstand criticism of his

personal style. But for all that, employment at the Film Board paid decently and was secure. Perhaps fear and the need to overcome it were on his mind because of his attempt to make it as a freelance director.

Rubbo's long and deep fascination with the tormented van Gogh suggests another possibility. Does Rubbo, who was certain that some dark personal experience lay behind Margaret Atwood's bleak portrayal of Canadian society, himself suffer from deep anguish? There is no such suggestion in his documentaries. They are not bleak in tone but, for the most part, joyous, or at least buoyant. Except for minor annoyances like a stolen camera or being stared at, the concern he expresses in his documentaries is for others, not himself. The only utterance of his in any of his films that sounds at all like a *cri de couer* is his mildly tortured-sounding insistence, in *Solzhenitsyn's Children*, that "it's wrong," for large, powerful countries to invade smaller, weaker ones. This was a moral plaint, not an expression of personal hurt.

Or could Rubbo's identification with van Gogh lie in an artist's anxiety that he might not be remembered? Van Gogh received no public recognition in his lifetime. Rubbo's grandfather's art occupies only a minor place in art history, and he is all but unknown outside Australia. Could the anxiety of being forgotten lie behind Rubbo's exhortation to overcome fear in his children's features? After all, as Rubbo had van Gogh say in *Vincent and Me*, "Every painter likes to be remembered." Substitute "filmmaker" for "painter," and could not his van Gogh be speaking for Rubbo?

There are some other reasons for suspecting that this could be the case. In 1980 or 1981, the Film Board published an illustrated (and undated) booklet on him, titled *Michael Rubbo: The Man and His Films*.⁴ Rubbo instigated the project, helped compile the material, and suggested the layout. For this act of self-promotion he was derided by some of his colleagues. But from his point of view he was simply taking an initiative to try to help the NFB distribute his films and perhaps provide a model for other NFB filmmakers amassing a body of work. Imagine his frustration that most of his best films—which he had to know were excellent and innovative—were refused by the CBC, the prime outlet for the Film Board's television-length documentaries, or indifferently promoted by the Film Board itself. How could he be remembered if his films couldn't even reach audiences?

As recently as 2007, the nearly seventy-year-old Rubbo posted on YouTube a two-part defense of Michael Moore against a film attacking him, *Manufacturing Dissent* (2007), by Canadians Debbie Melnyk and Rick Caine. One of the film's main charges was that Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989) was based on a lie. The premise of *Roger & Me* is Moore's unsuccessful quest for an interview with General Motors head Roger Smith, whom Moore blames for the economic troubles of his hometown of Flint, Michigan. Moore, the Canadian film claimed, was granted an interview but chose to pretend he never got it. Rubbo's defense of Moore seems ambivalent. He regards Moore's alleged lie as unacceptable if the allegation is true, but he doesn't outright condemn it. He is more annoyed at *Manufacturing Dissent*. He distrusts the filmmakers. He defends the right of a filmmaker like Moore to fiddle with the facts a bit in order to make an interesting story. One gets the impression that he doesn't approve of the alleged, major fudging in *Roger & Me* but he has an unacknowledged reason for not denouncing it outright. At the end of the second part of the YouTube presentation, Rubbo holds up a copy of the DVD of *Waiting for Fidel* and remarks that he has been told that *Roger & Me* was inspired by it.

