



## THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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## Something's Happening

### *Solzhenitsyn's Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris*

Cuba had impressed Rubbo. He admired the sharing mentality that he thought he saw there. His warmth toward the Cuban experiment was evident in the two films he made there, especially *I Am an Old Tree*, which, despite its several caveats, is an affectionate account of Cuban society. Although he acknowledged that he felt himself too old—he was about thirty-six—to change, his film approved of the goals Cuba was pursuing and, for the most part, the steps it was taking towards those goals.

But Cuba upset him when, in 1975, it sent its military to Angola. The exodus of the “boat people” who took enormous risks to escape Vietnam after the triumph by the North took him by surprise. Reports of the Khmer Rouge’s murderous rampage in Cambodia horrified him. And so, while he remained leftist in his sympathies, he feared he might have been too soft on Cuba’s Marxist experiment.

Rubbo’s doubts were exacerbated by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, the English translation of which appeared in 1973. Solzhenitsyn described in relentless detail the establishment of prison camps across the USSR, and especially in Siberia. Millions of inmates were forced into labor; thousands were brutalized or killed. Solzhenitsyn himself had been interned for years. Perhaps two aspects of *The*

*Gulag Archipelago* were most disturbing to its Marxist readers as well as less ideological leftists. One was the sheer nightmarish quality of the Gulag: no due process, whimsical decisions, lack of communication. Even more devastating was Solzhenitsyn's argument that the Gulag could not be blamed solely on Stalin. The Soviet Union's dark side could be traced back to its founding under Lenin, and to its core ideology. It was, for Solzhenitsyn, rooted in the nature of the Bolshevik Revolution and its Marxist-Leninist ideology. It was not an aberration but an inevitable outcome.

Following the book's publication, Rubbo became aware of an even stronger reaction in France, where several prominent young Marxist intellectuals, most of them avid participants in or supporters of the radically leftist May 1968 uprisings in Paris (subsequently known as May '68), had renounced Marxism, written tracts attacking the Soviet Union and Communism, and become media sensations. A vocal group of them were becoming known as the "New Philosophers." The term in French, *nouveaux philosophes*, had a connotation that was often lost in translation. The original *philosophes*, such as Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, were men of the Enlightenment. But, as explained in the introduction to a special 1981 issue on the New Philosophers in *The Chicago Review*,

unlike the irreligious controversialists who are thought to have presaged the French Revolution, the *nouveaux philosophes* fix a backward gaze upon their own failed mini-revolution, the famous "events" of May 1968 and the general strike which followed. Once student activists, they have learned over the course of the intervening years to mistrust a narrow Marxist ideology. ... For inspiration [they] have turned to such modern heroes of resistance as Solzhenitsyn and Camus, or to the doubting Socrates, or to the church fathers and the Old Testament. But though they deny the expected Enlightenment touchstones, the century of the rights of man is not hard to discover in their work: in their skeptical vigour the new philosophers recall the disaffected critics of the ancient regime.<sup>1</sup>

Because Solzhenitsyn seemed to be the strongest influence on the New Philosophers, Rubbo decided that for his next project he would attempt to persuade Solzhenitsyn, who was now residing in the United States, to participate in a film about his book and the reactions to it by these young French writers who were once on the left. It so happened that the film would likely be shot on roughly the tenth anniversary of the Paris uprisings.

Rubbo's idea for the film was to assemble several of the New Philosophers at a Russian restaurant in New York, where they would have dinner and a discussion with Solzhenitsyn. The event would be an encounter and would be intercut with relevant archival footage. It would likely be contentious at times. Rubbo proposed the idea to Solzhenitsyn in a letter sent to him at the Hoover Institute, a conservative research facility and think tank housed at Stanford University, and where Solzhenitsyn held an appointment. As he remembers the now-lost letter, Rubbo confessed his leftist sympathies but assured Solzhenitsyn that he would be treated fairly. He described the National Film Board's reputation for fairness and his own somewhat dialectical method. He argued that a film with such an approach might extend Solzhenitsyn's persuasive reach to audiences inclined to disagree with him.

It is hard to imagine the reclusive, doleful Solzhenitsyn seriously entertaining this proposal. Rubbo did not get a reply. He has no evidence that Solzhenitsyn even received the proposal. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn had screeners at the Hoover Institute.

With Solzhenitsyn out of the picture, Rubbo shifted his focus to the New Philosophers themselves. He would take a crew to Paris, where he would team up with a Quebecois journalist based there, Louis-Bernard Robitaille, whom he had met in Montreal through their mutual friend Nick Auf der Maur, the leftist candidate featured in *I Hate to Lose*. Robitaille would help Rubbo make contacts, help him get around Paris, and interpret for him. Rubbo intended to interview a number of New Philosophers and some of their critics and predecessors. And now, in addition to coinciding roughly with the tenth anniversary of May '68, the film would be shot during the French national elections.

The film opens with a tracking shot of Rubbo on the back of a motorcycle (Robitaille's, we later learn) speeding alongside the Seine. Pop music plays on the soundtrack. Dashing through Paris in a car, on

a motorbike, or on foot will become a leitmotif in the film. After this brief intro, the film cuts to a Communist Party rally occurring just before the March 1978 general elections. The atmosphere resembles that of a fair. Young vendors hawk trinkets—small white figurines of Karl Marx; lapel pins showing the hammer and sickle—and various newspapers and journals. Soon we see Rubbo squeezing his way through the crowd, looking for Robitaille, who for the moment remains unidentified. Rubbo introduces himself. (This is a contrivance, as they had already met, and one that seems gratuitous in that it adds little if anything to the film.) “You know Nick auf der Maur?” Rubbo asks. “Yeah,” the young man responds, looking quizzically at Rubbo.

“He—he told me when I got to Paris that I, yeah, that I should, uh, find you, because, uh, I’m doing a film—”

“How’d you get in here?”

Rubbo mentions his Film Board press pass, then says he wants to talk with Robitaille later. Rubbo notices a tape with the Soviet national anthem on it. “My contact,” Rubbo narrates, “Bernard Robitaille, says it will be *amazing* if they play it.”

After lingering to hear Communist Party candidate Georges Marchais rail about wealth disparities in France and promise to make the rich pay, and then the crowd sing “The Internationale,” the film cuts to a shot of Rubbo and Robitaille, now looking like old pals, dashing across a busy intersection to a kiosk that sells newspapers and journals. Robitaille gives Rubbo a brief rundown on several dailies. *Le Parisien* is right wing, “a bit racist,” with a “very big circulation.” *L’Humanité* is “Communist, one hundred fifty thousand.” *Le Figaro*, “respectable ... of the right.” *Libération*, “very interesting ... May ’68. The children read that.” *LAURORE*, “the ‘old man’ newspaper ... right wing.” *Le quotidien du peuple*, “the smallest ... very orthodox Maoist,” with a circulation of perhaps three thousand. *Le Matin*, one of the newest, is “pro-Socialist. And *Le Monde* “is something special ... the conscience of the state, and of the nation.”

In his apartment, Robitaille shows Rubbo stories he has published for *La Presse* on prominent intellectuals—not all of them New Philosophers—whom they may want to interview. “And here’s Sartre,” Rubbo sighs. We won’t get *him*, for sure.” “No, impossible to get him,” Robitaille confirms. Rubbo, smoking a pipe, follows cigarette-smoking

Robitaille around, probing, asking questions about why he left Montreal, and not getting expansive answers. Then, over a montage of shots depicting Robitaille's typical morning, Rubbo says in narration, "It's not going to be easy to work with Bernard. The mornings are virtually lost. He rises about ten, goes to his favorite pastry shop, where he buys a *pain au chocolat*. This he takes to his favorite café, where he has one or two *double espres bien serré*—double espressos, well squeezed. Then he reads newspapers until about twelve ... or did, before I met him." At this point, Rubbo meets up with him in a coffee shop. Robitaille groans that "it's too early in the morning." Such interplay between Rubbo and Robitaille, with Rubbo occasionally complaining about Robitaille's work habits, Robitaille teasing Rubbo about his intellectual deficiencies, and the two of them debriefing after an interview, recurs throughout the film. It functions as both comic relief and something like a chorus. The interaction is enjoyable and often, when in reaction to a recent encounter with an interviewee, revealing.

Speeding around Paris on Robitaille's motorbike again, Rubbo pleads with Robitaille, who has poor eyesight, to slow down: "It's quite terrifying on the back of here!" They briefly stop by the futuristic, forbidding headquarters of the Communist Party. Robitaille says he respects the Communists because they live by their principles. Racing past Notre Dame de Grace, Rubbo asks Robitaille why he takes so little notice of the Socialists. Robitaille says they're wishy-washy. Then the two find themselves with a Communist candidate for Paris's eleventh arrondissement, Douceline Bonvalet, a well-educated forty-year-old. A worker is pasting her large campaign posters over those of other candidates. Robitaille describes her as practical, close to the problems of the people she wants to represent. Cut to an elegant dinner, where Rubbo, sipping wine and turning on his charm, questions another woman, Marie-Pierre Carretier. Carretier is a journalist colleague of Bernard's. She won't vote Communist. "Communism is for nuclear power," she explains. "Communism is for the army, Communism is for centralism. It's ... a reactionary party."

These two interviews serve as warm-ups for more substantial ones to come. But first there is a brief scene in which two men, one in a Mitterand mask and the other in a Marchais mask (the leaders, respectively, of the Socialist and Communist parties), pantomime a



8.1 Rubbo (r) with Louis-Bernard Robitaille. Production photo. *Solzhenitsyn's Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1978). The National Film Board of Canada.

fight to some street music. It's not very clear that the two men are Rubbo and Robitaille. Perhaps the scene is meant to suggest that they view the election as something of an empty ritual. There follows a scene of Mitterrand delivering a formal speech to a large, well-behaved crowd. He drones on about how it is natural for men to seek power, which is why his Socialists not only seek power for themselves, but

“counter-powers”—limited, no doubt—for the opposition. Now in a car, Robitaille explains some of the election process to Rubbo (and to us). It starts with two rounds. The first round narrows candidates down for the second.

As hinted at by the mock fight, we soon learn that neither of the two men—who are now functioning something like a tag team—is very interested in the election itself. It’s a pretext for the film, something of a MacGuffin. What intrigues them are the changes taking place on the French Left. In a bookstore, they examine works on Marxism. Cut into the discussion are brief shots of the books and inserts of the authors. “I think we can say that it started with Solzhenitsyn,” Robitaille says over a shot of a paperback copy of *l’archipel du goulag*, followed by footage of Solzhenitsyn as they discuss him. Rubbo notes that at first Solzhenitsyn was ignored because he seemed so reactionary. As the pair examine more books, Robitaille says there was a second wave, so to speak, of former leftists, major figures from May ‘68, like André Glucksmann “who was ... first a Communist and then, uh, a Maoist ... and who wrote a book, *La cuisiniere et let mangeur d’hommes ... Cook and the man-eater .*” Rubbo says, “Yeah, I read—I read this one. He’s more or less saying that, uh, that Marxism is as bad as, uh, as, uh, Nazism.” Robitaille then picks up a copy of *la barbarie à visage humain*, and says, “Well, the big star is Bernard-Henri Lévy,” who, Robitaille explains, was an early publisher of the New Philosophers and then became one himself with his book, *Barbarism with a Human Face*. Rubbo asks whom they should try to interview. Robitaille suggests several names, then adds, “But if you insist to have a star, we can see Lévy. I know you like that.” The next shot shows them admiring a ceiling-high rack of books. “You’re very impressed,” Robitaille remarks, digging at Rubbo. “You’ve never seen so many books. Maybe you make films but you don’t read a lot.” Pleased with his jibe, Robitaille takes a drag on his cigarette, then doubles down: “If you’re illiterate, don’t—don’t think everybody, uh, all your public is the same.” Rubbo takes no apparent offense; in a close-up gazing at the rack of books, he just says, “Amazing.”

Robitaille takes Rubbo on a tour—“a little history lesson ... which would be very good for you.” A visit to a monument to the Paris Commune of 1871 leads to the next interview. The Commune is important,





8.2 “Maybe you make films but don’t read a lot.” Screen grab. *Solzhenitsyn’s Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1978). The National Film Board of Canada.

Rubbo narrates, because “according to Socialist historian and writer Jean-Pierre Faye, the fall of the Commune greatly influenced the first Soviet leaders.” In his office, Faye says that at first the party was committed to democratic openness, but Lenin believed the Paris Commune failed because it was too soft, and that all dissent should be suppressed. The Czechoslovakian uprising of 1968, which the Soviets brutally suppressed, was, says Faye, an attempt to restore such freedoms as that of the press and of association. The film cuts to Rubbo-narrated footage of the Soviet Army’s occupation of Prague. “So this is Prague, exactly ten years ago. ... And it makes me very—it makes me very *mad* to think that those tanks are still there today ... just like it used to make me mad to see Americans in Vietnam. It’s *wrong*.” Faye says that the invasion also angered Communists in Europe. Over footage of a frightened young Soviet tank driver besieged by microphone-wielding reporters, Rubbo summarizes the exchange: “Always they say the same thing: ‘Why are you here? *Speak* to us. You’re *Communists*, aren’t you? What are you *doing* here? There’s no counter-revolution here.’”

At Robitaille's suggestion, they visit an old Czech exile, Artur London, now living in Paris. In 1952, he had been accused of betraying the revolution; he was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. In his apartment, his wife shows us microscopic messages written on cigarette paper he had smuggled out of prison, telling her that he would confess but not to believe it. He wrote a book about how he was made to confess. Fourteen people were convicted; eleven were executed. Intercut is footage of one of the accused, Rudolf Slánský, confessing that he "acted as an enemy, defending the interests of the Anglo-American imperialists, and I betrayed Czechoslovakia." When Robitaille asks why, after the show trials that had occurred earlier in Hungary and the Soviet Union, he maintained his faith in the Soviet Union, London explains that faced with Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, Communists like him did not notice that the Soviet Union was becoming a police state. "Everybody defended the Soviet Union. Everybody defended Stalin." He admires Solzhenitsyn—"magnificent writing"—but disapproves of his endorsement of the Vietnam War and his claim that he had never felt so free as in Franco's Spain. London says he has retained a life-long commitment to what he calls "Eurocommunism," or "Socialism with a human face."

After London mentions that there were some protests in Moscow's Red Square against the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia, and that one of the protesters, a worker named Viktor Fainberg, is living in Paris, the film cuts to Fainberg standing with Rubbo and Robitaille in a large, mostly empty public square. Fainberg says that his circle in the Soviet Union sympathized with the Czechs' efforts to liberalize Communism. Because Fainberg struggles to express himself in English, Rubbo provides a voice-over summary: "Seven demonstrators met together on Red Square. They had [printed] slogans, hidden in a pram, under a baby. So they got into position, and then suddenly the slogans just appeared in their hands, from under the baby. What did they say, the slogans? 'Hands off Czechoslovakia.'" The protesters were beaten, and Fainberg lost his front teeth and was sent to a psychiatric hospital for five years. He says it was a good experience, because he saw not only the depths of depravity that human beings were capable of but also their capacity for dignity and courage. He is convinced that because of the human rights movement, the Soviet Union is doomed.

In what Rubbo identifies as “the elegant office of René Andrieu, the editor of *L’Humanité*,” Robitaille asks Andrieu, a guarded, stiff man who looks like he could be an oil executive or a college president, what form he thinks Socialism should take in France. For us, Andrieu says, Socialism and democracy are synonymous. He seems to hedge, and then obfuscate a bit, when Robitaille asks him if he thinks they are synonymous in the Soviet Union, but he concludes emphatically, declaring, “I’m *totally* for democratic control, I’m *totally* against arbitrary power, against the centralized state, against the one-party system. *That I don’t want.*”

“Finally,” says Rubbo in voice-over, “I got up the courage to ask him a question ... in my rotten French.” Andrieu had debated one of the New Philosophers on television the night before; what, Rubbo asks, does he think of their comprehensive attack on Marxism? “It amuses me somewhat,” Andrieu replies. Marx’s followers stretch across the globe, Andrieu continues, a reality whether one likes it or not. “No philosopher in history has left such a legacy—neither Plato nor Descartes, Kant—none have made such an impact on the course of history.”

The next morning, in a coffee shop, Rubbo upbraids Robitaille for oversleeping, causing them to miss “an extremely important interview with Jean Elleinstein, the most progressive thinker in the Communist Party.” Instead they attend what Robitaille describes as “a very Parisian event,” a book launch, the book in this case being about its author’s expulsion from the Italian Communist Party. At the cocktail reception that follows, they speak with one of the panelists, novelist Philippe Sollers, whom Robitaille describes as “the pope of the avant-garde.” Rubbo’s voice-over translates and summarizes their exchange. Robitaille, whose manner seems to betray that he thinks Sollers is something of a charlatan, says to him, “You’ve had a rather zig-zagged career during the last few years. You supported the Communists, you were *very* close to the Chinese ... then suddenly you *break* with China.”

“Yes, I’m ... always swinging against the tide, you know. I do things that are ... out of fashion. A bit of zig, and a bit of zag.”

“But you believed in China pretty completely, no?”

Sollers has been chewing on an olive and now removes the pit from his mouth; he looks like he is searching for a clever response. “Oh, you

should look at that [as] essentially Dadaist, because I'm fundamentally a Dadaist. You know, people don't always see the ... *humor* in political postures. They make a *religion* of it, and they're *shocked* by sudden changes of positions, like mine. ... You don't seem ... very convinced."

At a large indoor rally, Jacques Chirac is delivering what Robitaille says is Chirac's stock anti-Communism speech to his mostly middle-class audience. The Communists will try to trick you, Chirac says, but they have the capacity and the will to paralyze you, paralyze France. He speaks at a podium, on a stage, his image projected on a giant screen behind him. It looks Big Brotherish. After his speech, a woman leads the crowd in singing *La Marseillaise*. For them, Rubbo says, the Communist Party hasn't changed. As the song is ending, we see several shots of older, stereotypically bourgeois men on the street. One of them sports a bowler hat. A two-shot features two of them walking toward the camera, one with a cane, the other with an umbrella that he uses as a cane.

They've been given a second chance to interview Jean Elleinstein, Rubbo tells us, "if Bernard will hurry up." Apparently he does. Rubbo translates and paraphrases Elleinstein, who, like René Andrieu earlier, looks guarded and official behind his desk. European Communism recognizes, Elleinstein says, that Socialism must be achieved democratically. The Soviet Union's experience is not applicable here; it is an *anti-model*. When asked why he would want to keep using the name "Communism" when it has been so discredited, Elleinstein responds with what, in Rubbo's translation, seems like mumbo-jumbo: if in the West we can't solve our problems, it is not because of how Socialism developed in the Soviet Union, but because capitalism is dominated by the profit motive and is thus incapable of solving these problems. We have to find new roads neither social democratic, which failed, nor Stalinism, which is irrelevant. A new road has to be found. "That's what Eurocommunism is all about."

In a café, over wine and beer, Rubbo and Robitaille discuss labels such as "Communism" and "democracy." Simplistic uses of the words irritate Robitaille. Where, he asks, is the democracy in the Republican or Democratic parties in the United States? Afterwards, with Rubbo driving a car and Robitaille giving directions, they head for their next interview. "André Glucksmann," Rubbo narrates over violent footage

of the riots of May '68, "the man we're about to see, was in the streets of Paris in 1968 when they looked like this." As a consequence of the riots, Glucksmann joined an extreme Marxist group, Rubbo says. "We'll see how he feels today."

Glucksmann says that the resistance in the Soviet Union is what turned the young Marxists around. Rubbo translates in voice-over. Having been dissidents here, we understood the Russian dissidents, Glucksmann explains. People like him felt "an underlying rapport that exists when the illusion is stripped away." For example, the Vietnam War, "a dirty war on the Western side, we imagined it was a clean war on the Vietnamese side. That was false. Obviously false."

Robitaille suggests that it might be Glucksmann who has changed, not Communism. Glucksmann says,

there was a willingness not to see. A willingness to be blind. Yes, I've changed. And no, I haven't changed. We were right to protest against the concentration camps in South Vietnam, for instance. And the proof that we were right is that Cambodia, which was perfectly peaceful, an island of peace before the American intervention, became the scene of terrible massacres ... where American bombers have been replaced by the machine guns of the Khmer Rouge. So in a sense we *didn't* change, because we were against *all* massacres, and still are, by all states. In another sense, we've changed because ... we had that willingness not to see. We believed that one side had to be good if the other side was bad.

When Robitaille observes that Glucksmann seems to equate the Soviet Union with the French Communist Party, Glucksmann assails him for having written an article on Glucksmann and the other New Philosophers that argued that, because they criticized the Left, they were therefore of the Right. That's "the logic of the Cold War ... the logic of camps, in every sense of the word." If we can't say, he goes on, that there are lies from the Left or the Right without being accused of being enemy agents, then "I say it's not me that's sick, but you."

Rubbo mentions that he had made two films in Cuba in 1974 and was quite impressed by the idealism of the young people he met there. We see clips from the films. The student body president from *Waiting for Fidel* is included in the clips. “What fascinates *you*,” Glucksmann asks Rubbo, “about that young Cuban? Why didn’t you ask him, one, about the concentration camps, two, about the way they treat homosexuals ... three, about, uh, what Cubans are doing in Africa, why they’re playing GIs for the Soviet Union? *You*. What fascinates *you*? The young Cuban, I don’t know—but *you*?”

In Robitaille’s apartment, Rubbo and Robitaille, slumped on sofas, look dismayed and tired. And perhaps tired of each other. “Well,” Rubbo says, “it wasn’t a very good interview that you just did there.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Well, where do *you* stand, Bernie boy? Where do you stand in this debate?”

Robitaille responds reflectively: “It’s very easy to draw ... very, very simple conclusions like that [i.e., Glucksmann’s]. You say, ‘That was so bad, so let’s not do it again. Let’s just stay as we are, now. Let’s not try anything.’” The scene shifts to the two men riding an elevated train, their conversation continuing in voice-over. Robitaille elaborates, “Because there are problems, and because the experiences were not very good, let’s not change anything *anymore*.’ I think that’s—that’s a bit *easy*. It’s not stupid, it’s easy. It is very easy. And I think that’s the problem of the New Philosophers.”

The men continue on the train for a while, cool to each other. In one shot, they avoid each other by burying into their respective newspapers (Rubbo, *L’Humanité*; Robitaille, *Le Matin*), held up before their faces as if to discourage any attempt at communication or interaction. Over this sequence, Rubbo, in narration, editorializes: “I don’t think Glucksmann makes it too simple. It’s not too simple to say that one was blind. It *is* simple to think that the truth about something all comes from one or two great minds, and that all virtue resides in one or two social experiments. It’s not simple to admit that the world is more complex than that.”

Over a scene in a café, Rubbo introduces in voice-over the next interviewee, “Jean Daniel, editor of the left-wing *Nouvel Observateur* [who] supports the New Philosophers, but with some ... interesting

reservations.” In the interview, in which Robitaille asks all the questions, and which Rubbo translates in voice-over, Daniel says that the New Philosophers are important but warns against slipping into resignation. Man is capable of remaking Socialism “while at the same time denouncing the use of that word ... by the Cubans, the Chinese, and the Albanians. ... We don’t say that Christianity is bad [just] because there are bad Christians. ... But the word ‘Socialism’ *has* been wrongly expropriated, and the New Philosophers have made us conscious of that takeover.”

Prodding, Robitaille opines that ten years earlier it would have been much harder to say that the Soviet Union or China were not Socialist countries. “Well,” Daniel responds, “there’s always the question of degree. In the case of the Soviet Union, you are *wrong*. It was *quite* possible to say that ten years ago. But since mankind is always looking for a mecca, or Vatican ... we have moved our dreams from Algeria to Cuba. China has been one of the most enduring examples of our desire to anchor our dreams to some existing model. You’re right: it would have been hard ten years ago to say China wasn’t Socialist. The real difficulty is to resign oneself to the lack of models.”

As they stroll through a park, Robitaille, in voice-over, again needles Rubbo: “You know, this time you were very good, hardly no Australian accent in your questions. Very precise, very good.”

“That’s because I didn’t ask any questions.”

“Very good, very good.”

But, as Rubbo points out in his narration, “some people still believe in the models.” We are now at a large rally staged by a Marxist-Leninist group that “is faithful not only to the China of Mao, but to the teaching of Lenin and Stalin as well.” Asked if there are some countries he still considers Socialist, a bearded young Maoist mentions China, Albania, North Korea, Cambodia, and Vietnam—“with variations, of course.” Robitaille asks him how he feels about Cambodia: “The news that’s reaching us now is a bit ... *upsetting*, isn’t it?” “Yes,” the young Marxist replies, “it’s *very difficult* for us, because we supported *both* Vietnam *and* Cambodia in their national liberation struggles. It’s very unfortunate what’s happening, and we just hope that it’ll be settled ... peacefully.”

In a bookstore again, Robitaille gives Rubbo a quick rundown on several older and recent books about China. Until a few years ago, all the books about China, from both the Left and the Right, were very positive. Now, they are mostly negative. The last book Robitaille shows Rubbo, *la moitié du ciel*, is very positive on China, unconditionally pro-Mao, Robitaille says. But recently its author, Claudie Broyelle, with her husband Jacques and a third author, have published a very critical book on China, *Deuxieme retour de Chine*.

Rubbo and Robitaille interview the Broyelles in their home. In Rubbo's voice-over translation, Claudie Broyelle says, "It's a bit embarrassing for me to take responsibility for my first book, because I have to admit I was wrong ... and it's not ... pleasant to have to say that." After she elaborates, Robitaille exclaims that the Broyelles have gone from one extreme to the other; first, China was all white, now it's all black: "It's a bit like leaving the church."

"No," she protests. "It's *not* like that. Firstly, it's not completely black, the picture of China that we paint. And anyway, we just reported what we saw." Jacques Broyelle: "We thought that it was a dictatorship on the enemy, but we quickly found out that the dictatorship was on the people, too, like in all Socialist countries." Claudie Broyelle: "If you want to get married, you have to ask permission of the committee. If you want to have a child, ask the committee. You're given a number. ... *You* [pointing her finger] can have a kid in '75, *you* can have one in '76, *you* in '77. If you don't get on with your husband, ask the committee for permission to divorce. In *every domain*, the party reigns supreme. You can say that from the cradle to the grave, the Chinese are controlled in all that they do ... by the party."

"There are now some twenty-five Socialist experiments in the world," Jacques Broyelle observes. "Each time an experiment fails, we remake our investment somewhere else, redefining our concept of Socialism."

Claudie Broyelle says that she now believes "there *is* no other democracy than the ... respect for forms ... the written codification of laws that people can *refer* to. ... Today, anybody can publish a newspaper. We ourselves, our little Maoist group, published a newspaper for *years*, even with very meager resources ... with a circulation of some five thousand. And we had *printers* who were willing to print our paper, because they were covered by the *bank* ... but if the banks were



nationalized, the printers would no longer do it. They'd have ... precise goals ... democratically decided by the union, the government, and the people—democracy in inverted commas.”

Jacques Broyelle recalls that “when Solzhenitsyn’s book came out [in France] in 1974, somebody asked Marchais if Solzhenitsyn could have been published in a Socialist France. He replied, ‘Certainly—if he could find a publisher.’” Claudie Broyelle adds that during the Cultural Revolution, when the Communist leadership decided that the proliferation of Red Guard and underground publications was getting out of hand, they simply cut off the supply of paper.

Walking along the Seine, Rubbo and Robitaille debrief. Rubbo: “Do you think that maybe our opinions are so weak, we’re convinced by everybody? Everybody I talk to—everybody I talk to, I find convincing.” He laughs.

Robitaille: “I agree. Yeah ... because they’re very convincing, what they say.”

Rubbo: “Jesus, it’s confusing.”

Robitaille: “Well, maybe at the end, you’ll just ... abandon the whole thing, and just go to the countryside.”

A fat, jowly man in a blue sweater is preparing a meal for several people in his apartment. Rubbo narrates that “we were impressed by the Broyelles, but Daniel Anselme is not impressed by *us*. This is depressing, because Daniel Anselme is an experienced and knowledgeable man when it comes to our subject, the Left. He used to be a Communist, and now is a writer-activist for *Autogestion*. He doesn’t like our celebrities, our lack of contact with workers, and nor does he like being filmed. Disappointing as we may be, we still get a ... good meal: veal escalope.” Rubbo translates the ensuing conversation in voice-over.

A woman in the room—although not identified as such, she is Marilu Mallet, Rubbo’s wife at the time (and herself a filmmaker); their young son Nicholas is in the scene, too—asks Daniel what he thinks of “this film Michael is making?” His mouth full, Anselme answers—Rubbo’s voice-over translates not just his words but also his sarcastic, mocking tone—“Sounds to me like a piece on high fashion. Well, for a foreign newspaper one does an article on the fashion world of France, and you pick certain young designers who are up and coming, and who would like to become more famous. Ah! [cutaway to Robitaille lighting

a cigar] He's got a long cigar. Very elegant. Yes, he's a Canadian, but he's acclimatized ... Parisian ... a *dandy* of the boulevards. A century ago he would have had a *cane*, and yellow *gloves*. Sure! Yellow gloves and a cane. And you would have had your *table*, at the *Café Madrid*. And now look at the terrible life you lead in this false capital."

"Daniel knows, perhaps more than anyone else, about the 1968 uprising in Paris," Rubbo says, "but getting him to say something serious about it is another matter." Robitaille thinks Anselme may be speaking metaphorically when he says, "Okay, so you take a slice of veal, making sure it's not too thick ... you make this dish thinner ... slice of ham." Robitaille asks, "So that's the recipe for escalope '68?"

"No."

"No connection?"

"No."

An intense young man is walking down a narrow Parisian street. Rubbo is "still trying to catch Bernard-Henri Lévy. He's the most *outrageous*, and the most *marketed*, of the New Philosophers. He has a way with words that makes him a sort of philosophical pop star ... [Lévy is now sitting among an audience in a small room] a Mick Jagger of the brainy bunch. But we intend to stand our ground." Over these last words, Lévy glances over at the camera as if to say, "Not a chance."

But they get their chance, and as they climb the steps to Lévy's apartment, the two prepare for the interview. Rubbo: "You can ask the hard questions ... and I'll be the nice guy." Robitaille: "You'll be the—you'll be [laughing]—you'll be the nice dummy boy, North American, asking nice questions."

"And you can ask the tough ones, right?"

"Okay, I'll be the bad boy."

The interview opens on Lévy—pacing, gesturing, intense, humorless, self-important, incredibly young-looking, shirt open at the top. His apartment is all white or slightly off-white: the walls, the woodwork, the door, the furniture, even the floor. In Rubbo's voice-over translation, Lévy delivers an oracular mini-lecture: "Marxists have always said that it doesn't matter about the theory. Judge the practice. Judge materialistically. Thus they have rubbed our noses in the fact that the theory of liberty, equality, and fraternity leads to the Vietnam War, and to the massacres in Algeria. So, apply the same criteria to

Marxism. ... It's a philosophy which preaches *against* the state, but which has had the concrete effect of *strengthening* the state. So I simply ask that they apply to Marxism the same rigorous judgment that they demand *we* apply to liberal thought. And surely it's even more justified in the case of Marxism, which is a philosophy that claims to lead to a new, improved society."

Robitaille seems at least mildly intimidated by Lévy's dazzling erudition. He is having trouble playing the role of the bad boy. He asks if Marx would approve of what's happening in the Soviet Union today. "I have no idea," Lévy replies. "The question's meaningless—just as meaningless as it would be to ask if de Tocqueville would be happy with what's happened in Vietnam. Anyway, Brezhnev is not mistaken when he thinks that he is inspired by Marx. And when you see, over the gates of Kolyma, the enormous Soviet concentration camp, a quotation by Marx, I say it's not misplaced."

"But," Rubbo asks, "all this evidence of oppression has existed for a long time—the trials of the '30s, the ... crushing of the Prague Spring. How come people like you have just woken up?"

One reason, and I never tire of repeating it, is the appearance of that monumental work, the writings of Solzhenitsyn. In essence, he says the same things as Kravchenko, and others, with the difference that Solzhenitsyn is an *artist*, and not a reporter. *The Gulag Archipelago* is as important to our times as the *Divine Comedy* was important to Dante's era, as *King Lear* to the Shakespearean age, as important as Picasso's *Guernica* was for the Spanish Civil War. [Here Lévy puts his hand on Robitaille's shoulder; it looks patronizing, and Robitaille seems taken aback] In brief, for me, he proves the thesis that *only* the artist, and *not* the theoretician, can stop the flow of blood. ... [Another] reason that the Western intelligentsia was *deaf* to Kravchenko, *deaf* to Koestler, was because the brains of the Left were fuddled with Marxism. ... Marxism made us *deaf*, Marxism made us *blind*, we had to purge ourselves of Marxism. So if the Communists come to power in France, it will be very dangerous. More than dangerous, it will be *catastrophic*. The



8.3 Bernard-Henri Lévy holding forth. Screen grab. *Solzhenitsyn's Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1978). The National Film Board of Canada.

day the Communists come to power, I swear to you, I will be the first French writer to change his nationality.”

Robitaille asks if Lévy really thinks there’s a danger of totalitarianism. Lévy: “I’m *telling* you, I would be the first French writer to shame the honor of his government by changing his nationality. With the Communists in power, with René Andrieu holding the reins of power, there would be a risk of totalitarianism—smiling, good-fellow totalitarianism, but still totalitarianism. And there are signs today which don’t lie.”

Later, in Robitaille’s apartment, Rubbo, looking defeated, fiddles with what could be a neck chain. “We were ... too impressed,” he sighs. Off camera, Robitaille says, “We were taken by ... *speed*.”

“I wanted to ... talk about my Cuban experiences, because *really*, it was ... quite good in Cuba.” As Rubbo says this, Robitaille’s body language suggests he is tired of hearing about Rubbo’s experiences in Cuba.

In a lengthy tracking shot on a bridge over the Seine, the two men, facing the camera in a medium two-shot, continue their discussion about Lévy. Robitaille: “And I think pessimism ... is something very natural. And that’s a force, because it’s very—at the same time, it’s very *easy* to be pessimistic, and it seems very natural.”

Rubbo disagrees: “I think you were quite impressed by his arguments, actually.”

Robitaille: “Yeah, he has ... some personal force, I agree with that.”

The tracking shot lasts about twenty seconds, until a jump-cut gets them over the bridge and then to a shot of the river, at which point Rubbo’s narration resumes: “Bernard is really worried that we are giving in to an easy and comfortable cynicism.” Cut to a man in black pants and black turtleneck standing in front of a bookshelf in an apartment almost as universally white as Lévy’s. “So he takes me to see another author, Gerard Chaliand, who has lived what he writes, and writes prolifically,” says Rubbo.

Chaliand, who speaks fluent English with a slight accent, says he’s written “oh, about ten, twelve” books, then takes one book after another from the shelf and tosses each to the floor as he identifies it. “That’s—that’s one on Algeria ... another one on Algeria. ... That’s about arms trouble in Africa. ... That’s the same one in English. ... That’s about the peasants of North Vietnam. ... Palestinian resistance ... resistance again. ... That’s been also in English.” After mentioning a title in French, he shifts back to English: “We call that in English, ‘Revolution in the Third World.’ ... That’s about Portuguese Guinea, that’s about the Kurds, that’s a translation of a book in Arabic ... in Turkish ... in, uh, Spanish ... Swedish.” In the middle of this demonstration, the camera tilts to the floor to show the growing pile of books and that Chaliand is standing on a footstool.

Later, away from the pile of books, Robitaille asks Chaliand, “So you’re an expert on the Third World, but that doesn’t mean that you’ve become, through disillusionment, a ‘New Philosopher,’ huh?” Rubbo translates Chaliand in voice-over:

Not at all. ... It’s a very Parisian phenomenon. [Rubbo intercuts the headline of a story in *Libération* titled “MISERE DE LA NOUVELLE PHILOSOPHIE.”] Very French, in



- 8.4 “It’s very easy to be pessimistic.” Screen grab. *Solzhenitsyn’s Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1978). The National Film Board of Canada.

fact ... because in France we change fashions very fast. Fashions are discarded like ... old clothes. We’ve had the Structuralists, the Lacanians. ... We’ve been disciples of Sartre ... and now they’re putting the New Philosophers on the market. Two years from now, nobody will read them, or will be spitting on them. But actually it’s *good* that they are *demythifying* things, for a generation which was really behind the times, the generation of ’68, who didn’t know about the camps before reading Solzhenitsyn. So it’s time that they discovered that the world isn’t black and white [cut to a newspaper story headlined “ENTRETIEN AVEC BERNARD-HENRI LEVY”], and that’s a *good* thing.

Switching to English, Chaliand says, “So, I think that, uh, it’s not a philosophical question, it’s a political one, really. I think that institutions, uh, should be as strong and democratic as possible ... uh, that pluralism is a lot better than one party.”

The ballots for the first round of the election are being cast, collected, and tallied. Rubbo explains: "So the democratic ritual, that ... Claudie Broyelle now trusts, for want of something better, is underway." In a polling station, a gaunt man with a Lincolnesque beard presides over the counting. Robitaille reports the percentages to Rubbo, indicating that a split vote makes a leftist victory very unlikely for now. On television, a dejected Georges Marchais spins it positively: "Dear comrades and friends. The results of the first round show that there is a favorable climate for the victory of the Left, if they are united on the second round."

At this point Rubbo inserts a scene from a cab ride the day before, when, Rubbo says, it had "looked good for the Left." The driver hopes for a victory by the Left. Couldn't it turn out badly if they won? Robitaille asks. "How could it go bad? There's no reason for it to go bad. You have the Socialists, as a rotation of power. It's not the Communists *alone* who are going to take power, with a knife between their teeth." Robitaille: "What [if it were] the Communists alone?"

"No! That would scare me. That would scare any Frenchman who was not a died-in-the-wool Communist."

Anxious reporters are cramped in a small space waiting for something. "In the Socialist Party headquarters," Rubbo explains, "we well-paid journalists from all over the world scramble for a place from which to witness Mitterand admit that he's been beaten. Obliquely, sadly, he will blame the Communists ... first for the split, and for tonight's defeat."

Mitterand is bitter. "Ladies and Gentleman, our country chose the Union of the Left at the last provincial and municipal elections. It is clear today that the hope that that victory aroused was betrayed by the rupture of the Left on the twenty-second of September, 1977. History knows who bears responsibility for that rupture: those who never ceased in their attacks on us, attacks as violent and incessant as those of the Right. The results are there. France stays with the same parliamentary majority, and the same problems."

A high-angle tilt down on a hectic crowd on the floor of the Paris stock exchange initiates a credit sequence constructed of shots of cacophonous trading activity intercut with Rubbo and Robitaille racing through Paris. Robitaille remarks off camera, "So you see that, uh,

a few hours after the election, the stock exchange was quite happy.” The first end credit is appropriately generous: “special collaboration—Louis-Bernard Robitaille.”

At eighty-five minutes, *Solzhenitsyn’s Children* was Rubbo’s longest film to date, and from a textual perspective, it was—and remains—his richest. It integrates images of Paris, glimpses of its citizens, film clips, photos, and excerpts of interviews. It portrays a culture of intellectual disputation. It is about ideas but it is also about buildings, streets, cafés, and conversation. Its sounds—street noise, music, and philosophical pronouncements—are not separate from the work but integral to it. Besides its length, the film represents an embellishment of Rubbo’s by-now established personal style. Like *Waiting for Fidel*, the motivating force is disappointingly absent, but in this case with Rubbo’s foreknowledge. He references his films on Vietnam and Cuba—the former indirectly, the latter overtly. He uses an intermediary, but this time as an on-camera equal. (Rubbo controlled the editing, of course.) And if his interactions with Robitaille are sometimes testy, Rubbo is comfortable with that. Without Robitaille, and the interplay between him and Rubbo, the film likely would have been much weaker. It for sure would have been less fun.

One thing the film is not is an argument for any one of the philosophical positions expressed in it. Its philosophical content is but one color in Rubbo’s palette. This is not to say that the film is unserious. Where else can one find on film such a display of New Philosophical positions, including the reasons behind them? But the implicit point is that an attitude of doubt and skepticism about any philosophical position, and even about doubt itself, is perhaps the most honest stance a thinking person can take.

But in the documentary world there is often little interest in doubt or skepticism. Rubbo screened a fine-cut of *Solzhenitsyn’s Children* in double-system projection at the 1978 Grierson Seminar, a week-long event for filmmakers to show their work and discuss it with other filmmakers, as well as critics and scholars. Don McWilliams programmed the seminar that year. One of the themes guiding his choices was that of the filmmaker as central character—which, in the four years since *Waiting for Fidel*, had become a contentious issue. Thirty-six years later, in 2014, McWilliams couldn’t recall details of the discussion of



Rubbo's film (which then had the working title *The Doubt*), but he remembers that Rubbo "was roundly attacked. The general tone can be summed up by a comment from someone that a more appropriate title for this film would be 'A Tour of the cafés of Paris with Michael Rubbo'—something like that." That comment, of course, echoed Daniel Anselme's marvelously withering put-down of Robitaille (and by association Rubbo) as "a dandy of the boulevards." The consensus was that the film was "meandering and self-indulgent with little of value." The audience didn't care much for the New Philosophers in the film, either. But McWilliams was impressed with Rubbo's "openness to debate." Rubbo was "very thick-skinned" and "gave as good as he got," he said; he was "a gentleman."

In a 1982 *Cinema Papers* interview with John Hughes, Rubbo remembered the film's assailants at the seminar as "a bunch of British Trotskyites":

I wish I had a tape of their loathing; it might be healthy to listen to it occasionally. ... [They] didn't like the politics of the film because on the screen, treated with undue courtesy, are a bunch of French intellectuals, once on the left, who are now saying that Marxism leads to the Gulag. To make it worse, the subject is handled in a playful way. They saw it as heresy in very bad taste. I know what they mean, but I found them totally intolerant of anyone who did not defer to their opinions, and I really don't think it is my fault that the world does not act out their doctrinaire vision.<sup>2</sup>

When Hughes remarked on the scene in which Rubbo and Robitaille admit to each other and to us that they find everyone they've interviewed convincing, Rubbo responded that their indecisiveness was

shocking because one is supposed to have made up one's mind before the camera rolls, and we obviously didn't. What we had decided was that doubt itself is valid and important. Doubt is the best enemy of fanaticism. We defend the right to doubt in the film, even when the bullets are flying.<sup>3</sup>

It was not always clear if it was the film that critics hated or the New Philosophers in it, especially Bernard-Henri Lévy. In any case, the antagonism was enduring. In 2007, Rubbo put the entire sequence with Lévy on YouTube. “It got about one hundred thousand hits, but so many of the comments were so vitriolic, so racist against Lévy, that I took the comment option away and I think at the same time lost the hit count.”

Perhaps the film’s harsh critics would have preferred something like the only other documentary that I know of by a major director that explores the disillusionment of the Left: Chris Marker’s three-hour *A Grain Without a Cat* (1993), which was first released in 1976, then reedited and updated in 1993 for English-language distribution. Beyond the fact that he is a Marxist, Marker’s own beliefs are often elusive, but his affections clearly reside with the idealism and hopes of those participating in the May ’68 uprisings, and he is disappointed at the diminution of leftist hopes since that time. Marker is not an on-screen participant in live-action events; his film is primarily an assemblage of documentary footage. He is joined in his narration by several other voices. Despite the revelations about the Gulag, the fall of the Soviet Union, and other disillusioning events, he remains a Marxist. The New Philosophers are not mentioned at all. The title may refer to the disappearance of reliable contexts or models for revolutionary impulse. But like *Solzhenitsyn’s Children*, *A Grain Without a Cat* had a negligible impact in North America.

Although American public television aired Rubbo’s film, the CBC did not. The film did receive screenings in early 1979 at arguably the two highest-quality movie houses in the United States, the Film Forum in New York and the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California. Three New York reviewers recognized the thrust of the film: it wasn’t a film about Marxism or the New Philosophers per se but rather French intellectual life. Writing in the *Times* (11 January 1979), reviewer Janet Maslin saw that the quality of ideas expressed in the film “matters less than the climate of intelligent activity Mr. Rubbo’s film conveys.” J. Hoberman, in the *Village Voice* (15 January 1979), concluded that ultimately the film “is exactly what one subject [Anselme] calls it, ‘a film on high fashion.’ But why not?” Hoberman recognized that because the “high fashion” criticism came from a subject in the film,

Rubbo was perfectly aware of what the film was. And the film was, for Hoberman, a lot of fun. Robert Hatch, referring to both *Waiting for Fidel* and *Solzhenitsyn's Children* in the *Nation* (3 February 1979), called Rubbo "an inspired seizer of opportunity" whose "happy combination of talent and personality produces reportage of extraordinary dramatic excitement." *Solzhenitsyn's Children* "is a serious but high-spirited plunge into French political life." "Paris," he added, "is probably the world's most photographed city, but I cannot remember a film in which it seemed so inviting."

One New York review echoed the harsh response at the Grierson Seminar and seems animated by hardcore Marxism. Amy Taubin in the *Soho Weekly News* (11 December 1979) attacked what the film's supporters admire in it: "One could be easily fooled into thinking [the film] is an amusing, stylish documentary of the Paris of the French left at the time of the 1978 elections. I think something much more insidious is going on." Taubin likened Rubbo's technique to that "of any hack travelogue-maker," accuses him of condescension, assails him for focusing his questions on human rights while ignoring economic issues, and calls the film simple-minded. Everything that is intentionally self-deprecating in the film is turned against Rubbo, including Daniel Anselme's put-down. All Rubbo has done, she concludes, is "make a useful tool for reactionary politics all over the world today."

On the West Coast, Walter Addiego of the *San Francisco Examiner* (17 February 1979) called the film "fascinating but troubling." He judged Rubbo's presence intrusive and he claimed the questions Rubbo and Robitaille asked of the New Philosophers were not pointed enough. Judy Stone, who had liked *Waiting for Fidel*, wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (17 February 1979) that *Solzhenitsyn's Children* is "not precisely a model of lucidity" about its subject. Rubbo's narration was "soporific." She would have preferred Rubbo to focus on just two of his subjects: Artur London and Bernard-Henry Lévy. By doing so, Rubbo "might have really illuminated his thesis: that doubt is an essential ingredient for a revolutionary, although it may result in paralysis."

The film may be experiencing a slow process of entry into the documentary canon. In 2005, filmmaker and scholar Jonathan Dawson, writing in the Australian online journal *Senses of Cinema*, called *Solzhenitsyn's Children* "a documentary of great charm and style that

also perfectly captures a unique time in European history.<sup>394</sup> Dawson identified as a key element of that charm precisely that which Anselme and the critics who echoed him detested: the *flaneur*-like roles of both Rubbo and Robitaille, amateurs in philosophy, perhaps, but intensely curious. And in 2010, New York's Museum of Modern Art held a special screening of the film.

