

THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

D. B. Jones

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Nudging Things Along

Persistent and Finagling

After *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, Rubbo was eager to make another film in Asia. He had proved himself able to cope with the difficulties and dangers inherent in filming in challenging environments. And he had an idea he had long harbored. But until he could develop and secure approval for it, Rubbo took on a project as local and domestic as *Sad Song* was exotic and risky. He learned of a small group called STOP (the Society to Overcome Pollution), mostly thirtyish middleclass women, mostly mothers, who wanted to come up with a dramatic educational event to mark Survival Day (a day for environmental activism) in Montreal. He decided to chronicle their efforts over a three-week period.

The resulting film, *Persistent and Finagling* (1971), is in black and white and was made on a low budget, no travel being involved. Perhaps its low cost encouraged Rubbo to take on a more active role than he did in *Sad Song*. He not only narrates the film, but appears in it on a few occasions. More than that: he interacts with his subjects and occasionally goads them. He chronicles events but also openly helps shape them.

The film opens in medias res, at night, the camera panning across windows before settling on one and zooming in on it, where inside we can see some people discussing something. Before cutting inside, Rubbo's commentary sets the scene: "September the twenty-fourth.

Survival Day is just three weeks away. The STOP executive meets at Sheila Shulman's house to plan its campaign. They—Sheila, Kay, Ann, and Sally—want to do something that will really catch the attention, and the imagination, of Montrealers.” Now inside, we see the four women discussing and planning. The third shot of the film is a cutaway to Sheila's husband Larry speaking with Rubbo, who is mostly off camera. Larry makes a comment that seems dismissive of the group. The women had petitioned Mayor Jean Drapeau to mark Survival Day by closing off to traffic the city's main shopping street. They have just read the mayor's letter turning them down. The same idea has been tried in several other cities, the mayor had written, and “is not likely to catch the imagination of our citizens.” Soon we are back with Larry, who remarks to the now on-camera Rubbo, “This is a group of middleclass women, who are trying hard to do something but are a little afraid of crossing over.” They are, he is implying, afraid of confrontation.

Soon the women come up with the idea of organizing a bus tour of Montreal factories that pollute the city's air and water. They start gathering information. Ken Webb, a young student of air pollution, is helpful; he gives them a list of about fifty-five polluting factories along with a suggested route for the bus tour. Establishment scientists, however, disappoint them. At the University of Montreal, the women, in Rubbo's words, “lay siege to the scientists in their citadel on the hill.” A tweedy pipe-smoking water pollution expert is evasive. Professors in another lab strike an attitude of scientific detachment. One says that not enough is known about pollution for scientists to get involved. But apparently enough is known for the public to get involved: pollution is the public's responsibility, they say.

Reaction shots of the women suggest they are getting discouraged. “They still lack,” Rubbo says, “a tour director, a panel of experts, and a finalized route for the bus—in other words, practically everything.” Sheila cancels a meeting of the group in order to attend a lecture at McGill University by the American environmentalist Barry Commoner, who had recently authored an influential book, *The Closing Circle*. In a brief conversation with Sheila before the lecture, Commoner counters what the water pollution experts had said. “You've really got to know what the facts are,” he tells her, “but that isn't really your responsibility, it is the responsibility of the scientific community.” In his lecture,

Commoner maintains that scientists should make the facts available, and people should act on them.

For their tour director, STOP thinks they have a promising prospect: the head of Montreal's Department of Health. He had worked with them before and likely would be sympathetic to their cause. But after they tell him about the tour, he gives them a bureaucrat's version of what the scientists had told them: "It would be a kind of condemnation by the public of these sources [of pollution] before the responsible parties have had a chance to be heard." When they pop the question anyway, he squirms and declines, saying that he would not consider leading the tour unless it placed the city in a favorable light.

Back at the house, Sheila's husband Larry comments again to Rubbo. He says that the women seem to take three steps forward but then one step backward. They are still diffident.

While Sheila and Kay are out with Ken Webb evaluating sites, Ann tries to snag as their tour director Rod Blaker, a local radio personality known for hard-hitting news features. They visit Blaker and describe their plans. He is vain and something of a tease. He grills them with the bravura of an accomplished professional dealing with hopeless amateurs. When he speaks, he inserts gratuitous verbal padding. "Do you have what I might call an information officer, a public relations officer?" he asks. "You seem to me perhaps a little uncertain as to what you want to achieve in this." When Ann invites him to be their tour leader, there is a pause. "You haven't shocked me yet. Go on." When warned that the event might antagonize some people, Blaker nibbles at the bait. He has no desire to antagonize anyone, he says, but he doesn't mind if people feel antagonized by solid information. "So, with that in mind, if you're trying to *soft*-pedal something, you should probably get somebody else. If you're prepared to have something spoken or said *as it is*—to use the famous expression, '*tell it like it is*'—then, you know, *maybe*, I'm your man."

Next comes a sequence intercutting Ann meeting with Blaker, Sheila and Sally with Ken Webb, and the group themselves. The contrast between the coy, bombastic Blaker and the quiet, helpful Webb builds as the women grow increasingly frustrated in their efforts to land Blaker. Each time they visit him, he demands more documentation. At one meeting, he says they need to be prepared for twenty

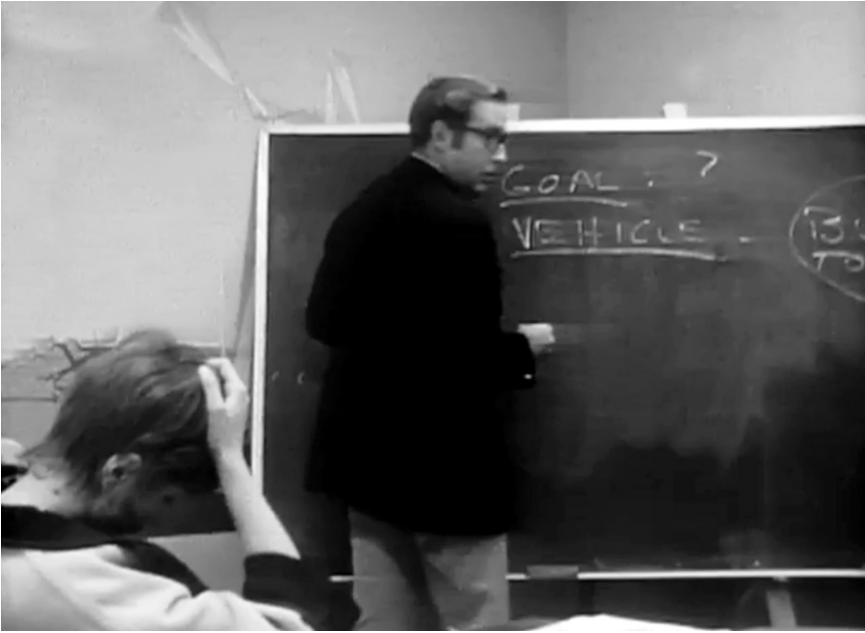
thousand questions. He wants “yards of material, stop by stop, all the history of each stop, what the factory does, what it has been doing, who its people are, what their problems are, what statements *they* have made with respect to their own problems, what statements *you* make with respect to their problems, and verification of the statements you make by accepted authorities. We’re going to have a *trial* at each location.” But, he adds, “You know that you’re not ready.”

Debriefing that evening, the women vacillate between believing they can meet Blaker’s demands and feeling worn down and condescended to. They’re just amateurs, they’ve been told, and they are discouraged. Rubbo and Larry, again commenting like a Greek chorus on the women’s struggle, feel that Blaker has been too demanding. The next day, Rubbo plays back to the women the tape of their interview with Blaker, “hoping, I suppose, to [encourage them] to keep their options open.” They listen, frown, and roll their eyes, but they resolve to go back to Blaker and get him to say yes or no to their invitation.

They catch Blaker, Rubbo says, “on the run, between broadcasts.” He seems to be trying to elude them, but he can’t. There follows a scene in which Blaker, chalk in hand and pompously pedantic, stands before them at a blackboard and again lectures them. He is still unsure, he says, what their goal is, and he needs more specific information about the factories. In a telling shot—an example of the influence on Rubbo of the shot of the befuddled photographer in *Lonely Boy*—Kay, in the foreground, rests her head on her hand in utter dismay, as Blaker bloviates about the need to tailor their plan to the media, to grab attention, to provoke people to complain. “Look,” he says while erasing the board, “it sounds like a cop-out, but please don’t take it that way. As far as I’m concerned, you are *not yet ready* to proceed.”

After the women regroup—“What a huge drag,” Sally says of Blaker and his demands—they start distributing flyers in the neighborhoods near the factories. They are reluctant to prod residents to testify against their industrial neighbors. They are surprised to find that most of the residents are friendly to their cause.

Meeting again with Blaker, it looks like more of his annoying condescension and demand-making is in store for them. “I’ll make it very brief: I don’t think you’re *ready*. I have some question in my mind as to whether you are ever going to *be* ready, um, I don’t think you’re



3.1 Blaker insists on more information. Screen grab. *Persistent and Finagling* (1971). The National Film Board of Canada.

treating the thing with the degree of planning and organization which it requires, and I think you're confused about your goals ... but perhaps to your relief, I'll tell you that persistency does seem to have some value. Yes, I will do the job." But, he adds, "I do so with *great fear*." A poorly documented tour could do STOP more harm than good, he says. The women promise to have all the information he has asked for by the following day. "My neck is on the line," he says, but "I guarantee you, at this point, I will be on deck." Relieved, the women relax, and so does Blaker. At ease now, Blaker smiles, and tells them they're "just a bunch of absolutely, totally persistent ... *finagling females*, who have *dithered* me to the point where I don't know how to say no."

Later, at Sheila's house, Rubbo and Larry, rather than congratulate the women, complain that they've let Blaker bully them. "You like being tortured by him," Rubbo says. "I would have told the guy where to get off," he blusters. But Sheila won't let *Rubbo* bully her. Every idea



3.2 Sheila reminds Rubbo that he's agreed with Blaker's every suggestion. Screen grab. *Persistent and Finagling* (1971). The National Film Board of Canada.

that Blaker suggested, she says, “*you've* taken on, as what *you'd* like to see done.” Chastened, Rubbo does not respond.

On the scheduled day, with Blaker signed on, the tour is ready to proceed. But Blaker hasn't shown up. And he has canceled a hotel room he had reserved for a cocktail reception after the tour, so there is fear that he has chickened out. STOP is ready to proceed without him—their confidence has grown along with their preparation—but at the last moment Blaker arrives and the tour goes on as planned, shown in a montage of stops at various locations with comments by Blaker as well as participating experts and volunteers.

At the reception, where, Rubbo narrates, “drinks await us in the recaptured hotel room,” Blaker and a newspaper reporter from the *Montreal Star* engage in a friendly argument about STOP. Although Blaker is complimentary of STOP, he can't help but lecture, maintaining that they remain too amateurish, that they need a public relations person.

The reporter disagrees: “They’re proceeding in their own way, and they’re groping ... and without *realizing* it, they’ve been *very* effective, in my opinion.” The slippery Blaker stiffens: “No—I’m in *perfect* agreement. We’re talking methodology. I want nothing to do with the slick crowd. Don’t come *near* me with the guy who’s got all the media answers, who’s got all the fast, rapid stuff. I don’t need that.” But true to character, he has to have the last word with the women. When Sheila reminds him of what he had called them, he replies, “I said you’re a bunch of amateurs, and, you know, you’re disorganized, you don’t know what your goals are, you don’t know where you’re going, but there’s one thing I’ll say for you: you have all the persistency of a *group of women*—and that’s great.”

Although Rubbo is shown goading the women to stand up to Blaker only once, there is an earlier scene in which Sheila asks Rubbo if, as the film’s director, he is happy with what he has seen so far. This suggests, although not conclusively, that the women want to please him. It is hard not to suspect that the production of the film encouraged them to persist with their finagling. They don’t want to disappoint Rubbo, and they don’t want their failure recorded. But Rubbo doesn’t want them to disappoint him (or themselves) either. Hence the goading. His playback of the Blaker interview was meant to challenge the women. With such actions, he has become an active and acknowledged participant in the reality his film is documenting. In several of his subsequent films, Rubbo would insert himself into the progress of events more overtly, occasionally in very imaginative ways.

An important aspect of the film is its portrayal of an antagonist who exhibits the characteristics of a villain but is treated in the round, like a character in good literature. Blaker (who entered politics, with some success, not long after the filming) is pompous, vain, sexist, and condescending, but ultimately he is likeable. He finally does put his neck on the line for the sake of the tour, and the insistent demands on which he conditioned his participation made for a solid, successful event. Here Rubbo has done something very unusual in political or social documentary: he has humanized the enemy. Or more accurately, he has humanized the opponent, making it very difficult to think of him as an enemy. Such humanization would become another frequent characteristic of Rubbo’s documentaries.



3.3 Sheila asks Rubbo if he's pleased so far. Screen grab. *Persistent and Finagling* (1971). The National Film Board of Canada.

Because the film has genuine, rounded characters who change in the course of events, it offers more than a simple chronology. The film is the first of several Rubbo films that tell a story in the sense normally used in fiction and hard to do legitimately in documentary. All the more remarkable, Rubbo managed to make an engrossing story about ordinary, unassuming middleclass housewives pursuing a goal that is extremely modest on the scale of things.

With this film, Rubbo added another new twist to his personalization of documentary: he lets himself be one-upped. When Sheila effectively shows him to be a bit of a blowhard—"I would have told him where to get off," Rubbo had boasted—he included her put-down in the film, without any response on his part, thus granting her the last word on that matter. And surely he was aware that those cutaways to him and Sheila's husband commenting on the women and their hesitancy would come off as sexist and condescending, despite the affection and respect the two men clearly have for the women. Complementing

his treatment of Blaker, whom he humanizes by showing his likeable side as well as his annoying traits, Rubbo presents himself as a human being in his own right rather than the all-knowing director with flawlessly correct attitudes. He displays his fallibility and uses it in service of the film.

These salient features combine in *Persistent and Finagling* to create a superb, entertaining if low-key celebration of emerging female confidence and empowerment in the face of male chauvinism. The women overcome the resistance to their bus tour, they lasso Blaker, they show up Rubbo, they conquer their own fears, and they succeed. It may seem quaint now, but it registered an instance of mainstream female awakening circa the early 1970s. In 1975, I showed the film to a class of first-year graduate film students at Stanford University; the women in the class loved the film and thanked me for showing it. It is a fine historical document about unspectacular but engaging people gaining confidence while serving a cause. Unfortunately, the film was not broadcast on television, showcased at festivals, or widely distributed. It has not been remastered onto DVD and so is unavailable. The only production stills available for it are three photos of the tour bus. Forgotten in the Film Board archives, it remains an undiscovered gem.

