

THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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Making It Personal

Sad Song of Yellow Skin

Although Unit B's films had inspired Rubbo's interest in the NFB, and its key filmmakers were responsible for his getting hired, he never had a chance to work with the unit. Around the time Rubbo joined, the Film Board was adapting to a radical restructuring—or, as some regarded it, de-structuring. During the two decades prior to 1966, filmmakers were assigned to units each headed by an executive producer, some of whom administered their units autocratically. Directors found this structure constraining. Units were assigned to specific kinds of films; one might be limited to making science films, another to children's films. The exception was Tom Daly's Unit B. Daly had learned to work with his filmmakers as a member of the team, sometimes even editing a film himself. It was his unit that had produced most of the Film Board's groundbreaking films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. They could generate their own subjects, and their films won most of the prizes. Filmmakers in other units envied the freedom Unit B filmmakers had and the success they enjoyed. They wanted the same for themselves, and they agitated strongly enough that eventually they got it. The unit system was dissolved, and directors became members of a large, unstructured "pool," as it was called. Directors would henceforth seek out producers who might support them. Producers, in turn, would court some filmmakers and projects, and avoid others. Once teamed up, the producing-directing team would present a proposal to a

program committee, which would recommend that funding be provided or denied. Although higher-ups in the organization had ultimate decision-making authority, the program committee's recommendations were usually accepted, if money was available. (This process applied only to films funded with "free" money, which was a portion of the Film Board's budget that it was allowed to spend on films it originated itself. Since its establishment in 1940, a substantial portion of the Film Board's work was sponsored by other government agencies, which were expected to contract with the Film Board when they wanted a film for a specific purpose.)

Some directors floundered in this new context. In the absence of structure, there was no one responsible for finding work for them. (For this and like reasons, the pool system lasted only about six years, to be replaced by the "studio system," somewhat like the old unit system, if not as rigorous.) Filmmakers who were both assertive and talented did well. An example of the latter is Donald Brittain, one of the prime movers in the campaign to dismantle the unit system. His *Memorandum* (1965) was one of the earliest, and is still one of the strongest, films on the Holocaust. Brittain was an excellent writer of narration. His *Memorandum* narration (spoken by Alexander Scourby) was extensive if not quite wall-to-wall. Yet it was compelling. At the same time, most of the footage was completely unscripted. Taken aesthetically, *Memorandum* could be seen as a cross between the Film Board's wartime style of documentary, which involved heavily narrated visuals assembled from combat and archival footage, and the new, unscripted shooting style introduced at the Film Board by the makers of the *Candid Eye* series. And it incorporated the newly liberated perquisites of Unit B films. It was shot without a script. It took eighteen months of editing to come up with an effective structure.

As a newcomer who arrived just after the demise of the unit system, Rubbo accepted whatever assignments were available. His film on Mrs. Ryan was the first of his own choosing. He had taken the idea to Tom Daly, who, as Rubbo remembers the exchange, agreed to produce the film as a challenge to Rubbo himself, to find out if he had it in him to become a serious documentary director. Neither he nor Daly was excited by the result, but the film was serviceable, and Daly was willing to work with him again.

Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class, along with Rubbo's other early NFB films, lacked a passionate provenance or social significance. Who would care much about what went on in Mrs. Ryan's drama class? Even for Rubbo, it was not an issue of burning importance. But now there was a potential subject Rubbo could care deeply about: the Vietnam War, which in 1969 had been a full-scale conflict for several years. With his track record of films about children, he believed that if he could find an angle that fit the Film Board's children's program and also, in keeping with the Board's government mandate, had Canadian content, he might have a chance to make a documentary on the war. He learned of a Canadian-sponsored foster-parent program for orphans in Saigon. The program could make a good film subject, he thought, and so he took the idea to Daly. Daly agreed to produce the film if they could get it programmed, which they did.

He filmed a few sequences with a Montreal foster family connected to the program, and then he flew to Saigon with a small crew. But not long after arriving, he discovered a subject that interested him much more: a group of three young American journalists with the anti-war Dispatch News Service (a Washington-based alternative news group that in 1969, shortly after Rubbo was done filming and had left Vietnam, broke Seymour Hersh's story of the My Lai massacre, distributing it to thirty newspapers). The journalists—Dick Hughes, who ran a home for orphaned street kids; Steve Erhart, who was researching articles about a community living in closely packed hovels in a disused cemetery; and John Steinbeck IV, who was fascinated by a Buddhist colony on an "Island of Peace" in the Mekong River—had been living among the Vietnamese and working to ameliorate the effects of the war. Rubbo was attracted by their initiative and the casual courage it took for the three Americans, unanimously against the war, to place themselves in a doubly dangerous situation.

Rubbo wanted to build his film around these three young men, but because they were not Canadians, the film would lack Canadian content. He wired Tom Daly. Perhaps taking into consideration that the crew was already in Saigon, and valuing Rubbo's enthusiasm, Daly gave Rubbo's new proposal his blessing. Rubbo filmed for three weeks.

A limited budget for location filming was one of the few disadvantages of making documentaries at the Film Board, even in its glory

days. But the short shooting time was counterbalanced by the ability to extend the editing, for which there were no location costs. Consequently, filmmakers like Rubbo (and Brittain) tended to shoot intensively on location in order to have as much material as possible for editing. (Starting with *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, Rubbo developed a reputation, doubtless exaggerated, of working his crews so hard that replacements occasionally had to be sent in.) While filmmakers might be pressured to complete the editing of a project by a target date, they could resist such pressure in order to get a film to work as well as it could. Some of the Film Board's best documentaries, such as some of Unit B's films and Brittain's *Memorandum*, had emerged only after a long and arduous editing process.

Sad Song of Yellow Skin benefitted from this unofficial dispensation. Working with an editor, Rubbo's first rough-cut was disappointing. Both he and Daly thought the film was dreary, dead, pedestrian, and lacking organic coherence. It was an essay.

Daly suggested to Rubbo that he start over, edit it himself, and try structuring the film in a way that mimicked his own Vietnam experience, which was one of initial bewilderment and gradual discovery. Thus the finished film opens with a series of brief, seemingly random shots, most of them full of motion: the sizzling contents of a wok; a man biting the head off a chicken; an old man pedaling a cyclo; a lovely young Vietnamese woman in a white *ao dai* riding a bike; a corpse laid out in a crude pine coffin. Cut in with such shots are occasional snippets of American television piped into Vietnam: President Nixon speaking on the war; a report on the weather. Some of the shots look like the cinematic equivalents of brushstrokes: by themselves, they are not completely clear. Some are so tight that they block off the context, or the movement is so fast as to blur the image. Often the camera is panning, following a cyclo driver, say, or a person riding a motorcycle, with movement in the foreground and background as well. In one wide, deep shot of a busy intersection teeming with people and vehicles—buses, bikes, motorcycles, cyclos—there are at least six planes of action moving either right to left or left to right. Although most of the images foreshadow scenes that will be developed later, a first-time viewer doesn't know that yet. It's confusing. The one clue orienting us is Rubbo's narration, the first words of which are "The war ... will not

... end ... until Saigon is badly hurt. A Vietnamese told me this on my first day there.”

The rest of the film shows us a Saigon that has been badly hurt. It shows it through intermediaries who know more about what’s going on than Rubbo. Soon introduced, the three Americans become the organizing principle for major sequences in the film. The scenes with Hughes are with or about the street kids he is housing and mentoring. Erhart is seen mostly in the cemetery settlement, so teeming with people and crowded with shanties that, Rubbo says, a stranger entering it without a guide is immediately lost. Steinbeck’s *Island of Peace* appears largely man-made. The community is headed by an old man who is called “the coconut monk,” because he once spent seven years in a coconut tree praying for peace under a vow of silence. He has constructed, on pylons rooted in the river mud, a long concrete map wide enough to walk on representing a unified Vietnam.

These three milieus become the bases for three interlacing stories, each showing a particular aspect of the city, and each deeply moving on its own. Rubbo’s narration interacts with the words of the three Americans, who are sometimes shown on camera speaking to Rubbo, other times heard in voice-over. The three stories become something like documentaries within a documentary, although they are not separate entities. The cemetery story’s ending, which is the film’s penultimate scene, is a wrenching sequence on the funeral of a dead opium addict, an ex-dancer, who leaves behind two young orphaned girls. The film ends on the *Island of Peace* with a hauntingly beautiful, calming ceremony at sunset.

Through these intermediaries the film develops in the audience a feeling of intimacy with Saigon while at the same time eroding any certainty that we might have had going in. The more we learn, the less we know. This progression reflects Rubbo’s personal experience in Saigon. In a 7 February 1969 letter to the NFB, he wrote:

The people have hidden the horror and their losses deep inside and this may in fact be the hard thing to find. As Tran [Tran Hu Trong, Rubbo’s guide] says, “We smile when you might cry.” Perhaps (the thought just occurs to

me) the Americans really don't know what they've done to these people.

His doubts mount in a letter to the NFB two days later, when he writes:

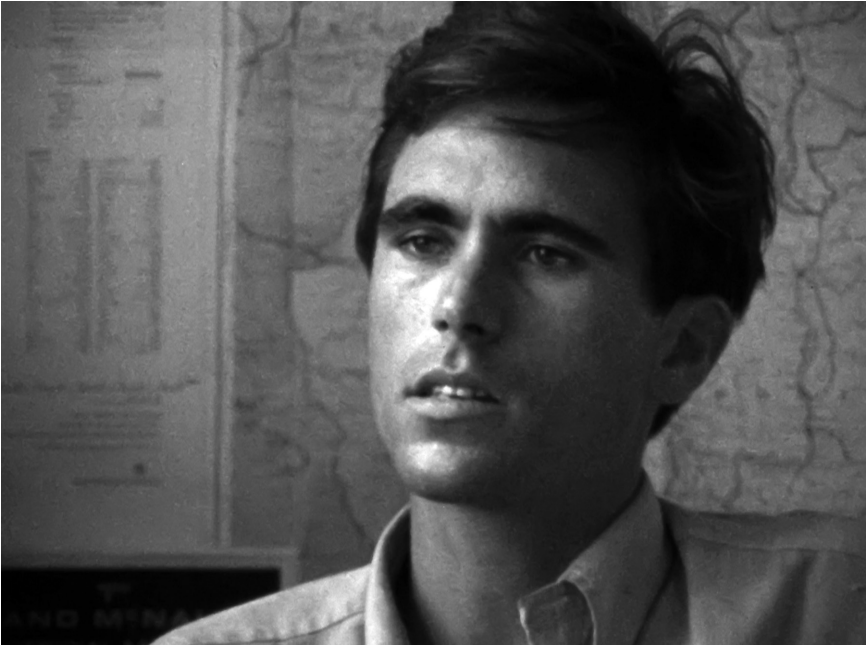
[You] would expect the Americans to be bitterly despised by the Vietnamese. They probably are, and yet to my surprise there seems to be a peculiar love-hate relationship between them. If they despise the Americans, they also despise themselves for needing Americans.

On February 10, he confesses that

I was rather shocked to find that many people seem fervently and rabidly anti-communist. I mean they espouse loyalty to the government and talk of v.c. "atrocities" with more warmth than is necessary to guarantee loyalty.

Rubbo concluded his February 9 letter with a confession: "Let's just say that reality is a shock when it comes up against the simplistic ideas that have served one till now."

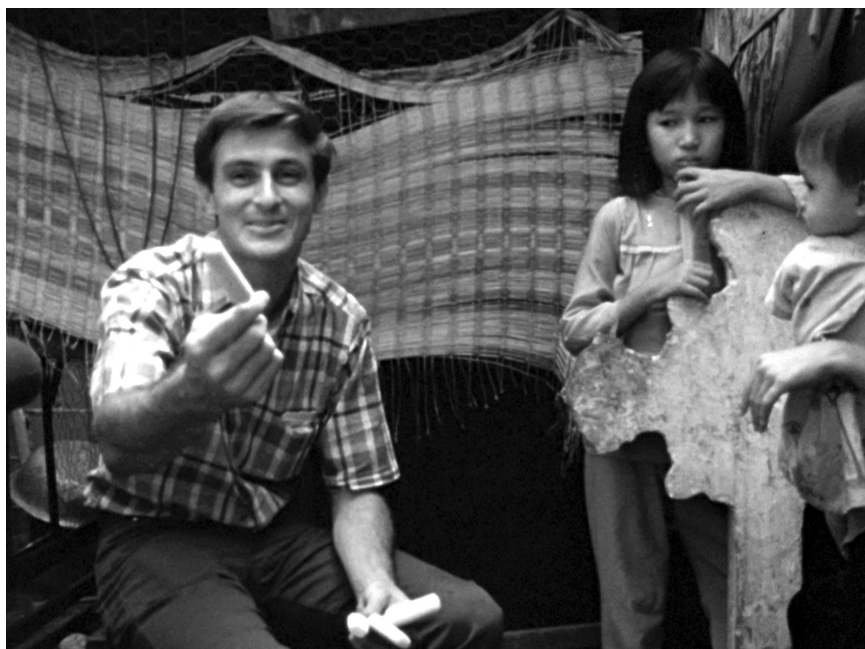
Even the three men Rubbo relies on to guide and interpret for him confess to not fully understanding the Vietnamese they mean to help. After a scene in which Rubbo interviews Wei—a diminutive but dashing young charmer whom Rubbo describes as the "chief hustler of Dick's house ... [who] pimps, steals ... sells more refrigerators than anyone else ... and [over images of Wei playing some sort of card game] may win or lose a hundred dollars a day"—Hughes tells Rubbo that what Wei gave him in the interview was something he knows is marketable, in a "very sellable pigeon English." We witness an argument between Hughes and Wei. One of Hughes's few house rules, Rubbo says, is that there can be no money dealings between people in the house. Hughes is angry at Wei, Rubbo says, because "Wei has taken money from us for the interview in the street." Later in the film, Hughes confesses that only recently he realized that even after living with the kids for several months, he was "being completely put on," that they harbored a deep resentment of him "as an American, so deep



2.1 Dick Hughes. Screen grab. *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970). The National Film Board of Canada.

that they didn't even realize how deep." They knew there "were just some things I'd never understand."

Steve Erhart's limited ability to connect with the residents of the cemetery settlement frustrates him. He'd like to get closer to them, he says, but it is hard. No one will talk about the war; it is too dangerous. In his commentary, Rubbo remarks that "to these people, we were just Americans. And in their context, Americans either kill or give. Every encounter is reduced to these two alternatives." Trying to entertain some cemetery children and give away sticks of ice cream, Erhart realizes he is making a fool of himself. When there are few takers, he turns to the cameraman (and thus to us, too) and offers him a stick of ice cream. Afterwards, Erhart asks Rubbo's guide, Trong, if it was wrong for him to try to give away the ice cream. Trong says there are two ways of giving, one good, one bad. Erhart's was the latter (although we're not told why).



2.2 “Would you like an ice cream?” Screen grab. *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970).
The National Film Board of Canada.

And Steinbeck’s observations about the inhabitants of the Island of Peace seem cautious, as if he wants us to know he is not intimate with them and is thus largely speculating. Rubbo says that Steinbeck “calls himself a friend, not a follower, of the monk. He ... says it’s the only place he can find truly happy Vietnamese.”

Rubbo would occasionally use intermediaries in his later films. In an undated, internal, informal memorandum he wrote in October or November 1979 for a potential Film Board publication (which apparently was never published), he explained why the strategy appealed to him:

I like to use somebody who is deeper into the situation that interests me, than either myself or the audience. This intermediary has the advantage of predigesting the experience. I suppose it’s a bit like (to use an awful analogy) the

mother bird who chews up the food before thrusting it into the beaks of her young, I don't know why I think that audiences should need to be spoon fed in this way, or perhaps it's me that needs the spoon feeding. Anyway, I like the guide who takes a little of the strangeness out of the situation. Thus in *Sad Song* I used the three young American journalists who were already half inserted into the twilight world of Saigon to show us around. They had the access that I knew I could never get in the time available to me. Time is a factor.

And these three men certainly knew the twilight world of Saigon.

Perhaps two of them knew it too well.

From John Balaban's gripping memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*, about his own time in Saigon doing humanitarian work, we learn that Steve Erhart, a friend of Balaban's, became involved in Saigon's drug culture, never returned permanently to the United States, and died in India at age thirty-five.¹ Steinbeck spent considerable time on the Island of Peace, but back home he suffered from drug and alcohol addiction, dying at age forty-five.² Only Dick Hughes emerged with his idealism and sense of purpose intact. He continued his work with Vietnamese orphans after the surrender, establishing several additional homes for boys. Later, while pursuing an acting career in the United States, he remained involved in helping Vietnamese war orphans.

Another contributor to the seemingly contradictory sensation of both increased intimacy and distance is Rubbo's personalization of the narration. He speaks it himself, often haltingly, as if searching for words as he narrates; he does not seem to be reading from a written commentary. For example, because the Americans in Saigon think of the Vietnamese, friendly or unfriendly, as "gooks," Rubbo says, "it is hard for a young American who is neither a soldier ... or an AID man ... who ... wants to ... know the Vietnamese people."

Rubbo tells us that he lived in Dick's house for several weeks and that on his very first morning there, "two of the kids stole my still camera." They quickly sold it, and then came back in the house, "singing songs— 'I'm a hundred percent yours tonight, Baby.'" Recording these



2.3 “I’m a hundred percent yours tonight, baby.” Screen grab. *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970). The National Film Board of Canada.

words several months after the incident, Rubbo is still angry about it—you can hear it in his voice—but at the same time, he implicitly criticizes his self-regard by showing, with no special emphasis, the horrid scars that one of the singers sports on his chest, neck, shoulder, and face. If we choose sides, it is with the kids—we hope they got a good price for the camera—and Rubbo seems to want us to think that way.

The personal voice emerged during the editing process. Rubbo did not want an anonymous, voice-of-God narration. In Vietnam, he had toyed with the idea of asking Steve Erhart to narrate the film. He “was very eloquent, very poetic, a good writer who could [in speech] string sentences together in a very evocative way.” On one of his last days in Vietnam, Rubbo

rented a hotel room in a squalid, run-down place near the river, because it was as far away from the noise of the city

traffic as you could get. It was a dark, suffocating room, everything closed off to keep the traffic noise out. There was no crew there, just Steve and I and a heavy tape recorder, the Nagra. Steve and I smoked some pot and recorded his musings about the opium lady. I'd not smoked much pot in my life, probably he'd smoked a lot, but I think it was a great help in getting us into the mood for him to speak in that dreamy sort of way about the woman having once been a dancer and the mistress of a prince.

Viewers of the film will know what Rubbo meant about Erhart's way of speaking when they listen to Erhart's account of the opium lady. But Erhart had no direct involvement in the portions of the film that feature Hughes and Steinbeck, so Rubbo abandoned the idea of Erhart narrating the film. After he took over the editing, and was organizing the material so as to reflect his own experience in discovering Saigon, it made structural sense for him to speak the narration himself. But it was a controversial decision. In a tribute to Tom Daly that he wrote in 2011, Rubbo credited his mentor for it:

Tom went out on a longer limb for that film than I even knew. He was not one to pass on the pressures he was under. *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* was one of the first documentary films made with a personal voice. Some people at the board considered it very novel and others, self-indulgent. With *Sad Song*, the filmmaker became a character in the story. This had not been my intention at all and was really a function of being out of my depth, of trying to make sense of what I saw and felt and feeling the need to tell something of that process, or so it seemed. ... It was a style that Tom would never have used himself, but he so much enjoyed helping us be ourselves filmically that he never made an issue of it and I carried it on in film after film, all produced by him.³

However, it is not just the film's architecture, reflexive devices, and personalization that account for its power. It's that they are harnessed

coherently toward one goal: to get at the truth of the situation as Rubbo encountered it. The personal references are never inserted arbitrarily, and they don't seem designed to showcase the filmmaker. They serve the film and, if anything, deprecate the director. (His anger about the stolen camera seems petty juxtaposed with the badly scarred kid.) He wants to learn, and he acknowledges his reliance on the American interpreters. He evinces a genuine affection for the Saigonese—a cyclo driver; prostitutes; an army deserter; an always-smiling mother of fourteen living on \$2 a day; street hustlers; bargirls; many others—but he never pretends that he knows them. And in the film's riveting final two scenes, he seems to step back—as he had in *The True Source of Knowledge*—as if in awe or amazement, to allow us to absorb the contrasting realities before us.

In the funeral sequence, after a few moments with some young prostitutes and their *mamasan*, Rubbo says that there was another woman—“almost a friend”—in the cemetery whom he had wanted to film. Over some old black-and-white footage of her smoking opium, Rubbo says of her, “She played with another army, this one—with the French in Hanoi, in ... 'fifty-four. But last night, in her little cupboard ... with her opium pipe, she died. Now, all that we have left is some images that Trong took of her ... last year.”

The residents prepare her for burial. An older man sprays mouthfuls of alcohol around her chamber in the hope of disinfecting it. Two other men line a cheap wooden casket with sawdust. One man collects money for the funeral. “Everybody was giving fifty ... a hundred *piastres* ... which is a lot of money for these people,” Rubbo says. The woman's emaciated body is carried down from her loft and placed in the casket. Among the many people standing around watching are the woman's two young daughters. The older one is thirteen years old. Tears welling in her eyes but trying to be brave, she holds her much younger sister in her arms. In voice-over, Erhart says that the woman “was very small, and [had] very fine bones. She was a very beautiful, delicate little thing ... and she used to dance ... in the cabarets ... in Hanoi, when the French were there. And she ... was the mistress of a prince. And after a while, she was hooked ... on the black phantom, opium. I was thinking of her, living there, in a tomb ... and she was once a dancer.” The coffin is closed and nailed shut.



2.4 The Coconut Monk. Production photo. *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970). The National Film Board of Canada.

From this sad scene, Rubbo cuts to a large bell being rung on the Island of Peace. Some kind of prayer ceremony is going on. Apparently it is routine; the residents of the colony pray about ten times a day. The coconut monk has incorporated into his Buddhism and Taoism lots of Catholic symbols. Rubbo says that while the war rages all around the island, here “the only war is symbolic war,” which the monk “fights with apples and palm-leaf grenades.” The old monk is on his map, walking with a staff. Steinbeck explains that the monk “believes that if you manipulate a symbol for a thing properly, you manipulate the thing itself.” Then Rubbo narrates: “So he manipulates the symbols of his map. Each day he walks between Saigon and Hanoi.” We learn from Rubbo that the monk came from a wealthy family and was educated in France as a chemical engineer. Returning to Vietnam in 1945, he underwent “a classic Buddhist change, seeing the misery around him, and feeling a compulsion to do something about it. The government calls him a fool, and confines him to this peaceful island.”

“He’s a fool perhaps,” Steinbeck rejoins, “but who drops the naphalm in Vietnam? Other crazy men. And what are the results of these two insanities? Carnage, and ... a lovely society.” These are the film’s last words, but not its last word. Over the credits, as the sound of the bell fades, we hear gunfire from automatic weapons, as a reminder of Steinbeck’s “other crazy men.”

Sad Song of Yellow Skin is a beautiful, moving film—its title is that of a Vietnamese song popular at the time, one that expresses loss and longing against a backdrop of centuries of national struggle—but in distribution the film encountered several problems. It was made for television, primarily, but the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the expected exhibition channel for NFB documentaries, at first rejected it. All those self-references bothered them, and the film’s unabashedly personal narration appalled them; Rubbo’s delivery was, to them, non-professional. Eventually these objections were overcome and the film was broadcast. However, although the film received the prestigious Robert Flaherty Award from Britain’s Society of Academy of Film and Television (now the British Academy of Film and Television Arts) in 1971 and a Special Award from the Canadian Film Awards (which in 1974 were taken over by the Academy of Canadian Cinema and became known as the “Genies,” Canada’s counterpart to the Oscars), it never got the degree of attention that the later, American-made *Hearts and Minds* (1974) received. It wasn’t angry or certain enough for most of those who wanted to watch films about the war. Piers Handling, an early advocate for Rubbo’s films (who in 1994 became the head of the Toronto International Film Festival), wrote in his 1977 article “The Diary Films of Mike Rubbo” that in Rubbo’s films, “there is a complete lack of insistence about what he says, and this is combined with his personal thoughts as to what is happening on the screen, avoiding any attempt at persuasion.”⁴ Rubbo’s hatred for the war is clear in the film, but it is understated. He shows American soldiers as clumsy but not intentionally destructive intruders into Saigonese culture. They get their boots shined and they look for girls. They seem to feel out of place. Rubbo doesn’t attack them personally but suggests they’re pawns, not monsters. For Rubbo, American culture’s most obnoxious intrusion into Saigon arrives via television. Piped into a Saigon bar is a clip of President Nixon asserting that Americans will support the war

if they are told its purpose. Following Nixon, a television announcer introduces “that bubbling bundle of barometric brilliance—Bobbi,” a leggy blonde who reports on the weather in the United States and in Hue. At her mention of Hue, Rubbo cuts in other television footage—of corpses littering the ground after the Tet Offensive, and then cuts back to Bobbi ending her weather report with a flirtatious little dance-like move.

Despite its disapproval by the CBC and much of the professional media establishment, the film had meaningful influence, both within the National Film Board and on Rubbo’s subsequent growth as a director. *Sad Song* broke three institutional taboos: it was overtly and thoroughly personal; it had no Canadian content; and it criticized Canada’s closest, far more powerful neighbor on a very sensitive issue. It also validated Rubbo’s intuitive judgment: he went to Saigon planning to film one subject but, once there, pursued another—something he would do again on occasion, with excellent results. In its implicit judgement about the morality of the war, it proved prophetic in a way that *Hearts and Minds*, which was made after the moral verdict on the war was already in, could not. The film’s success gave Rubbo the confidence and impetus to ratchet up his personalization of the documentary a few steps further.

