



## THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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ISBN 978-1-55238-871-6

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# Introduction

## Purpose and Method

In late 1979, Michael Rubbo's sister wrote him from Melbourne that his film *Solzhenitsyn's Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris*

was shown just one night at the National Film Theatre. Yes, the response was really good. People in the foyer were saying how good it was. I met a Canadian filmmaker who gave a lecture at the gallery. He was still talking about the Canadian Film Board, saying how every now and again, really good stuff was made. Started to tell me about this really good filmmaker who made *Waiting for Fidel*. He just about fell over when I said you were my brother.

At the time, Rubbo, an Australian, was in his second decade with the National Film Board of Canada. About twenty years later, while waiting outside a theater in Sydney for a festival screening, he

met a film student from the [Australian National Film, Television, and Radio School], which I had once been invited to head. She had never heard of me, and she said that none of my films were taught there.

Rubbo's absence from the documentary film curricula of the Australian Film School is typical of the wider world of film study and criticism. His work, although often mentioned, doesn't have the presence there that it should. After all, Piers Handling, who more than anyone else has promoted a critical appreciation of Canadian film, once called Rubbo "one of the most important filmmakers in the world."<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this book is not to seek an explanation for the comparative lack of attention to Rubbo's work. Rather I hope to make a case for its great merit. In so doing, I aim to establish Rubbo's role in the development of the personal documentary and to identify what makes his best films distinctive, enduring, and deserving of more attention than they have received. Of these two aims, the first is primary, in the sense of contributing to the history of documentary, but the second is more important and potentially more rewarding for the reader. If Rubbo's best films deserve the claims I will make for them, then they have much to offer, both to documentary filmmakers who want to deepen their work and to general audiences seeking insight, understanding, and pleasure.

Rubbo's most salient contribution to documentary style is the effective use of a personal, often spontaneous, and frequently intervening voice. Although he may not have been the first to employ a first-person, self-reflective, on-camera narrative voice, he was among the first to do so after the triumph of observational cinema, achieved the richest results, and had the most influence. His best films make no claim to objective or universal truth about the realities he explores; they are presented as his interpretation. They are told not merely from Rubbo's point of view; they recognize, with empathy, the points of view of others. Their narrative progression is organically causal and character-driven, achieving in documentary some of the values normally sought in serious literature and dramatic film. His best films confront important issues, yet they are driven by an urge to understand, not to judge, condemn, or incite. Further, despite the narrative and exploratory character of his films, they are not primarily reportorial, analytical, or argumentative in tone but rather impressionistic, even painterly. In his best films, the combination of these qualities serve a drive to discover truth and to recognize that he has not found it.

To establish Rubbo's place in the history of documentary film, as well as the enduring value of his work, I will offer a critical appreciation of his films, organized chronologically in order to convey his development as a filmmaker. With the exception of work Rubbo has recently presented on YouTube, which I only sample, I will discuss all of the films I was able to locate (including the feature films he made during a hiatus from documentary). He directed two short films for the United Nations Habitat program, but neither I nor the UN has been able to find them. Nor will I discuss films on which he is credited but did not direct, but I will include them in the filmography. The exception is a minor children's film on which he is credited for the commentary, but which contributed to his early development as a filmmaker.

To build my case for Rubbo's films, I describe the more important ones at length. Some readers might find these descriptions tedious. I hope not. When writing about *The Searchers* or *Rear Window*, a critic can assume the reader knows the film and its director pretty well; if they don't, they can easily get hold of a copy. This is not the case with several of Rubbo's films, only some of which are readily available. Outside of Canada, it can take some work to track others down. Moreover, documentary is a content-based medium: the reader needs to know what's in a documentary in order to follow what is being said about it. This is especially true for films as densely packed with varied imagery as Rubbo's films usually are. And the content in Rubbo's film is interesting in itself. Visuals, although expected in film books, often aren't very helpful. Production stills are usually not from the film itself. Still frames, or "screen grabs," are taken from the film but reveal little about how a film develops over time. The only way I know to convey an approximation of this on the page is with words.

This book includes some production photos, screen grabs, and a few other illustrations. Although screen grabs tend to be less sharp, for technical reasons, than production photos, they can occasionally support, or at least illustrate, my commentary on the films.

Narration is a key component of a Rubbo film. Because he often appears in his films as a participating subject as well, I distinguish narration from dialogue so that the reader can tell one from the other. I sometimes include hesitations and repetitions in order to approximate what the reader would hear if watching the film.

This study makes no pretense to biography or, with a brief and minor exception, to probing Rubbo's psyche. It's about the films. Often I recount his experience with getting his films produced and distributed. I include biographical information when I am aware of it and if I think it is helpful to the reader, and I also draw on insights into his films from Rubbo himself. I've known him since 1970, when I was at the National Film Board on a freelance assignment and saw his film on Vietnam at its first in-house screening. In 1971, on my way to a job in Australia, I did very minor and not very helpful advance work for his Indonesia film. In 1973, I interviewed him and reviewed his two Asian films for an Australian film magazine, *Lumiere*. Back in Montreal in 1974, I was present at a rough-cut screening of *Waiting for Fidel*, where the film's most notorious scene was debated. I included short passages on his work in my two books on the National Film Board and wrote entries on two of his films for *The International Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*.<sup>2</sup> He has been a guest speaker for my students and colleagues at La Trobe University (where I tried to recruit him to teach), at Stanford, and twice at Drexel University. He has been a guest in my house on a few occasions.

I relate these facts about my relationship with Rubbo in the interests of full disclosure. However, I hope the reader does not immediately suspect that my admiration for his work is significantly colored by my long, if sporadic, association with him. Rubbo and I may be friends, but we are not close, and we are not ideologically aligned. Our relationship has motivated me to keep up with his films, and this in turn has helped me notice patterns and recurring tropes, attitudes, and quirks that we associate with directors we call "auteurs." It has enabled me to observe his development over time. In any case, my observations about his work are based ultimately on the films themselves, and they can be tested by the reader against his or her own viewing of them.

For readability, I've limited footnotes to instances where I think them essential. When directly or indirectly quoting Rubbo, or mentioning a biographical fact, the source, unless otherwise noted, is from personal correspondence or conversation with him over the years. For NFB correspondence or other documents, I give enough information to enable a determined researcher to track them down if he or she can enlist the help of the Film Board's outreach services and if the

documents still exist. I refer repeatedly to Tom Daly, Rubbo's mentor and his favored producer at the NFB, and I occasionally provide some background on the organization itself. Readers who would like to know more about Tom Daly can consult my book about him. They can read more generally about the NFB in either my book about it, which focuses on documentary, or Gary Evans's more recent and comprehensive history.<sup>3</sup>

