

## THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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# Learning the Craft

## *The True Source of Knowledge These Days;* Early Films at the NFB

Twentieth-century Australians were consummate travelers. Perhaps their country's remote location, far from the world's centers of activity and culture, provoked an urge to explore other lands. Michael Rubbo's love of travel began in his childhood. He collected postage stamps, enchanted by their depictions of foreign landscapes and cultures. While an undergraduate studying anthropology at the University of Melbourne, he hiked in New Guinea's jungles with an Australian patrol officer, visited Japan twice, and explored Fiji. He went twice to Indonesia, a country he would return to years later to make a film. And he led a student group on a six-week tour of India.

On several of these trips, he recorded his adventures and impressions to use in telling others about them when he got back home. He shot some 8mm footage in Fiji but disliked the results. On other trips, he took photographs. And he painted. Back in Australia, he would exhibit his pictures, emphasizing, he recalls, not the art but the storytelling. His photos and paintings supported his stories.

When free from his responsibilities to the student group in India, he went on his own to Calcutta, where he sought out the great filmmaker Satyajit Ray, best known in the West for his Apu Trilogy. Rubbo had seen several of Ray's films and was moved by Ray's characters and

his affection for them. When he arrived in Calcutta, Ray was out of town. While waiting for him to return, Rubbo made tape recordings of conversations with one of Ray's stars, Sharmila Tagore. "She was just a schoolgirl when Ray found her. I think he saw her in a classroom." She had led an affluent, somewhat sheltered life. India's most famous poet, Rabindranath Tagore, was the brother of one of her great-great grandmothers. Rubbo remembers her being amazed

at the way Ray had picked her out of that sheltered environment, how he was certain, with very little testing, that she would be a wonderful actress. She said with a sort of musing wonderment that he knew her face so well that if she turned this way, there would be a certain look which would mean a certain thing, or the other way, and she would be communicating something else, emotions she didn't even understand herself. He was something of a magician for her and she was filled with reverence for him. That and the fact that she had the most beautiful lilting voice charmed me so much and made that tape with her one of my most precious possessions.

Sharmila Tagore's first screen appearance was in *The World of Apu* (1959), the third in the Apu Trilogy.

After he returned to Calcutta, Ray agreed to sit for an interview with Rubbo.

I remember climbing the outside stairs of a drab white concrete apartment building in Calcutta, going up level after level until I came to an apartment with a heavy concrete balcony. We sat outside on the balcony with the crows making a deafening noise often obscuring him on the tape. He had a deep and melodious voice, and he told me how hard it was to keep his pure vision, of the pressure he was under to become more like the Bollywood filmmakers of the Mumbai coast, films with singing and dancing, and how his more observational anthropological films struggled for

appreciation in his own country although they were considered amazing elsewhere.

It may have been the experience with Ray that gave Rubbo the idea of becoming a filmmaker. He had been toying with pursuing graduate studies in anthropology, but was turned off by the discipline's increasing emphasis on statistics and other forms of measurement. Film intrigued him for its storytelling potential. He applied to and was accepted by Stanford University's graduate film program, which in those days—the mid-1960s—did not require previous filmmaking experience but looked for well-educated college graduates with inquiring minds. Attending Stanford would also feed his love of travel. He had never been to the Western Hemisphere. He received Fulbright and Ford Foundation grants in support of his studies.

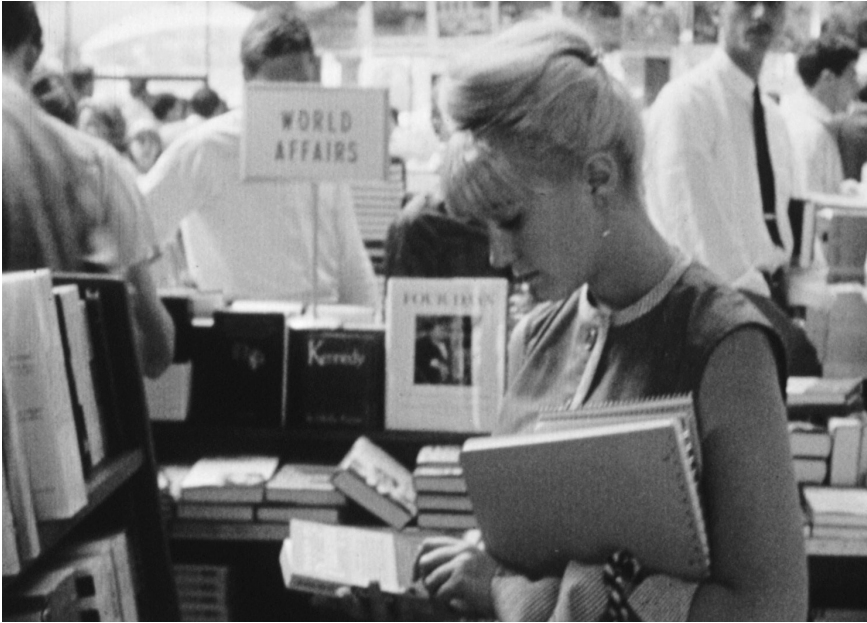
Stanford's film program was oriented toward documentary, used 16mm for teaching and filmmaking, and typically took two years to complete. After a year of coursework, students would make a "thesis" film. Each year's incoming class was small, typically between ten and fifteen students.

The head of the program at the time, Henry Breitrose, was an admirer of the NFB, and he often screened NFB films for his students, including breakthrough titles such as *Corral* (1954), *Lonely Boy* (1962), *City of Gold* (1957), *Day After Day* (1962), *The Back-breaking Leaf* (1959), *Bethune* (1964), and *Memorandum* (1965). The Film Board was established in May 1939, about four months before Canada declared war on Germany. It was designed and for its first five years headed by John Grierson. During the war, it became a source of Allied propaganda, producing newsreels for theatrical release. It grew rapidly during the war and emerged from it a full-scale production house. But Grierson, who advocated propaganda during the war, had been clever enough to ensure that the Film Board's mandate—"to interpret Canada to Canadians"—included other kinds of films as well. Hence, the end of the war did not imply the end of the Film Board. And he hired talented and dedicated people. Thus the Film Board had enough public support to weather attempts to cut it down to size or even eliminate it. And by the late 1950s, despite its status as a government organization, it had emerged as the world's leading producer of



1.1 Rubbo with Stanford classmate Bonnie Sherr (later Klein) circa 1965. Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

serious short films—especially experimental animation and innovative documentary, both of which it had pioneered. It had a staff of roughly a thousand employees (depending on how they were counted), including writers, directors, cameramen, soundmen, editors, musicians, artists, animators, and all sorts of technical people. It was a smaller version of a comprehensive production studio in Hollywood's heyday. But because it was a government organization, regular employees, essentially civil servants, came to enjoy roughly the same job security as tenured college professors. Its films won scores of major international awards. It was a mecca for young people who wanted to work in documentary or animation. Among the students who were impressed by the Film Board were Bonnie Sherr and Rubbo himself. Both would eventually work there, Rubbo first and then the recently married Sherr, who henceforth went by the name Klein. (Klein started at the Film Board in 1968, directing several films for the Challenge for Change



1.2 The Stanford Book Store. Screen grab. *The True Source of Knowledge These Days* (1965). Courtesy of Stanford University.

program on the community-organizing tactics of Saul Alinsky. Her best-known film is *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* [1981], an investigation of the business of pornography, including strip joints, sex supermarkets, and peep shows.)

Rubbo first had to complete his thesis film. He decided to make a documentary reflecting on his educational experience at Stanford. The purpose of education was to learn, to gain knowledge, but Rubbo questioned higher education, both at Stanford and elsewhere. On a shoestring budget, he made a half-hour film contrasting Stanford with its near neighbor, the University of California at Berkeley, and with the real world outside of academia. His film was technically rough, with very little sync sound, but it foreshadowed aspects of his future filmmaking and remains interesting today. Called *The True Source of Knowledge These Days*, it asked where truth should be sought. Was a Stanford education the source of knowledge? If so, was truth found in



1.3 The Stanford Computer Center circa 1965. Screen grab. *The True Source of Knowledge These Days* (1965). Courtesy of Stanford University.

books, in contemplation, or in the new computer center? (The film's attention to computer science was prescient; few saw that Stanford was giving birth to what would become Silicon Valley a decade later.) Was the University of California at Berkeley, where Mario Savio had just launched the "free speech" movement, a more authentic school? Or was truth to be found through reflective participation outside the university? Rubbo's film, although in no way critical of Stanford or the University of California, implicitly favors the last route.

Made just before the Vietnam War had flared up into a major conflict, the film suggests that for truth-seeking students, participation in the great moral causes of the day—the most salient of which, for American students, was the voting drive in the South—provides a path to knowledge that avoids both the sterility of safe, abstract learning and the materialism of career preparation. Truth was to be sought in engaged concern for others, particularly the weak or disadvantaged. Although the film has very little sync sound, it includes unscripted



1.4 A Stanford football player recounts his Mississippi summer. Screen grab. *The True Source of Knowledge These Days* (1965). Courtesy of Stanford University.

student comments in voice-over; Rubbo narrates in places. The only sustained sequence, which occurs in the last third of the film, features a Stanford football player recounting how he was beaten up and peed on by a mob of white supremacists when he was volunteering in Mississippi followed by a female Stanford student, who had taught as a volunteer in a “freedom school” in Mississippi, recalling how moved she was by the hunger her young charges had for civil liberty.

Viewed in retrospect, *The True Source of Knowledge These Days* exhibits several traits that foreshadow Rubbo’s mature work. The film is impressionistic. Images and sounds are laced together at an energetic pace to create a mood or disposition rather than an ordered discourse. Rubbo exhibits empathy for his subjects; he may favor the politically active, but he respects, in this case, the humanity of the career-minded or even the mere good-timers. There is an element of boldness, of sensing what is going to be important: he engaged a young San Francisco musician named Jerry Garcia to produce some music for the film.



There is a moving climax, where the pace slows, underscoring the film's more serious content. The two students' voice-overs foreshadow Rubbo's predilection for using intermediaries. There is an underlying drive towards discovering truth. Every one of Rubbo's later important films would possess at least one of these qualities.

As he was completing his thesis film, Rubbo had his eye on securing an internship at the NFB. He loved their work, especially *Lonely Boy*, a portrait of the young Paul Anka. In the late 1950s, the Film Board had created a series called "Candid Eye," which consisted mostly of unscripted documentaries made possible by the invention of lightweight 16mm sound-recording equipment. *Lonely Boy* was made after the Candid Eye series had ended, but it was shot in much the same unscripted style. It had a deeper structure than the Candid Eye films had, and it was shot with supreme self-confidence. It is coherent and it feels complete; to borrow a principle of dramatic art from the French critic Raymond Bellour, its end responds to its beginning<sup>1</sup>—which was not often the case in the early days of unscripted documentary (or even now). At the same time, it notices, includes, and integrates seemingly trivial moments that are touching, revealing, or amusing. One thing that influenced Rubbo were instances in which the filmmakers broke down the pretense and illusion of passively observed reality, which was then the prevailing documentary aesthetic. At one point in the film, for example, one of the codirectors is heard off camera asking a nightclub owner to repeat a kiss he had just planted on Anka's cheek. Both the owner and Anka break out laughing, asking why the filmmakers wanted that. The camera moved, they're told. They repeat the kiss. Rubbo also loved a shot in which a photographer can't get his flash to work, then, befuddled, looks up at the overhead light as if that were part of the problem. For Rubbo, this reflected the Film Board's willingness to celebrate "life's little, awkward moments." Both the self-reflexivity and the attraction to the unspectacular but revealing would influence Rubbo's development as a director.

Rubbo sent his film to Montreal. Brietrose wrote him a recommendation. Rubbo himself wrote to Tom Daly, the head of Unit B, which had produced the NFB films Rubbo liked most. When Rubbo finished final requirements for his degree in 1965, he had not yet heard back from the Film Board, so he hitched rides to Montreal. Arriving



1.5 “Could you do the kiss again?” Screen grab. *Lonely Boy* (1961). The National Film Board of Canada.



1.6 Befuddled photographer. Screen grab. *Lonely Boy* (1961). The National Film Board of Canada.

unannounced, he asked to see Tom Daly, and was ushered into a screening room where Daly just happened to be watching Rubbo's *The True Source of Knowledge*. With Daly were two of the Film Board's most talented filmmakers, Roman Kroitor and Wolf Koenig, who had codirected *Lonely Boy*. With Daly as producer, Kroitor, Koenig, and Colin Low had directed most of the groundbreaking films that had so impressed Rubbo. The group as a whole was known for its pursuit of perfection and a sense of aesthetic integrity. They often called it "wholeness," which for them was an essential aspect of truth. Daly was particularly driven by a quest for truth that accounted for all things, as opposed to a merely factual, ideological, or partisan truth.

They were impressed by Rubbo's film. Instead of an internship, they offered him a paid job as a production assistant. For a young filmmaker of Rubbo's bent, it was a dream job: steady pay working and learning in a self-sufficient production house that included its own lab, a talented staff representing all the major roles in documentary filmmaking, and a tradition of excellence and innovation in documentary film.

And creative freedom—eventually. Newly hired filmmakers typically worked as assistants, or were assigned films of minor importance—films for schools, for other government agencies, or part of some predefined program of films offering little room for individual expression. Rubbo's first NFB documentary was *The Long Haul Men* (1966), a short film following two American truckers as they haul a load of shrimp destined for Calgary, Alberta, from the Mexican town of Guymas. The film is a paean to trade and especially the men on whom trade depends. We follow the truckers from the US-Mexico border to the US-Canada border. (The film was made long before the North American Free Trade Act of 1994 permitted drivers to cross borders.) It is an unpretentious, pleasing film, with occasional moments of understated humor characteristic of the Film Board's work in those days. Rubbo enjoyed the experience of working with two of the Film Board's best craftsmen: cameraman Tony Ianzuelo and sound recordist Roger Hart. But the film bears none of the traits that would become integral to Rubbo's established style. Before the film was completed, the producer (not Daly) stepped in and imposed a narrator on Rubbo. Fortunately it was the gifted Stanley Jackson, and the film is enjoyable if not distinctive.

The next seven films of Rubbo's (informal) apprenticeship were either for or about children—or both. He was assigned to three short films to be made by cutting live-action footage of animals into narrated anthropomorphic stories. Rubbo's only role on the first of these, *The Bear and the Mouse* (1966), was narrator. The film is about a mouse that rouses his family to free a trapped bear by gnawing through the binding on its primitive wooden cage. Rubbo assumes different voices for different animals, sounding cute and innocent for the mouse, raspy for a crow, guttural for a big black bear, and so forth. And he is the omniscient narrator as well. Introducing the mouse family, he settles on the film's protagonist: "This one is cleaning his whiskers. He always tidies himself up before going off for a walk. His name is Mouse." Later, Rubbo cheers the mouse family on as they work to free the bear: "Quick, chew little mice." They free the bear just before the trappers arrive.

Rubbo directed and narrated *That Mouse* (1967), about a vain white mouse who arrogantly rides through the forest on the back of a bear. The mouse gets his comeuppance when various animals get together and trick him into climbing onto the back of a large black dog, which he mistakes for the bear. The dog shakes him off, hurling him into a nearby pond. Chastened, the white mouse grows up and has a family. Again, Rubbo assumes different voices for different animals. The third animal film, *Adventures* (1968), is about a baby raccoon trapped by a farmer who wants him as a pet for his son. The raccoon escapes and has various adventures before returning home. Rubbo directed and wrote the film, but did not do the voices.

All three animal films are surprisingly entertaining. They exhibit a gift for storytelling. They also foreshadow Rubbo's talent for writing and delivering commentary that engages with both picture and audience. And they demonstrate a willingness on Rubbo's part to throw himself into a project enthusiastically, without fear of embarrassment. A half-century later, the films are still popular with young audiences.

Rubbo then made four films inspired by meeting a woman who was teaching drama to children in an intriguing way. The first of these, *Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class* (1969), is a straightforward, black-and-white chronicle of an after-school, once-a-week volunteer drama class taught by one Mrs. Ryan. The narrator is Stanley Jackson again. Mrs. Ryan

uses an improvisational approach to drama. The students, who range from ten to twelve years of age, think up their own ideas and create their own characters. It takes numerous sessions before Mrs. Ryan is able to get them sufficiently interested in the classes. Between sessions, Rubbo briefly interviews Mrs. Ryan about her progress with the students. The students do role-playing exercises, such as pretending to be a growing plant, or freezing on command and then making up stories about their “statues.” Their first complete story, “Museum,” has them pretending to be exhibits that come alive as monsters and chase down a patron. Eventually the students put on a performance for the whole school called “Pandora.” The show was inspired by the myth, but the students invent the details.

Although dated a year earlier, *Sir! Sir!* (1968) grew out of the production of *Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class*. It is a twenty-minute film recording an improvisation in which two students who had appeared in *Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class* and a dozen of their teachers trade places for a class session. The young “teachers” are dressed in suits, the adult “students” more casually. In the film’s only narrated passage, Rubbo explains that there were no rehearsals, just a statement of the premise. Like *Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class*, *Sir! Sir!* is filmed in black and white using direct-cinema style. We see the microphone often, members of the crew occasionally, Rubbo himself once or twice. It’s an engaging film. Anyone who was educated in a North American public school will recognize the behavior of both parties. The young teachers try very hard to act like the teachers they have known, attempting to maintain order and get through a lesson plan. The adult students seem to be having a great time acting out the disruptive behaviors and minor mischief-making they have had to contend with over the years. Of the two groups, the young teachers have the worse time in their roles, perhaps because they are taking the exercise more seriously than the adults. After “class,” and a brief scene in which a student is detained after school for bad behavior, Rubbo debriefs the young boy who played the main teacher. Rubbo asks him if, after this experience, he would like to become a teacher. With a class like that, the exhausted, much-relieved boy says, “Not for a million dollars.” He doesn’t seem to be just role playing when he says that.



1.7 The two “teachers” prepare their lesson. Screen grab. *Sir! Sir!* (1968). The National Film Board of Canada.

With the same group of children, Rubbo directed *Here's to Harry's Grandfather* (1970). The story was written by the children and largely improvised, but it is substantially different in style from either of the first two films. It is in color and, at fifty-eight minutes in length, was intended for television. And while the story is largely improvised, much of it was improvised prior to filming; the film is replete with shots that could have been taken only if the action was known beforehand. There is no self-reference at all. The few words of narration are spoken by one of the actors. The story involves a group of campers, boys and girls, who are bored with camp and decide to find the house where the grandfather of Harry (who played the main teacher in *Sir! Sir!*) once lived. The group encounters another band of campers and must outwit them to find the house. Once there, they explore a creaky attic, peruse old magazines, gaze at photos, dress up in old clothes, and play house. The kids are engaging. An intriguing feature is that the kids seem naturally to

assume traditional gender roles, with the boys doing the adventurous things and the girls cooking meals or nursing a sick camper.

A year later, Rubbo cut a shorter version of *Here's to Harry's Grandfather*, called *Summer's Nearly Over* (1971). The story is essentially the same, with the campers trying to find Harry's grandfather's house and encountering a hostile group of other campers along the way. This shorter version works better than the longer film. The main stylistic difference between the two versions is that Rubbo narrates this one.

Although these seven films with or for children have their charms, they are not particularly memorable. They are interesting for their place in Rubbo's development as a storytelling documentary filmmaker. The animal films' effectiveness results largely from Rubbo's engaged narration. Documentary narration is rarely given the attention that its potential contribution to a film warrants. Already in the animal films, Rubbo is exhibiting a flair for spoken commentary that responds to and contextualizes the image—and engages the audience. The films with Mrs. Ryan's students, although quite distinct from one another, presage Rubbo's interest in not merely recording the action but instigating or meddling with it in the midst of filming—all in the interests of telling a story. And finally, Rubbo's experience in making films for or with children led to a breakthrough opportunity.