



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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Plein Air Documentary

YouTube films; Bicycle Art; Painting with Film

All About Olive is, so far, Rubbo's last full-length documentary. In subsequent years, he has spent most of his creative energy on two seemingly very different kinds of pursuits: short YouTube documentaries (usually between six and twelve minutes in length), and making what he calls bicycle art: sketches and prints depicting people riding bicycles. The intersection of these two pursuits yields an insight into Rubbo's documentary aesthetic that I've barely touched on so far.

Rubbo has posted hundreds of mini-films on YouTube. Quite a few of them are either excerpts from or follow-ups to his past documentaries. Several of these pursue the Shakespeare authorship question, although some of the Shakespeare entries simply express his appreciation of Shakespeare. He has excerpted *Waiting for Fidel* several times. There are follow-ups on some of his features for children, especially the two Tommy Tricker films. His favorite subject drawn from his previous work, however, has been Olive Riley. Besides excerpts—some slightly revised or enhanced—from *All About Olive*, he made numerous original films involving her. Some feature Olive reminiscing about something, such as looking for work in the 1930s, encountering a shark up close, or going bushwalking with a friend. There are several of Olive singing such popular old songs as “Bye Bye Blackbird,” “Waltzing

Matilda,” or “Smile, Smile, Smile.” A few of the films emerge from interesting setups: listening and reacting to an opera Rubbo plays for her; watching an old Australian film; Rubbo’s wife Katya showing her some Matryoshka dolls.

The subjects of Rubbo’s original creations for YouTube are varied, but most of the films exhibit familiar Rubbo touches. A few, such as *An Artist of Malacca* (2013), are about people who happen to interest him. Tham Siew Inn sketches “all over the world, and just for the joy of sketching, apparently,” Rubbo says, although Tham does sell books of his work. Tham’s work is swirly and kinetic. Rubbo’s narration is typically informal and personal. The film ends with Rubbo back home presenting one of Tham’s books to his wife. She calls his work “very delicate.”

“So you like my little present?”

While the camera is on the book, she thanks Rubbo. Then, facing the camera, she says, “And thank you, Tham Siew Inn. I really enjoy your work. It’s beautiful.”

Over a period of a few years, Rubbo filmed a person who had become a close friend, Pyotr Patrushev. The four-part portrait, *The Man Who Swam Away* (2010–2014), is mostly a head-on interview with Patrushev, who recounts how, as a young and superbly conditioned athlete, he swam from the Soviet Union to Turkey over part of the Black Sea. Patrushev’s riveting account is enriched by family photos and other visual material. Once branded a traitor to Russia, Patrushev has become a successful translator for visiting Russian dignitaries.

Rubbo frequently makes YouTube films advocating causes he supports. *Maggie Chiou Here on Show* (2013) is about a visitor’s desire to stay in Australia. Maggie works in the Tarragal Nursing Home, where she teaches Tai Chi to the residents, plays the piano, guitar, and ukulele for them, and leads them in song. Sue, the head nurse, tells Rubbo about one man with severe dementia whose face lights up when he sings along with Maggie. Rubbo concludes the film by saying to Sue, “So the whole point of this tape is to try to get the authorities to think about letting her stay. Do you think she would be a good inclusion for our country?” “I certainly do, I certainly do,” replies Sue. “I think she’d be an asset to our country.” We are not told the nature of Maggie’s visa problem.

Another cause is the preservation of old, single-screen movie theaters in small towns such as the one in which he is now living, Avoca Beach, about an hour north of Sydney. *Avoca Beach Theatre: Our Little Treasure* (2012) is a paean to a single-screen theater that has been a community fixture since the late 1940s. People go there not just for the movies but also for events and parties. In recent years, however, it has been threatened with development. The owners, who had enjoyed popular support when it was assumed they wanted to preserve it in its original form, have schemed to expand it into a modern complex first with three screens, then five. To Rubbo and many others in the community, the proposed expansion seems wrong-headed on several counts. For one thing, the community seems too small to support five screens. For another, people went there as much for the social interaction as for the movies. The film ends with the issue unresolved but Rubbo and his like-minded fellow citizens still trying to “save our little treasure.” Rubbo has made several follow-up films on the ongoing fight for the theater.

Of all the causes Rubbo has pursued on YouTube, his most passionate one is the promotion of bicycle riding. He favors bicycle lanes, amenities for people who use bicycles for such things as commuting, shopping, or recreation, and the freedom to ride without wearing a helmet. His *Councillor on a Bike* (2010) praises the work of a civic leader in Yarra City, a suburb of Melbourne. The film starts in a familiar fashion: “I’m off to Melbourne, on a train of course, because that allows me to take my bike. I’m going to make a film about a local politician, Jackie Fristacky, who’s very pro-bike.” Fristacky, who doesn’t own a car, goes from meeting to meeting by bike, because it is quicker. Rubbo, on his bike, follows her around with his camera. She often stops on the street to confer with residents who have a problem or complaint. She spots graffiti on a monument in a park and reports it through her cell phone. Yarra spends \$17 per resident on bicycle infrastructure, says Rubbo. “It’s a hard act to follow, but I’m hoping other councils might think it’s worth a try.”

The legal requirement to wear a helmet while riding irks Rubbo. For *Bike Share and Helmets Don’t Mix?* (2009), he attends a conference in Melbourne on the future of bikes. It becomes clear that strict helmet laws discourage bike sharing and bike riding. “The helmet is

a vexing problem,” a bike-share proponent from the United States acknowledges. For Australia, Rubbo proposes that the helmet should be voluntary for adults riding sit-up bikes. It could change Australia’s bike culture drastically and bring millions of new riders, he believes. Rubbo ends with a brief interview with a young woman who says she loves using a helmet. Taken aback at first, Rubbo realizes that ending on such a note could be reassuring to those who would still choose to use a helmet.

In *Sue Abbot Fights Bike Helmets* (2009), Rubbo goes to Scone, a small New South Wales country town, to report on the case of Sue Abbot, who is fighting the \$52 fine she has received for riding her bike without a helmet. Her legal and associated costs for disputing the ticket have soared to about \$2,500. Sue takes Rubbo to the spot where she was ticketed. She had been riding all her life around here without a helmet. Rubbo cuts to an interview with a man who observes that bike riding has nearly disappeared since the helmet law was enacted. Rubbo himself says, “Those countries that cycle the least, are fittest,” over a series of shots of big butts. He ends the visit with a visual paean to helmetless bike riding: lovely shots of Sue riding her bike on a gravel road in the countryside, where “the greatest danger is ... swooping magpies,” which she wards off “with jingle bells.” He concludes the film by noting that wearing a helmet is a matter of choice in Europe, where bicycle lanes and other provisions contribute to safety.

For *No Helmet, Please!* (2009), Rubbo is in Scone again, this time for Sue Abbot’s trial. While waiting for the hearing, he observes that people aren’t required to wear a helmet when riding a horse. Rubbo himself often wears a helmet when biking, but “I don’t want to be *told* to wear one.” Pro-helmet people like to point out that while the helmet law has decreased bike riding, it has also decreased injuries, but Rubbo observes that the simple decrease in ridership, not the helmet requirement, is likely the cause. Rubbo is not allowed to film inside the courtroom. Sue’s lawyer, Rubbo reports, had told her that she probably would be let off if she simply agreed to wear a helmet in the future, but she refuses. She says she will keep on riding her bike without wearing a helmet. Rubbo ends the film with an analogy: because about three hundred people a year drown while swimming, compared to about



13.1 Sue Abbot. Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

forty killed on bikes, will the officials now demand that people must wear life jackets when they go swimming?

It dismays Rubbo that while bike-share programs flourish in cities around the world, they are not popular in Australia. In *Melbourne Bike Share in Trouble?* (2010), Rubbo investigates why bike share is hardly used in Melbourne even though at various convenient locations bikes are available for sharing. He identifies the helmet law as the main cause. He interviews several people on both sides of the issue, and with one pro-helmet woman he engages in a brief argument. Rubbo

amasses evidence that helmet laws do not increase safety; all things considered, they probably decrease it, he says, by giving wearers a false sense of security.

Message to Melbourne from Dublin Bikes (2010) was shot in Ireland by an assistant. Rubbo narrates. Andrew Montague, a Dublin city councilor, has achieved great success with a bike-share program. With Montague on camera, Rubbo interviews him from Australia via speakerphone. They don't require helmets, Montague reports, yet after a million trips they've still had no fatalities. The small risk of riding without a helmet, Montague says, should be weighed against the risks of heart attacks and so forth resulting from inactivity. He cites a study showing that people who ride bikes regularly live ten years longer than those who don't. Rubbo ends with an exhortation to the city of Melbourne. It can't allow bike share to fail, he says. Exemption from helmet laws "is the game changer."

It's not that Rubbo disregards safety concerns. His problem with helmets is with requiring them and the false sense of security that can give. His *No Bike Mirror ... Suicidal?* (2014) answers its title question in the affirmative. After surveying the variety of mirrors a cyclist can choose from, Rubbo shows two actual accidents involving mirrorless bicycles. The footage for one was filmed from a cyclist's head cam. The other was filmed from a car camera. *No Bike Mirror ... Suicidal?* is strong stuff.

Recognizing that people, especially older people, who live in hilly areas may be less inclined to bike, Rubbo touts power-assisted bikes in *Electric Bikes—The Great Electric Bike Comparison* (2009). An accomplice takes a 7-kilometer hill in the Dandenong Range outside Melbourne, first in a regular bike, then in a power-assisted bike (which one still has to pedal, but not so hard). He climbs the hill in twenty-plus minutes on the regular bike, a bit over fifteen minutes on the power-assisted one—and feels a lot less tired afterward. Then Rubbo himself ascends the hill on his own power-assisted bike, something he says he would not have tried before.

To varying degrees, most of Rubbo's YouTube work exhibits the traits that made his previous and more substantial documentaries distinctive. He is always personal, usually present at least as an off-camera (since he is working it) participant. The YouTube films let the audience

in on purposes, plans, and methods, including the occasional contrivances. He is at ease with his subjects and himself.

The films promoting bike riding lead to a rarely noticed aspect of Rubbo's documentary aesthetic—its painterliness. They express cinematically a love of bicycles that Rubbo often celebrates in drawing, etching, and painting. Most of Rubbo's paintings are in oil. They are characterized by bold strokes and strong, joyful colors. Often they depict scenes in Quebec. But around the beginning of the century he began producing images of people riding bikes. For the most part, he used four different techniques. One was a kind of rubbing, which involves rubbing away oil paint from special paper. Another, akin to Japanese woodblock printing, involved linear carving into linoleum tiles, which in turn are used as printing blocks. The third method was a kind of solar printing: drawing first on acetate, then briefly exposing the drawings to plates that are sensitive to ultraviolet light, then printing with those plates. The fourth was simple drawing. The prints made from all these methods are full of motion, about as kinetic as a still image can be. At the same time, they are not detailed, sharply drawn, or naturalistic. With their graceful curving lines, they depict the pleasure and perhaps even the joy of riding a bike, usually with others, and never with a helmet. Like the bicycle films, the bicycle art is casual and free-flowing.

When a film is described as painterly, the adjective is almost always meant to suggest that individual shots have a pictorial quality resembling painting, usually scenic painting. Almost invariably, a "painterly" shot is static. It is picturesque. Movement within the shot is usually slight. When there is camera movement, it is likely a slow pan or gentle tilt. The camera itself rarely moves very much in a shot described as painterly. Such shots are, if anything, anti-cinematic, and they are uncommon in Rubbo's work. There are beautiful images in his films, but their beauty depends largely on the context in which they appear.

The painterliness in Rubbo's work lies not in individual shots but in the whole film as it unfolds over time, including the sounds—dialogue, narration, music, location sounds. Given the kinetic intensity of a typical Rubbo documentary, and his comfort with spontaneity, there would rarely be time for anything more than a painterly shot or two in the usual sense of the word when applied to film. To fully



13.2 Drawing by Michael Rubbo. Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

grasp the aesthetic of a Rubbo documentary, one has to be willing to consider the film *as a whole*, as in some ways like a painting—and a particular style of painting at that: *plein air*. The term literally refers to painting done outdoors, but it also connotes an improvised, dashed-off quality, where the effect lies in the overall impression and not in the details. Rubbo himself has referred to his style of painting, although not his filmmaking, as “*plein air*.” The sketching we saw him do with Margaret Atwood was exactly that.

To appreciate the cinematic nature of this painterly quality in Rubbo’s work, it may be helpful to consider the aesthetic influence of his



13.3 Lino cut by Michael Rubbo. Courtesy of Michael Rubbo.

mentor, Tom Daly, on the National Film Board of Canada. Daly had begun his Film Board career as an editor at the age of twenty-two, just after the Film Board was created in 1939. When World War II broke out, the Film Board became a propaganda arm for the British Commonwealth. Television was not yet a mass medium, and theaters typically showed a cartoon and a newsreel before the main feature. The Film Board's mainstay became two-reel compilation films made largely from war footage, both Allied and captured from the enemy, and churned out monthly for theatrical distribution. Having little to do with the filming, the Film Board's creative role lay mostly in editing. Their "directors" were mostly editors. They had to discover order in—or impose it on—disparate footage shot for various purposes. They did so brilliantly; an early compilation film, *Churchill's Island* (1941), won an Academy Award for best documentary short, the first of many Oscars for the Film Board. Stuart Legg, imported from England,



13.4 Tom Daly, circa 1993. Photo by Lois Siegel.

edited the film. Daly, his assistant, soon emerged as a skillful editor in his own right. By the 1950s, Daly was a producer known for his brilliant editing and his attention to detail. He would emphasize the importance of the precise frame at which a shot should begin or end. A difference of a frame or two could affect the emotional power of a cut. Daly's aesthetic permeated the Film Board, and if not everyone was a true believer, most were affected by it. Any accomplished editor during Rubbo's years at the Film Board, when Daly was regarded as an editing genius and a superb mentor of young filmmakers, would value attention to detail, the more meticulous the better.

But there was another crucial, equally important aspect to Daly's view of editing, one that might seem to contradict the first. He believed in and espoused a personal philosophy of what he called "wholeness," which applied to far more than filmmaking, but which had a definite aesthetic meaning. To illustrate what he meant, he would occasionally tell a story about having seen a beautiful copper beech tree one autumn. It was standing alone in a field, so its branches were large and full. It was so beautiful that he walked over to it in order to pick a leaf from it to keep as a memento. But the first leaf he looked

at had a wormhole in it. The second had another leaf stuck to it. The third had caterpillar damage. He could not find a leaf that didn't have a flaw. He had a sudden vision of "this perfect thing ... made up of all these imperfections."¹

An accomplished editor at the Film Board once told me that he thought Rubbo was a sloppy filmmaker and, specifically, editor. (He later retracted that opinion.) That editor was influenced strongly by Daly's meticulous side. He saw the individual leaves in the copper beech tree. Whether Rubbo is conscious of it or not, he is a filmmaker more influenced by the second aspect of Daly's philosophy than the first: what matters most is the whole tree. There are various ways of achieving a sense of wholeness in one's work, but in Rubbo's case any of his best films resembles an impressionist painting unfolding over time. The individual shots are not always particularly meaningful in themselves, and not necessarily joined for precisely the smoothest cut or cleverest segue. But together they create a beautiful motion picture constructed from hundreds of shots and sounds of varying power and import and whose beauty can be grasped only from the entire experience of viewing the film.

If plein air paintings have a dashed-off look it is largely because they are usually, in fact, dashed off. In *Vincent and Me*, Rubbo depicted his idol, van Gogh, painting this way. Van Gogh probably could produce a hundred paintings for every one by, say, Vermeer, his fellow countryman. Taking into account the cost, technology, and logistics of documentary, *mutatis mutandis*, Rubbo makes films in a manner much like van Gogh painted. He often embarked on his major Film Board productions with little preparation, and they were typically shot over an intense period of just a few weeks. In his 1980 interview with Alan Rosenthal, Rubbo acknowledged as much:

I've ... come to value my tendency to plunge in. And these days I even make a virtue of being unprepared. ... You go out with vague ideas about what you want and then just let things happen, trusting in your good instincts. I know it sounds dangerous, but life will inevitably serve up much better stories than you could ever think up beforehand. The trick is to get involved, to get in.²

Since that interview was conducted, Rubbo has become even more at ease with uncertain situations, changing circumstances, and intervening in them to provoke behavior. One reason he has been a prolific YouTube filmmaker is his ease in unstructured situations. Some of the YouTube films were shot and edited in a day. Yet they are coherent and fluid.

Because it is one of his longest films, and the one most directly dealing with political philosophy—a subject resistant to documentary film—*Solzhenitsyn's Children* is perhaps the most instructive example of the plain air quality of Rubbo's aesthetic. Like most of his documentaries, it was shot on the run: quickly, intensively, and of course without a script. Even the contrivances are allowed to play out as improvisation. Almost every visual sequence and almost every sound passage has the feel of a brushstroke executed somewhat spontaneously. Even the sequences with the individual philosophers and critics function impressionistically. While the philosophical content is not unimportant—there are provocative ideas, intriguing contradictions, and prophetic statements in abundance—a sense of the thinker as a personality is what comes across most strongly. The ideas, as articulated by the interviewees and edited by Rubbo, can be thought of, like most everything else in the film, as brushstrokes. They convey just snippets of meaning in themselves but contribute to an overall experience. The film has the feel of a plain air painting—dashed off and exuberant. And yet it is hard to imagine another film more effectively conveying a sense of intellectual Paris of that time—its vitality, intensity, seriousness, competitiveness, vacuity, and pomposity.

Superficiality was and is one of the complaints, open or implicit, against *Solzhenitsyn's Children* and some of Rubbo's other films, but it could be that “depth” is something that, in film and other media, is an illusion. Rubbo once thought of becoming an anthropologist, a discipline which expects its practitioners to spend years with their subjects in order to know them intimately and discover the truth about them. Rubbo spends a few weeks with his subjects, at most. Does that mean his depictions of them are superficial? Confessing to failure in one of his researches, the eminent ethnographer and theorist Clifford Geertz wrote

I do know that however long [I tried] I would not get anywhere near to the bottom of it. Nor have I ever gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about.³

Ethnographic issues aside, the charge of superficiality misses the plein air aspect of Rubbo's aesthetic. There is a difference between superficiality and a respect for surfaces. The British philosopher Roger Scruton has observed that

the most important features of the human condition are emergent features, ones that inhabit the surface of the world and are invisible to those whose eyes are fixed on the depths. ... Human cultures are reflections on and in the surface of life, ways in which we understand the world of persons, and the moral framework in which persons live.⁴

Rubbo's peculiar genius includes a respect for surfaces and an ability to reveal emotional depth through capturing and arranging them. He films what he sees and records what he hears. Rubbo's narration may comment on the material, but more than that, it both contextualizes and enters into it. And the narration itself uses words like brushstrokes. It seems organic to the material, not detached from it, perhaps because he writes it as he edits, not after. He takes characters as they are, neither debunking them nor explaining them away. He lets them wear their masks. When once he did assume the existence of some deep secret—in Margaret Atwood's psyche—and doggedly sought to uncover it, his confidence and ease as a filmmaker, his ability to adapt to unforeseen contingencies, his willingness to confess failure, and his daring interventions turned his failed quest for a dark secret into a film far better than he thought it was. Like many an artists, Rubbo doesn't always recognize his successes.

