REVIEWS

Michael Rubbo's
Margaret Atwood: Once in August

If a Michael Rubbo documentary usually acknowledges its genesis in the NFB, Rubbo's personal presence and persona are, however, more prominent. In Margaret Atwood: Once in August, Rubbo declares that such contradictory alignments provide a working license to make personal cinema within the Film Board. As he types a letter to Atwood requesting permission to make a film about her for the Board's Canadian Writers' Series, Rubbo commits a felicitous typo. By transposing the letter 'r' for the letter 'r' in the surname, the film proves to be a collaboration between A and R – Atwood and Rubbo.

This film is more anthropological than institutional, in the modern tradition of visual anthropology: where the researcher is necessarily implicated in the documentary of the cultural human subject. Its theme is the art of life, with Atwood the found resource on her family's summer island. The island's location is never revealed. It looks northerly, like the landscape in Atwood's novel Surfacing, but the full Atwood family forms an energetic presence. In Atwood, Rubbo finds a collaborator who extends his subject beyond portraiture: Atwood's knowledgeable ability to control media interviews is evident in her first speech, camping instructions to Rubbo. Rubbo plays the would-be voyeur as a voyageur, ensconcing himself in small cabins which he built to live on. By the end of Other Tongues, little has changed in the lives of our couples. Yannis and Sam have become friends, and they join Anna in St-Isidore, a sunlit cottage and verandah. Suzanne comes to the end of her English lessons and is told that she now knows something about the culture. But this ending is in reality only a continuation: the suitcase is picked up and carried off, starting on another journey that has no end.

There is a tentativeness to the final moments of Other Tongues, as there is to the rest of the film, that speaks to a fragile future. But, firstly, the film has the precision and imagination of someone whose grip on the medium is being more assured with every film. Within its 50 minutes or so, May has sketched, in his own sophisticated visual manner, a warm, complex and occasionally touching tapestry encompassing past and present, male and female, Quebecois and English, present and absence, that synthesizes the immigrant experience and suggests that we are all outsiders, fellow travellers who could do well to take notice of our surroundings and our heritage.

Piers Handling

Margaret Atwood: Once in August

Margaret Atwood: Once in August d / s c . / e d . Michael Rubbo co – s c . / e d . Michael Rubbo co-sc. / e d . Michael Rubbo co-sc. and research Michael Weisbord d / s c . / e d . Michael Rubbo co-sc. and research Michael Weisbord d / s c . / e d . Michael Rubbo co-sc. and research Michael Weisbord

Michael Rubbo's, the anthropological adventurer, finds himself a lurking outsider in Margaret Atwood: Once in August

Atwood tells Rubbo that her poetic muse is an old woman. These moments express more than the requisite documentary interviews, with their awkward politeness, props and impassivity, or the pretense of Rubbo's portable Atwood library stacked neatly on logs.

In an equally amusing but central scene, Atwood and Rubbo paint together: Atwood sits high on the rocks effortlessly divining a landscape. Rubbo languishes below, in the foreground, labouring over a faceless portrait of Atwood. "I've chosen something incredibly difficult. I'm doing you and I can't see you." He concludes the film with a similar sense of her elusiveness. In this key scene, Rubbo simultaneously sees Atwood up close and in relief. He drops his ravel, to reveal a prism of keenly felt perspectives – despite the "binoculars" he claims as his constrained vision at the film's conclusion. The epilogue's aerial stills of the island landscape, underlined by Rubbo's resignation, sustain the paradox of his control and his surrender of control.

Yet in counterpart to his previous film (Daisy: The Story of a Facelift, 1982), Rubbo here has lifted an ideal out of his subject, a natural woman who is a respected offspring, a committed parent, a fiercely protective writer and an autonomous mate with writer Graham Gibson. If In Daisy, Rubbo's subject flies away from him in pursuit of a popular romantic myth, Margaret Atwood: Once in August is about the opposite: internal values with a strong physical bearing. Rubbo, the anthropological adventurer, would, one feels, like to spread – and catch – such earth-bound strengths.

Joan Nicks