

# the diary films of mike rubbo

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Mike Rubbo's documentaries are highly personal statements. He becomes actor and commentator, and lets the film take its own shape. Below, Piers Handling provides us with a theoretical context in which to view these films, and then gives us a glimpse into each of them.

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by  
Piers Handling

Mike Rubbo



"I just knew that... any film that tended to show any sense of order or control about the situation would be false."

— Mike Rubbo talking about **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** in *Sightlines*, Fall 1975

Mike Rubbo's films contain highly interesting attempts to deal with some of the serious formal problems of the documentary film. He himself appears in his first films, **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** (1970) and **Persistent and Finagling** (1971), though his role as a social actor is minimal. In his next films, **Wet Earth and Warm People** (1971), **The Man Who Can't Stop** (1973) and **Waiting for Fidel** (1974) his involvement on the image track is extensive. These films, along with **I Am An Old Tree** (1975) and **I Hate to Lose** (1977) all share similar, although not identical, structural strategies. In all of them, Rubbo himself narrates, using non-sync direct address.

His narration is consciously opposed to what we traditionally associate with direct address. Instead of being serious, well-presented and impersonal — just think of Lorne Greene in the *Canada Carries On* series — Rubbo reads his text in a slow and quiet manner, at times using a gentle

monotone. 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. The films become journalistic diaries, subjective reactions to situations that generally are totally unfamiliar. Initially, **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** and **Wet Earth and Warm People** seem to lack any real focus as a result. In the first instance, Rubbo has been sent to Saigon. We are presented with a picture of the city and its people which seems removed from our expectations of Vietnam. We are shown no jetfighter strikes, helicopter attacks, or infantry patrols — the traditional images of war that have become so familiar through television coverage. Instead, the war intrudes in different ways. There are the children, often parentless, who steal to get by; the American journalists working for Dispatch; or the young Vietnamese soldier visiting his family under the watchful eye of an officer because he has already deserted once. **Wet Earth and Warm People** is pervaded by this same picaresque sense of a real inability to say much more about Indonesia than an ordinary tourist. Continually shown to be the centre of attention and curiosity, there is little chance for Rubbo and his crew to capture the spontaneous.



## Film criticism, documentaries and direct address or... Who Says What to Whom?

The new advances in film criticism have tended to neglect the documentary film. Only recently are pertinent questions being asked about the codes, strategies and structures of this particular genre. Bill Nichols, in his article for *Screen*, "Documentary Theory and Practice" (1), begins to raise questions of this type, while developing a methodology for analysis that he is pursuing in relation to the work of Frederik Wiseman. Modern semiological criticism has dissected traditional, narrative fiction film to question the illusionism and complicit ideology that lies at its core. Not surprisingly, the same forces are at work in the documentary film. In fact, as Nichols points out, the danger of illusionism is even greater because most people unconsciously accept the argument that documentary equals reality. Consequently, a filmmaker working in this field has to be extremely careful of the formal choices he makes in filmic terms — his is an awesome responsibility.

Using Nichols' explorations that I find so interesting as a touchstone, I want to offer a few tentative thoughts on Mike Rubbo, a transplanted Australian who has been making films at the National Film Board for just over ten years. Rubbo is little known in this country; his reputation elsewhere is far more substantial. There are probably a number of reasons for this but I think it is largely a stylistic difference. Rubbo's films exist outside of the current mainstream of the genre, and are quite different than their Film Board counterparts. In fact, it is surprising that Rubbo has even been allowed to work at the Board as very few of his films deal with Canada at all, the settings being as exotically diverse as Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia and Cuba. This could explain parts of Rubbo's singular style and why he has evolved the way he has in terms of making aesthetic choices. But how is Rubbo's style distinct, and what does it mean?

Let me begin by way of a small anecdote. Two years ago I spent a week at the Robert Flaherty seminar, and a year later had four days at the Grierson seminar in Orillia. Both were well attended by filmmakers and I found their approach, comments, and criticisms most revealing, not so much in what they said, but in what they didn't say. Very little time was spent on sound/image relationships and what this meant in filmic terms. One film that contained this dialectic at the centre of its enquiry, Tom Braidwood's

**Limited Engagement**, had an unhappy reception. However, while watching the numerous documentaries at these seminars, it was instructive to note the mode of address which was chosen. Nichols writes that:

"Historically, most documentaries have used the mode of direct address, and it is still preferred by television documentary, political films and most sponsored or commercial films. Indirect address seems to invite risks of incomprehensibility (the lack of a guiding hand) and, for political filmmakers, empiricism (a risk well confirmed by much *cinéma-vérité*). Conversely, the adoption of direct address has run the perennial risk of dogmatism, while offering the advantage of analytical precision." (2)

The use of direct address suggests a number of things, often quite unconsciously, to an audience. It is most obviously the voice of authority, and can suggest a comprehension of a situation which is not, in fact, understood, or an order where none exists. It's as if the voice is telling us, 'this is what it is like', 'this is the truth of the situation'. It is no accident that our evening television news is presented to us this way, combining both forms of direct address, on-screen and off-screen (or using Nichols definitions, a sync narrator and a non-sync narrator). A certain order has to be imposed on the material for a number of reasons, but it usually doesn't allow for questioning or discussion. The use of direct address to enclose the film into a unified statement which often excludes the viewer from any kind of participation in the action presented. We are presented with a situation which is then made sense of by the narrator and/or filmmaker. The manipulation of reality is then complete and is subject to multiple distortions.

How then to avoid these formal and aesthetic problems? The method of indirect address is one alternative. Social actors (*not* film actors) do not address the viewer as subject. This, however, raises other formal problems, as Nichols mentions, because indirect address is also the principal mode of fictional narrative cinema. As he goes on to suggest "... a less problematic course is to aim the exposition towards elucidation or description rather than argumentation." (3) Mick Rubbo's films represent one effort to use direct address without overloading it with authority, to use it to raise questions and involve the spectator.

Rubbo's own presence in film as a social actor reinforces the personal reflections that we hear on the sound track. There is an important recognition of his participation and involvement in the action being filmed. Rubbo does not give us a third-person impression of what is happening; instead, he works in the first person, through the narration and on the image track. I would hesitate to refer to Rubbo's technique in Brechtian terms, because the final effect involves little distanciation. But, like Godard's use of direct address to rupture the narrative flow ("diegesis") of the fictional mode, Rubbo makes us continually aware that we are watching a film; his films do not appear as a transparent window opening out on reality. Furthermore, Rubbo uses this device to comment on his own actions within the film, which permits him to voice his doubts, fears and concerns. This allows Rubbo to view himself in a number of different ways, at times humorously – as an awkward participant in events; or, ironically, as perhaps not belonging. The outdoor screening of films in **Wet Earth and Warm People** is evidence of the complexity of thought and feeling that Rubbo can deal with by using this technique. The warmth, excitement and wonder of the film evening (for many it is the first time they have seen this incredible invention), with Rubbo delightfully addressing the villagers in Indonesian to hoots of laughter, is delicately replaced the next day when they pack up their generators and projectors before leaving. Rubbo's narration while they are doing this voices his own doubts about whether the whole thing was a good idea – introducing the technological complexity, of which he is a representative, to these people. His feelings of inadequacy, and perhaps guilt, are subtly reinforced through the inherent magic of the music and dancers in the forest, which is intercut with the cutting of the bamboo, a sequence that follows immediately after the film evening. There is a conscious dialectic at work in these scenes – "a cultural battle" as Rubbo calls it – that is constructed for us out of a complex intricacy of film components.



While James Cross was being held somewhere in Montreal, the Stop bus was running its Pollution Bus Tour.

This cultural battle is at the centre of **Waiting For Fidel**, where an unusual threesome visits Cuba with the ostensible purpose of interviewing Castro. Rubbo finds himself in the

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company of Newfoundland's fiery ex-premier Joey Smallwood, and a millionaire who owns radio and television stations, Geoff Stirling. However, the Castro interview never materializes, but Rubbo finds much of interest in Smallwood's and Stirling's reaction to the Cuban experiment, as they tour the island visiting hospitals, universities, and construction sites. Geoff Stirling is the continual sceptic, a product of the free-enterprise system that has given him his millions. Yet Smallwood, with a history of socialist legislation behind him, acts as a foil to his business friend. And where is Rubbo in all this? He is certainly a presence. Perhaps he is more restrained than he would like to be, unwilling to commit himself too strongly for fear that it will unbalance the film. However, in the marvellous confrontation scene where Stirling attempts to put an end to the film that Rubbo is making but shouldn't be, the filmmaking process is brought under fire and we are made aware of some of its economic contradictions. Accused of being wasteful and extravagant, Rubbo is confronted with the private enterprise mentality of western society when Stirling claims that he is paying for the film in the cameras, the tapes for the sound recorders, the processing, etc. The Castro interview is all that is required of Rubbo, so why is he wasting all this footage on what seems to be irrelevant?

Now the documentary process can place a 'simple' set of demands on a situation and on filmmakers. For instance,



One of the endless ideological dinnertime arguments that punctuate **Waiting for Fidel**. Rubbo is lecturing Smallwood and Stirling.

one is sent to Vietnam or to Cuba, and is expected to bring back certain images. There are preconceptions as to what material should be brought back. This inevitably imposes subconscious restrictions on a filmmaker. He is expected to satisfy his sponsor, and ultimately his audience, who impose similar expectations. Particular images assume a position of requirement. If these images are not included there is a fear of turning people away to something more exciting or more familiar. But Rubbo's style is the complete contradiction of these demands, even to the point of suppressing purely aesthetic impulses if they don't serve to advance the film. This is partially another facet of the "cultural battle". So **Waiting For Fidel** becomes, not the film that was expected, but something completely different. It arises out of situations, as opposed to trying to control or dominate them. This is true of all six of Rubbo's 'diary' films. He finds what is there, not what he expects to see.

Earlier I placed great importance on the final effect of Rubbo's own voice on the sound track, suggesting that it was substantially different from the anonymous 'voice of authority' style that marks so many documentaries. I find this interesting not just for its formal effects, but also be-

cause it is inextricably tied to important thematic concerns that unite Rubbo's work. If the choices of certain modes of address indicate subtle filmmaker/audience relationships in terms of watching the films, it is also tied to an active/passive response to what we are presented with. Furthermore, this is linked to the reinforcement of invidious power structures; we as an audience either participate in the film, or we are spoken at, with little corresponding sense of interaction. This aesthetic is translated into practical terms within the films. Rubbo is intrigued with power and the social process, and how this power affects the individual in everyday, commonplace ways.

In **Wet Earth and Warm People** we are drawn towards Hussein, the betcha driver (betchas are bicycles with a seat for the passenger in front of the driver). The betchas are being continuously harassed by the police and the military in Jakarta. They cannot use certain roads at certain times. Yet, as Rubbo argues, the betcha is an ideal form of urban transport, quiet and pollution free. In trying to get an answer as to why these bicycles are disliked by the authorities, Rubbo is met with evasive replies. He eventually surmises that it is perhaps because the betcha is a symbol of the past, of something that Indonesia is now ashamed of in its attempt to move into the twentieth century. So, to make his living, Hussein must take back-roads to avoid police traps.

Rubbo doesn't stop here. We are shown how this touching inconvenience interrelates with the curious web of society that surrounds us. The chief of police who must enforce the law is dealt with as extensively as Hussein. He is seen as an intermediary who must enforce laws not of his making. Instead of being coldly remote and officious, he is as human as Hussein – kind, gentle and amusing, with a paternal sense of care for people. His authority has surprisingly not hardened him. In fact we feel a great deal of sympathy for him. The governor, Sadekin, is handled in a similar fashion. When we first see him, checking to identify papers of a nervous street vendor, he is presented as a traditional authority figure. But as we come to know Sadekin, he becomes a benevolent type of father-figure, proudly showing Rubbo his successes in improving the slum conditions in Jakarta, while in the villages he is surrounded by adoring children.

But the suspicion that marks many of the contacts between the 'two sides' in **Wet Earth and Warm People**, is also a part of **Persistent and Finagling** and **The Man Who Can't Stop**. The women of STOP (Society to Overcome Pollution) have a series of frustrating meetings with people they think can help them in their crusade – the university researchers at Montreal University, and the radio announcer, Blaker, whom they want to have as their host for the bus-trip around Montreal – who are either uncooperative, or place a number of demands upon their participation. Similar situations are visible in **The Man Who Can't Stop** when Francis Sutton, a middle-aged Australian commercial advertiser, disgusted by the pollution of Sydney's beaches, tries to get people interested in an inland sewage scheme. The indifference, or guarded hostility, of their encounters is overcome in both films as a fact of life that must be lived with and confronted. But their frustrations are balanced by those occasions when they receive support and encouragement – the student in **Persistent and Finagling** who researches pollution levels of various Montreal factories, and is happily prepared to share his information, or the woman who recognizes Sutton and voices her admiration for him. If those people in power positions are anonymous, or at best detached, glimpses of touching humanity are evident around the fringes of all the films.

Standing in stark contrast to these skirmishes are the two Cuba films, and in particular, **Waiting For Fidel**. There

is no need to persuade or cajole power, or people in authority in Cuba; it manifests itself in a multitude of ways, from the obviously visible to the more imperceptibly transparent. The weekly political meetings of citizens provide a forum of dialogue, and evidence of everyone's participation in the social and political process. Nevertheless, Rubbo remains slightly sceptical of what he perceives as an 'organized' outlet for expression. But regardless, he is confronted with numerous examples of a benevolent allocation of a society's power through its institutions – its schools, universities and hospitals. Their attitude to the insane and mentally ill, resulting in the successful rehabilitation of many of their patients, is viewed with admiration for the simplicity and humanity of approach. Similarly, the visit to the construction sites of a new city being built by those who will live in the apartments once they are finished, is met with this same sense of fascination. Many of the workmen are fishermen by trade, untrained in construction work, but they have learned on the job. Throughout Cuba there is an overwhelming sense of purpose and unity about what is being accomplished – a harmony of a people with its leader Fidel, an example of power and its constituency working together.

One may ask at what cost this has been achieved; has anything been lost? Rubbo's second Cuba film contains elements of the answer, even in its title, **I am an Old Tree**. This line is spoken by a middle-aged doctor who talks about the revolution and what it has meant to present-day Cuba. He notices the changes, and remarks that the younger generation is different, but unfortunately there are things in him that can't be changed, it's too late in his life, he is too set in his ways, he is 'an old tree'. But if conflict between the individual and his society is evident in all of Rubbo's other films, even this statement does not deflect this film away from what is surely the warmest and gentlest of the six diary films. The 'cultural battle' that exists at the heart of the other five films, is absent in **I am an Old Tree**. Or rather, it is not contained *within* the film; it defines Cuba against everything that surrounds it. But Rubbo too, sadly admits that he fears he is also an old tree, admitting in part that the struggle between the west and the emerging third world will continue, regardless of how sympathetic he might be to its experiments.

Rubbo has gravitated towards countries in a post-colonial phase of their history, countries that have been victims of nineteenth century imperialism – Vietnam/Indo-China, Indonesia, Cuba, and to a lesser extent Australia. How important this is to Rubbo is hard to assess, but it would seem to be related to the cultural battle that he perceives around him. As white westerners, we are continuously made to feel

...an old tree, too old to bend completely



as usurpers, coming from a culture that is disturbing the natural flow of life. In **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** one of the American Dispatch journalists tries to insert himself into Vietnamese life, but he is always aware of an unbridgeable gap. The Vietnamese knowledge of Americans is that they either kill or give. This places a series of demands on both cultures – the American is misunderstood by the Vietnamese on one hand, while the Vietnamese turn into perverse second-generation Americans like Ui aping a small-time twenties gangster. Ui's pidgin English is a further example of the mutations that are taking place, and this is confirmed in **Wet Earth and Warm People** when we find out that Hussein is picking up English. As Rubbo notes, they shed one skin only to replace it with another. Legacies of their historical past are a further reminder. In **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** Rubbo comes across an old cyclo-driver who fought for the French in the First World War, while the beaten-up Chevie in **Wet Earth and Warm People** is similar to the American cars of the fifties seen everywhere in the Cuba of **I am an Old Tree**.

While Rubbo has great affection for these countries and their struggle for survival, he is sensitive enough to realize that he is inextricably a part of that colonializing force. This is one of the reasons he is so attracted to the different elements of magic in these cultures. The Coconut Monk walking the map of Vietnam from south to north as a symbol of eventual unity in **Sad Song of Yellow Skin**, or the dancers in the forest, the puppeteers and the theatre group in **Wet Earth and Warm People**, function as beautiful mysteries in the face of Rubbo's film technology. While this type of magic is absent in **The Man Who Can't Stop** and **Persistent and Finagling**, nevertheless there is a strong element of symbolism in these two films, symbolic gestures like the dumping of water through the hoop into Sydney harbour in the first film, and the bus tour of Montreal to point out the polluters in the second film.

While the mystery and symbols of these various cultures serve to unite their *communities* in highly different ways, Rubbo places great faith in individual action. The members of Dispatch that we see in **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** are visible proof that the renegade can be of major importance, largely because of his strongly developed sense of individual action. Partially responsible for breaking the story of the My Lai massacre, their essential apartness allows them to view situations from a different perspective. Yet their solitude is ironically a direct function of their commitment. Sadekin in **Wet Earth and Warm People**, Francis Sutton in **The Man Who Can't Stop**, and the housewives of S.T.O.P. in **Persistent and Finagling** are all individuals who are challenging the traditional system. Even the two Cuba films which have the strongest sense of community action to them, are overshadowed by the continual presence of one man – Fidel Castro.

It has been said that every action is a political action regardless of whether it is meant to be or not. The absence of something says as much, in different ways, as its inclusion. While Rubbo would probably not consider himself a 'political' filmmaker, his films are all concerned with the body politic, its basic relationships and interrelationships with other people, and what this does to us all. In **Sad Song of Yellow Skin** it may be the questions that arise through Ui's contacts with Americans; in **Persistent and Finagling** it could be how a group of concerned individuals is forced to overcome certain obstacles to voice their point; perhaps in **Wet Earth and Warm People** it is explored through the daily annoyances that Hussein has to deal with to earn a living. Human interchange is very fundamental and simple, Rubbo might be saying to us, its problems are universal. He has also found unique ways of dealing with his concerns, an attempt at involving us in cultures that are es-

entially foreign but which can be explored for their similarities. Aesthetically, Rubbo is challenging the boundaries of the documentary in highly novel ways that relate to what he is trying to observe in the world around him. One can only hope that he does not pull back from the challenges that he has set for himself, through lack of recognition in this country.

The dynamics of social and political interchange are an integral part of all of Rubbo's films but in his latest work, he has excelled himself. With an uncanny intuitive sense of how this dialectic operates, Rubbo set about to make a film on the last Quebec provincial election held in November, 1976. **I Hate to Lose** is the result, a film in the mode of his other 'diary' films, assured and highly observant, warm and again gratifying in its feel for first-person journalism. Rubbo chose the electoral race in Westmount as his subject, originally to focus upon the interesting candidacy of Nick auf der Maur, leader of the Democratic Alliance, a left wing group who were expected to do well in the election. But, as in his other films, the material begins to chart its own course, and Rubbo follows these threads as they develop. Just as auf der Maur lacks a strong presence in the film, his opponents – especially George Springate, the incumbent Liberal, and the Union nationale representative, "Shorty" Fairhead – begin to attract Rubbo's attention. Furthermore, this is an indication of how successful a campaign they are running. While auf der Maur is a rational, sympathetic but relatively unemotional man, Springate is the opposite, a tough, gutsy and robust professional who stumps his home riding with growing confidence.

The film is too complex to do it justice in a couple of paragraphs (and I just saw a working copy of it), but the final ten or fifteen minutes which covers election night is probably the finest bit of work that Rubbo has done, matching in sheer complexity and sensitivity the "movie night" in **Wet Earth and Warm People**. From the moment the election results come in and it becomes increasingly obvious that Springate will retain his seat, Rubbo shows us a riding that, like an island, is lost in an ocean that it doesn't understand. While the Parti Québécois victory is happening around them, it is an event that like in *Alice in Wonderland* is happening 'out there somewhere'. Television sets in the background of party headquarters reveal the extent of the PQ win, but nobody really watches them, their attention is focused on the immediate fate of their riding. Springate's vindictive and unforgiving victory speech is intercut with Levesque's highly emotional appearance in the Paul Sauvé arena, again shown only on the television sets, as if one step removed from reality. Yet the English 'reality', symbolized for generations simply by the name Westmount, is sad, confused and lost – detached from its surrounding environment by a force that it seems unwilling to comprehend.

Rubbo has found it necessary to turn away from the exotic and disparate locales of his earlier films, but **I Hate to Lose** shows that the Canadian experience at this moment will give him much food for thought. □

## Footnotes

1. Bill Nichols: "Documentary Theory and Practice", *Screen* Winter 1976/77, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 34-38.
2. *Ibid.* p. 37-38. The two basic modes of address, direct and indirect, define whether or not the viewer is explicitly acknowledged as the subject to which the film is addressed.
3. *Ibid.* p. 44.
4. Dispatch was an independent wire service set up by a group of young Americans as an alternative to UPI and AP.
5. Dave Jones: "The Man in the Picture," *Lumiere*, April 1973, p. 14.



Children, briefly safe from the war, on the Island of Peace — Vietnam, 1969.



Cameraman Leach has lost his enthusiasm. The raft is going under and Jakarta is still 2 days away.



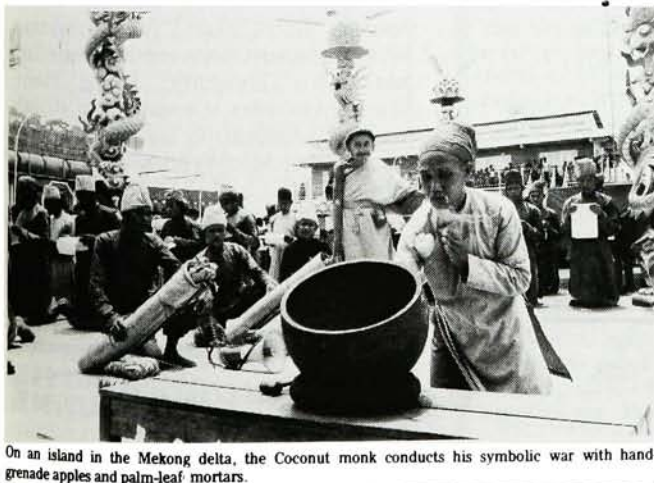
A woman picks lice out of her son's hair in a Saigon doorway.

## Filmography

- 1966 Long Haul Men  
The Bear and the Mouse
- 1967 Adventures  
That Mouse
- 1968 Sir! Sir!
- 1969 Mrs. Ryan's Drama Class
- 1970 Here's to Harry's Grandfather!  
Sad Song of Yellow Skin
- 1971 Summer's Nearly Over  
Wet Earth and Warm People  
Persistent and Finagling
- 1972 OK...Camera
- 1973 Jalen, Jalen  
Streets of Saigon  
The Man Who Can't Stop
- 1974 Waiting for Fidel
- 1975 I'm an Old Tree
- 1976 Log House
- 1977 The Walls Come Tumbling Down  
I Hate to Lose



Lunch with the chief of police before rehearsing the Hawaiian songs.



On an island in the Mekong delta, the Coconut monk conducts his symbolic war with hand-grenade apples and palm-leaf mortars.



Hussein explains the decorations on the back of his betcha: a bunch of feathers and a quivering reflector to ward off police.