



THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

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Family Matters

*OK ... Camera; Streets of Saigon;
Jalan, Jalan; The Man Who Can't Stop*

In the early 1970s, the Film Board entered one of its periodic stretches of austerity. There was very little money for new, individual productions. Partly to be seen playing a role in unifying Canada, and because outside television money was available for it, the Film Board launched a series of half-hour films made in English-speaking Canada by Quebec filmmakers and in Quebec by Anglophone filmmakers. While the series was derided by the more radical filmmakers at the NFB, Rubbo felt obligated to participate. His contribution was an impressionistic, fast-moving report on Quebec's budding feature-film industry, *OK ... Camera* (1972). It is a lively film, combining man-in-the-street interviews with ordinary French Canadians, interviews with important figures in the Quebec film industry (such as Genevieve Bujold, Denys Arcand, and Claude Jutra), movie clips, and posters. The film is held together by retro intertitle cards and a modern version of silent-movie musical accompaniment. Rubbo does not enter this film, staying behind the camera and even forgoing narration. It's an interesting if inconsequential, dutiful film.

The budget problems at the NFB affected only outside production costs, such as film stock, travel, and location expenses. Jobs were safe; employees were paid. With funds for new filming hard to come by,

Rubbo went back to the footage from which he had cut *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* and *Wet Earth and Warm People*. The material was rich enough, he thought, to cut an original, shorter film from each batch.

The Streets of Saigon (1972) uses many of the same shots as *Sad Song* and much of the same narration. Dick Hughes and his home for shoeshine boys are in the film, but John Steinbeck IV and the Island of Peace are not. Rubbo uses more of his audio tape of Steve Erhart, who becomes in effect a second narrator. (The end credits include the words “with the voice and thoughts of Steve Erhart.”) Although only half the length of *Sad Song*, *The Streets of Saigon* gives some of the back-story to the longer film—for example, that Wei is seventeen years old, conscious of his physical smallness, and fond of Dick. We learn that a tough-looking youngster who had appeared in but was not identified in the earlier film is named Nop and is a protector of the younger kids. The reflexive scene in *Sad Song*, when Wei is chastised for having taken money for the interview, is here elaborated on. Wei knows, Rubbo says, that the film crew is exploiting him. When he throws the cash at Hughes, Wei shouts, “Keep the money for the movie’—that’s Wei’s final crack.”

Edited four years after the filming, and with the war still going on, *Streets of Saigon* is more overtly antiwar and pessimistic. There is not even a mention of the hopeful, peace-seeking coconut monk. Rubbo’s closing narration expresses a bleak outlook: “It is four years since the film was shot. In those four years, Dick has opened four other shoe-shine houses. In those four years, [over] six million people in these unhappy countries [North and South Vietnam, presumably; perhaps also Cambodia and Laos] have been killed, wounded, or made refugees. Wei has become the manager of one of Dick’s houses. Nop is still alive. Twenty thousand Americans, though, have been killed. Steve has left Saigon. And the night that we left Saigon,” Rubbo says, “we had a drink with him, at a street bar, and watched the news on TV.” Here Rubbo includes the Nixon press conference and Bobbi the weather girl from the longer film.

Jalan, Jalan: A Journey in Sundanese Java (1972), Rubbo’s shortened version of *Wet Earth and Warm People*, was to some viewers not just an abridgement but an improvement. Rubbo is absent from both the screen and the soundtrack. There is no narration. Without any further

explanation (beyond the film's subtitle) of where we are or what we are seeing, the film is a distillation of some of the most scenic or exotic shots from *Wet Earth* salted with numerous images not included in the longer film. From *Wet Earth*, we see snippets of the puppet show, the argument in the compound, and men making a bamboo raft. New shots include netting a carp in a fishpond, a cigarette vendor, kids jumping rope, a little girl washing dishes, a young woman peeling a rambutan, people playing slot machines. The scene from the longer film in which four men clad in black and white perform some sort of musical ceremony alongside a rice field is repeated in *Jalan, Jalan* twice, once in the body of the film, and again as the film's closing image. What the two versions have in common is an attraction to children, a sense of wonder at a strange culture, and a seemingly meandering structure. Indeed, *Jalan, Jalan*, which in Indonesian means either to go on a journey or just casually stroll about, could have served as the title of the longer film just as well.

Two of Rubbo's three hour-long documentaries had involved far-away places and unfamiliar people. His next made-for-television documentary took him to another faraway place—but a familiar one and with familiar people. Combining business with pleasure, Rubbo was in Australia visiting family and looking for a film idea about the environment, a concern of his since before *Persistent and Finagling*. He spent some time with Film Australia. Film Australia was established in 1946 as the Australian National Film Board, which was inspired by and largely modeled on the Canadian original. Stanley Hawes, a Grierson associate in Britain and one of his key assistants in the Canadian Film Board's early years, headed the unit for over two decades. In 1956, it was renamed the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit; in 1973 it became Film Australia. But it never reached anywhere near the size or developed the artistic independence or aesthetic excellence of its Canadian inspiration.

The two organizations had exchanged filmmakers occasionally in the early 1970s. The Australians who had spent a year at the Film Board were impressed by the bolder approaches to documentary they saw in Canada. Rubbo wanted to make a film in Australia. He came up with an idea of a documentary about his uncle's campaign to persuade the government of Sydney to redirect the city's sewage from the ocean to

the interior. The sewage was polluting Sydney's gorgeous beaches; inland, it could fertilize farms.

Rubbo proposed a coproduction between Film Australia and the Film Board. At first, he encountered resistance from both sides:

There was great suspicion at Film Australia that I was ripping them off somehow, that I was making a pitch for scarce resources [money for productions] that they'd prefer to keep for themselves. I remember a very tense meeting, all the production staff, not the manager types, but people like myself, who had me for a lunchtime meeting in a very hot demountable building being used for spare offices. It was a sort of interrogation of my motives and what was in it for them.

The meeting ended with an agreement between the Australians and Rubbo that there would be no film unless it was edited by one of the Australians and that the NFB would be open to a reciprocal production of a film in Canada directed by an Australian. At the Film Board, there was the usual objection that the proposed film would have no apparent Canadian content, and some of Rubbo's colleagues resented that Rubbo had been favored with overseas projects.

In support of the proposal, Rubbo argued that this would be a great opportunity for building on the NFB–Film Australia relationship. A few of Film Australia's key producers and filmmakers hungered for a chance to make films in the Film Board style—more personal, less scripted, chancier. And the film would not cost the Film Board much; Film Australia would supply the crew and much of the location costs. The same, in reverse, would apply to the Australian-directed film. Eventually, both Film Australia and the National Film Board came around, although the Australian-directed film in Canada was yet to be determined.

As a personal documentary, *The Man Who Can't Stop* represented something new for Film Australia, but it also included personal dimensions new to Rubbo. As with *Wet Earth and Warm People* and *Persistent and Finagling*, he narrates the film, appears in it, and influences events. But he now includes members of his extended family. The protagonist

is his uncle, Francis Sutton. The costar is Francis's wife Joan. Their children appear in the film as well. Instead of minimizing his family connection with his subjects, Rubbo's narration emphasizes it: "This is a story," he begins, "about ... a homecoming ... about an uncle ... and about a sewage scheme." He and his aunt leaf through albums of photos. Although they are typical family photographs, several pertain to the serious subject of the pollution of Sydney's beaches. Several photos reference Rubbo's childhood. One photo includes him and two other boys on the beach: "That's me on the left, on one of those great Christmas holidays, long ago." Rubbo expresses amazement that a people so in love with the sea can pollute it so casually.

And as he had done for the first time in *Persistent and Finagling*, Rubbo develops his main subjects as characters, and he constructs a story from their interactions. Francis, who is sixty-one years old, has quit his job as a commercial artist to devote himself full time to what has become known as "the Sutton Plan," which would divert the sewage that now flows into Sydney's coastal waters inland, where it can be stored in a reservoir and used to irrigate farmland, fertilize crops, and cool power plants. This would not only save the beaches, it would make productive use of the effluent. But Francis has made little progress in persuading politicians and officials to take his plan seriously. He is told it would cost far too much. Francis presses for a mere \$5,000 grant for a feasibility study, but can't even get that. He'd fund it himself, but he and Joan are almost broke from his zealous, impractical pursuit of the plan. Compounding the indifference he faces, Francis has a diffident personality, which makes it hard for him to confront people or be assertive. But he is tenacious, single-mindedly devoted to solving the problem of Sydney's polluted beaches.

Rubbo structured the film around meetings that Francis has with people from whom he seeks support or advice, as well as the public lectures in schools and other venues in which he explains his scheme. Francis is not charismatic, as he himself admits. In a classroom presentation, one student yawns, two others exchange personal notes, and another looks around at classmates as if silently asking how long this man will drone on.

What turns the film into an engaging human story is the relationship between Francis and Joan. Whereas Francis is shy, Joan speaks



5.1 Francis Sutton. Production photo. *The Man Who Can't Stop* (1973). The National Film Board of Canada.

her mind easily and matter-of-factly. Francis loves her, but she has become exasperated with his quixotic pursuit. Francis is so involved in his scheme that he apparently doesn't do much work around the house, while we see Joan tending the garden or at the top of a ladder, working on the roof. She worries about their dwindling savings. Her affectionate carping is a leitmotif in the film. She can be quite supportive, especially when Francis needs it. When Rubbo suggests that Francis ought to be more politically clever, Joan says, "Francis doesn't have any cynicism in his nature." At a protest that Francis, to everyone's surprise, has succeeded in organizing, Joan is with him. Although attendance is clearly sparse, she says she is "glad to see so many people." Later, when Francis has suffered another setback in gaining support for a feasibility study, she asks him why he can't just stop. They argue briefly. Francis tells Joan, "You [meaning himself] always hurt the one you love, I suppose," his sparkling but misty eyes conveying his love for her. Joan leaves him



5.2 Joan Sutton working on the roof. Screen grab. *The Man Who Can't Stop* (1973). The National Film Board of Canada.

for a few weeks, then comes back. After being rebuffed by the Australian Ministry of Urban and Regional Development on the grounds that a feasibility study is already underway, Francis is asked if he intends to abandon his scheme now. “Abandon my scheme?” he replies. “No, I don’t think so. I think the public spirit should be encouraged to continue.” Joan pipes up: “Besides, Francis doesn’t abandon things. You know that by now, Mike.” She laughs.

At the film’s end, Francis reflects on his low-key personality. “I don’t think I’m very demonstrative particularly. I’m not at all like that, and I felt that perhaps I wasn’t a good person to be involved in such a film.” He’s right about his personality, wrong about his appropriateness for this film. The film’s attraction lies in his diffident persistence and the love between him and Joan. Rubbo’s final commentary, over the credits, validates Francis’s self-assessment and in its own way affirms it: “There’s no clear success in sight. Such stories don’t end in a day. Francis works on, and drops me notes from time to time, when there’s progress to report.”

In addition to its character development, the film takes two other components of Rubbo's style a step further. He intervenes on his uncle's behalf, in one case on his own but quite overtly. After Francis experiences a setback in his effort to get a cost estimate for his scheme and is considering approaching someone who has helped him before, Rubbo says in his commentary, "I pursue another course on the cost question. I make an appointment with Mr. McIntosh, Chief Engineer of [Sydney's] Development of Public Works." Rubbo secures the appointment, but Francis is not invited. The meeting between Rubbo and Mr. McIntosh is testy. McIntosh says that technology is being developed that will purify the effluent sufficiently to eliminate its pollutant effect. For McIntosh, there's no need to worry about the future of Sydney's beaches.

And Rubbo takes his willingness to show himself in an unflattering light further. Early in the film, after Rubbo has asked Joan how she fills her time, she mentions a few things and then adds, "And as you know, I write occasional verse," and laughs.

"I didn't know that," Rubbo says.

"You *do*," she rejoins, and mentions a poem that she had sent him. "You *liked* it." Rubbo mumbles something, apparently to the effect that he doesn't remember the poem. "Oh, Michael, then you were being insincere. You said you thought it was good."

The film was screened on the closing night of the 1974 Sydney Film Festival in the historic State Theatre, which was filled to its capacity of about twenty-five hundred people. Most of the audience that night had come to see Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974). *The Man Who Can't Stop*, with which it was double-billed, preceded it. Rubbo wasn't there, but Francis and Joan were. The film's Australian coeditor, Graham Chase, described the film's reception in an undated, handwritten letter to Rubbo a few days after the screening. In it Chase confesses being apprehensive. For one thing, the audience was tired after two solid weeks of film screenings. For another, he was worried that the 16mm print wouldn't project a strong image in such a large theater. But,

the lights faded—the organ descended—the velvet curtains parted—and on it came. I was nervous as a kitten. ... Well—bugger me—the jaded audience came alive. They



5.3 “Oh, Michael, then you were being insincere.” Screen grab. *The Man Who Can't Stop* (1973). The National Film Board of Canada.

were swept away by Francis and Joan. They cheered & clapped—hissed at the board of works—and laughed at all the right places. And as the first credit came on at the end—the applause was thunderous, so much that your last voice bit was lost completely.

After the film, the festival director, David Stratton, introduced Francis and Joan. The audience greeted them with a lengthy standing ovation. Then, according to Chase,

The Cars that Ate Paris was premiered in all its Panavision and colour. So sad—it's not much of a movie and the audience was quite restless throughout. After that, as I descended the marble stairs, I see hundreds of people walloping into Francis (Peter Weir is nowhere to be found).

But Chase goes on to report that distribution of the film isn't going well. Film Australia had offered it to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Australia's counterpart to the CBC), which turned it down. Chase doesn't think the distribution people at Film Australia were trying very hard. Meanwhile, in Canada, the CBC rejected the film as well; to them, it was self-indulgent.

The Man Who Can't Stop probably has little importance now as a documentary film about the environment, but it is a beautiful, engaging story of an Australian couple and their era. It is a human and cultural portrait. As a documentary, it is also impressive for its nearly seamless integration of several Rubbo traits: unapologetic personal approach, narration-enhanced storytelling, affection for people, transparency in filmmaking, intervention on behalf of the protagonist, and its subordination of the director's ego to his subject.

It was during the editing of *The Man Who Can't Stop* that the promised reciprocal film began to take shape. Australian filmmaker Bruce Moir, an acquaintance of Rubbo's, happened to be in Canada on a two-month grant from the Australian Film School to study educational television in Ontario. While en route to Canada, Rubbo had wired him about the promised reciprocal production and suggested a subject. Charles Bliss, a Holocaust survivor living in Canada, had devoted his life to developing a symbolic language which he hoped would transcend nationalistic barriers. His efforts from the end of World War II met only indifference and rejection until about 1973, when his symbolic language was found to help children with cerebral palsy communicate. On arriving in Canada, Moir explored the potential film project. When he had finished his obligatory two months on the grant, he moved to Montreal, where Graham Chase, busy editing Rubbo's film, let him sleep on the couch in his apartment while Moir worked to get the film project approved by both the Film Board and Film Australia. He succeeded and, with Tom Daly coproducing both films, crafted an engaging portrait of Charles Bliss, *Mr. Symbol Man* (1973). By the time the coproduction was completed, Rubbo and Moir had become fast friends.