



## THE DOCUMENTARY ART OF FILMMAKER MICHAEL RUBBO

D. B. Jones

ISBN 978-1-55238-871-6

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:**

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:**

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



**Acknowledgement:** *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, re.press, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>*

## Where the Action Isn't

*Log House; The Walls Come Tumbling Down;  
I Hate to Lose; Tigers and Teddy Bears*

After his Cuban documentaries, Rubbo made two short films, both codirected. In terms of style, *Log House* (1976), directed with Andreas Poulsson, the film's cameraman, is diametrically opposed to the approach he used leading up to and culminating in *Waiting for Fidel*. A television half-hour, the film is completely devoid of narration and contains only bits of dialogue in un-subtitled French. It observes the construction of a log cabin in a nearly pristine mountain forest north of Montreal. Four Quebecois men build the cabin over several seasons, which they use to their advantage, cutting and trimming cedars in summer and fall, hauling them to the building site in winter when they can be dragged over the snow, and leaving them there until the spring thaw makes digging and building possible. The builders are led by Lionel Bélisle, whose name we learn only in the credits. Three young men, who apparently are brothers, assist him.

*Log House* is a sensual film, rife with tight shots of construction activity, location sounds, and pleasing wide and following shots of the men working. It is informative: for example, we see the meticulous, time-consuming process of cramming dried moss between logs for insulation. It is also a tacit comment on changing technology. The men

use a combination of primitive tools and modern machinery. Bélisle's knowledge is considerable. He seems to know how to do every step required for building the cabin. No specialists are brought in, and he teaches his young crew how to do a range of tasks.

The one quality of the film that is familiar from Rubbo's best work up to that point is its affection for its main character. But it does not require much artistry to make us like Lionel Bélisle. He takes pride in his work, manages his work crew casually and collaboratively, knows how to relax, and is almost always singing. He performs a brief jig while carrying a window frame. After cutting out a square in a solid log wall from the inside, which is filmed from the outside so we don't see him until the square is opened, he looks at the camera, says hello, and doffs his cap. He plays the fiddle at a celebratory party when the cabin is finished. He is an exuberant person, and Rubbo and Poulsson allow us to enjoy and appreciate him.

While *Log House* depicts a dwelling going up in a near-wilderness, *The Walls Come Tumbling Down* (1976) is about city homes—some are beautiful mansions, others comfortable and affordable family dwellings—being torn down to accommodate high-rise apartments and office towers. Rubbo had two codirectors, William Weintraub and Pierre Lasry, and he wrote and spoke the narration. The film decries the destruction of charming Montreal architecture, ranging from immense mansions that could be put to public use to working-class neighborhoods that are good places to live. The film takes the side of protestors who show up at the sites where houses are being demolished. One of them is a woman in her fifties who seems somewhat pixilated, who can't shut up, but is on the filmmakers' side of the issue. A few young activists have attempted to persuade city officials, politicians, and developers to stop the destruction of the older sites, but to no avail.

The film is both a lament and a call to action. Violin music early in the film sounds like a dirge. And the construction of ugly buildings "nobody seems to want" appears bound to go on and on. But eventually, community activists manage to get eighteen anti-development representatives elected to the city government. The film includes a cautionary interview with a Polish architect. He relates how in Poland, when the government's central planners were committed to equality, charming and livable neighborhoods were torn down and high-rise

apartment buildings erected in their place. The apartments differed only slightly, and according to needs, such as family size, rather than income. But the price of equality was architectural monotony. (The film shows a tract in Poland with several such high-rises; not only do they look monotonous, they are eerily like the dispiriting housing complex that is the setting for Polish director's Krzysztof Kieslowski's ten-film series *Decalogue*, completed years later, in 1989.) Near the film's end, we see an area of several blocks where over two hundred and fifty flats have been razed, and the sites readied for development. "Such irresponsibility," Rubbo intones, "really invites the Polish solution. So watch out, you greedy ones. And," Rubbo adds as we return to the vociferous lady at a protest, "we need *you*, dear lady, to keep giving them hell."

Rubbo's next hour-long documentary, *I Hate to Lose* (1977), is about one small, politically insignificant corner of the 1976 Quebec parliamentary elections: the race in the riding of Westmount, a prosperous, primarily Anglophone district in predominantly Francophone Montreal, in overwhelmingly French-speaking Quebec. The province's premier, Robert Bourassa, of the Quebec branch of the Liberal Party, has called the election two years before his mandate is set to expire. He wanted confirmation of his commitment to keep Quebec in its relationship with the rest of Canada, as a province like other provinces. His main challenger is René Lévesque's Parti Québécois. The contest is essentially between French Canadians in Quebec who were more or less happy with the province's relationship to the federal government (and thereby to the rest of Canada) and those that weren't.

Lévesque had left the Quebec Liberal Party and formed the PQ in 1968. He was, or wanted to be, a moderating influence on French-Canadian nationalism, whose most passionate representatives wanted complete separation from Canada. In his *An Option for Quebec*, essentially an extended political pamphlet, he laid out a case for Quebec as sovereign but not completely separate from the rest of Canada. In the forward, signed by himself and ten others, they say that they left the Liberal Party looking for a solution that "was capable of reconciling the reality of interdependence with the exigencies of political sovereignty essential to the development of modern nations." They wanted a "sovereign Quebec which would be associated with Canada in a new union."<sup>1</sup>

How this association between a free Quebec and Canada would work remained vague: a monetary union, a common market of some sort, and coordination of fiscal policies. The sovereignty part was by contrast decisive and urgent: we “must rid ourselves completely of a completely obsolete federal regime. And begin anew ... Quebec must become sovereign as soon as possible.”<sup>2</sup>

French Canada had always believed that it was short-changed in its economic dealings with the federal government, but cultural anxiety was perhaps the main emotion propelling sovereignty. In his biography of Lévesque, Daniel Poliquin writes that their status in Canada had made Quebecers insecure. They worried about the decline of French Canada. Immigration was a major issue. Immigrants settling in Quebec would assimilate into Canadian, not Quebec, society. They preferred learning English to French and sending their children to English-language schools. As Poliquin put it,

Many felt something had to be done about immigration. And it was not just a matter of countering assimilation [to English Canada]; it was also a case of a majority that had always thought of itself as a minority suddenly realizing its strength and wanting for the first time in its history to assert itself. The message was clear: this is our place, always has been, and from now on, we will manage our own affairs in accordance with our aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

The PQ had competed in two recent provincial elections. In 1970, the Liberals won a sweeping victory, taking 71 of 108 seats. English Canada was euphoric. The PQ took just 7 seats, but they won 24 percent of the popular vote. In 1973, the Liberals took 102 of 108 seats. The PQ’s share of the popular vote increased to 33 percent, but it suffered a net loss of one seat. Compounding their frustrations was a perception that the Liberal Party had become complacent and corrupt in Quebec. And a language bill introduced by Bourassa angered all sides. It restricted access to English-language schools, made French compulsory in some professions, and allowed any immigrant or French-speaking citizen to attend English-language schools if they passed a test. There was a

perception that the Liberals hadn't protected the French language in Ottawa or Quebec.<sup>4</sup>

But despite their steady gains in the share of the popular vote and the general dissatisfaction with Bourassa, the PQ was given little chance of winning the election. A vote for them was seen as a vote for eventual separation, something a majority of the French-Canadian population was thought to be wary of. Nevertheless, those in Quebec who were not nationalists were nervous about the election. There was also a specific proposal backed by the PQ that scared Anglophones and immigrants: Bill 101, which would make French the official language of government, the courts, and the workplace. All signage would be in French, and immigrants would be channeled into French schools. For most of Westmount's English-speaking voters, the main goal was to keep Bourassa and the Liberal Party in power, if only because the alternative was frightening.

The film focuses on Westmount's three Anglophone candidates: George Springate, candidate for the Liberal Party; Harold "Shorty" Whitehead, representing the Union Nationale, a once-powerful party that was trounced in the last election but is making a comeback; and Nick Auf der Maur, a former muckraking journalist and a member of Montreal's city council for the past two years, and who has launched a new political party, the Democratic Alliance. The PQ has fielded a candidate, but he hasn't a chance of being elected in this well-to-do English-Canadian stronghold. Rubbo's film ignores him.

The biggest thing at stake is the bill that would make French the official language of Quebec, although the outcome of the Westmount race is unlikely to affect the overall result. However, looming in the background is the possibility that, if the PQ wins, the new provincial government under René Lévesque will lead Quebec to separate from Canada and establish itself as an independent nation.

Little of this background is made explicit in the film except at the very end. The film is a congenial demonstration of Canadian electoral politics, which in Westmount at least, is admirably civil by today's international standards. We follow the three English-speaking candidates and see, for the most part, that they engage in essentially identical activities. They stand on the sidewalk and introduce themselves to passersby; they go from door to door in the hopes of finding someone

of voter age who is willing to listen to them; they enjoy appearing at electoral coffee parties, where they discuss their views with groups of ten to thirty people; and they strategize with their tiny core of trusted advisors about how to get their message out persuasively and inspire people to vote for them.

Given his sensitivity to character, it is not surprising that Rubbo manages to distinguish the three personalities by more than their party affiliation. Whitehead is soft-spoken, earnest, and not aggressive. He had been a tail gunner in World War II and is now a successful businessman. Springate once played professional football for the Montreal Allouettes and is a former cop. He is boisterous, loud, and irrepressible. Auf der Maur is reticent, soft-spoken (when he does speak), and circumspect. The three respond to the demands of electioneering according to their respective personalities. When rebuffed by people he approaches on the street, Fairhead reacts calmly but sheepishly; rejection embarrasses him. Springate bounds from house to house, never getting discouraged. An older Russian immigrant objects to Auf der Maur's position on the French language issue. "I don't like you," he tells Auf der Maur as he stalks away. Auf der Maur appears unfazed. Rubbo makes no bones about whom he favors in this election: "I was attracted to Nick," he says over the start of a coffee-party meeting for Auf der Maur, "because he's something of a leftist who's actually willing to get into government."

Robert Bourassa had kicked Springate out of the Liberal caucus for breaking ranks on the language issue. It was partly because the Liberal Party had no candidate for Westmount in this election that Auf der Maur entered the race in an attempt to pick up the disenfranchised Liberal vote. Although Auf der Maur is unhappy that Springate has entered the race, he believes Springate has been so discredited for being critical of Bourassa while remaining a Liberal that he poses less of a challenge than Fairhead. But Springate is gaining support: many voters view him as the only candidate who, if elected, could have any influence on provincial government policy.

The film's most entertaining scene occurs in a radio studio where the three candidates square off against each other for a debate. Or, more accurately, Fairhead and Auf der Maur take turns at bashing frontrunner Springate. Fairhead charges Springate with hypocrisy. Auf



7.1 George Springate. Production photo. *I Hate to Lose* (1977). The National Film Board of Canada.

der Maur accuses him of asking voters to ignore his record. Springate squirms uncomfortably and impatiently under the attacks. When his turn comes, he lashes back at Fairhead for not fighting the language issue when he could have. Now Fairhead squirms. Springate says there's little point in Auf der Maur's candidacy, but Auf der Maur calmly maintains that minority opposition has a constructive role. It can raise questions and suggest alternatives, he says.

Auf der Maur's candidacy has stalled. His advisors are frustrated by his phlegmatic campaigning. At a polite coffee party, a man asks him



7.2 Nick Auf der Maur. Screen grab. *I Hate to Lose* (1977). The National Film Board of Canada.

what he has accomplished in his two years as a city councilor. All Auf der Maur says in response is, “A few minor things, like we’ve reduced bus fares for senior citizens.” The one scene in which Auf der Maur appears forceful is at a well-attended rally for him late in the campaign, where he is greeted by enthusiastic applause. “None of the other candidates have had rallies,” Rubbo reports, “perhaps fearing that a poor turnout would reveal their weaknesses.” Auf der Maur begins his speech with a few remarks in French, then says, “We *choose* to live in Quebec, we *chose* to learn French, long before any law told us we had to learn French.” Auf der Maur states that he, his party, and like-minded English-speaking citizens don’t want to be isolated from the majority of citizens in the province, are happy to live among them, and want to work with them. But the rally proves to be the high point of his campaign. When a voter later complains he is still not clear what Auf der Maur stands for, he replies that his party welcomes different points of

view. At a coffee party whose attendees are visibly unenthusiastic, he is asked what he can deliver if elected. He responds that he can't promise to deliver anything except his effort. "But a campaign without promises," Rubbo sighs in the narration, "is like a party without booze."

The growing fear of a separate Quebec should the PQ win the election has helped Springate surge into a comfortable lead. He is cocky, confident, and in good humor, because, Rubbo says, "the papers are carrying reports that Bourassa is *furiosus* with him, and nothing could be better, right now, than a kick in the pants from the Liberal leader." Springate relishes his position as the likely representative from Westmount. He tells Rubbo that having been expelled from the party and then brought back in, he can now say with impunity the things that got him expelled.

Although the *Westmount Examiner*, which hadn't backed a candidate in a local election in forty years, endorses Auf der Maur, he admits that his own campaign manager has told him privately that he will lose. On election night, Rubbo cuts back and forth among the three campaign offices, television coverage of the election, and Westmount's election headquarters. When the anxiously awaited results from a key district, where Auf der Maur's support was thought to be strong, show him losing by a margin of three to one, his defeat is certain. Springate is declared the winner. Fairhead comes in second, Auf der Maur a distant third. At the election headquarters, Springate walks around, accepting congratulations and hugging supporters.

But "Suddenly," Rubbo announces, "our attention shifts from this riding, and we realize that elsewhere in the city something in ... incredible is happening." On television, throngs of Quebecers are cheering deliriously. In an upset, René Lévesque and the PQ have won the provincial election.

As the film cuts back and forth between the television coverage of Lévesque's victory and the activities in Westmount, the contrast in both enthusiasm and import between Springate's modest little victory celebration and the tumultuous one across town becomes astounding. Springate's supporters number about thirty or forty people. Occasionally, Westmounters gape at the television as tens of thousands of Quebecers cheer Lévesque, yet their attention still focuses on the results in Westmount. But the electoral drama we have followed in that riding

now seems laughable. “Rubbo,” Piers Handling observed in his 1977 essay, “shows us a riding that, like an island, is lost in an ocean that it doesn’t understand.”<sup>5</sup>

We see Lévesque on television giving his victory speech. The spectacle scares many of Quebec’s English-speaking residents. A commentator on an English-language television program tries to reassure his shaken on-air colleague, and perhaps himself: “It was quite a moderate speech, really, Stan, quite moderate—don’t you think?” The mood is even more subdued in the Fairhead and Auf der Maur headquarters. Fairhead is good-natured about his defeat, but it has clearly stung him. Auf der Maur’s advisors drown their defeat in raucous, alcohol-assisted laughter. His idealistic young volunteers are utterly dejected. The film’s near-final image is an extended long shot of volunteers taking down a large Nick Auf der Maur banner while in the foreground a stunned young woman, nearly catatonic, stares blankly at something—or nothing—off camera.

Rubbo is not nearly as prominent in this film as he had been in his full-length television documentaries after *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, but for the first time he overtly declares his political leanings and preference. He likes Auf der Maur because he’s a leftist who is willing to participate in government. But Rubbo also seems attracted by the quixotic, underdog nature of Auf der Maur’s quest, just as he was by his uncle Francis’s sewage diversion plan. Auf der Maur’s self-effacement is similarly reminiscent of Francis. At the same time, the film is gracious to those Rubbo doesn’t like as much. He is amused by their foibles. Springate, whose brashness recalls Blaker from *Persistent and Finagling*, is treated generously. While Fairhead is prone to trade on his wartime combat role, Springate does not brag about his professional football experience. In a brief conversation with a teenager, Springate notes that the young man seems athletic and asks him if he plays football, and yet he says nothing about his own impressive athletic background (or if he did, Rubbo does not include it in the film). At a strategy meeting, Springate discourages his advisors from using the tactic of associating a vote for either of the other candidates as a vote for separatism. In his victory speech, however, he impugns Auf der Maur’s motives, accusing him of entering the Westmount race in order to split the vote. Coming at the moment of his victory, and in Auf der Maur’s absence (he hasn’t



7.3 Devastated campaign worker. Screen grab. *I Hate to Lose* (1977). The National Film Board of Canada.

arrived at election headquarters yet), the public aspersion seems small of Springate.

*I Hate to Lose* affirms a tendency in Rubbo's work that in retrospect is noticeable in much of his earlier films: a sense that the real action is elsewhere. In *Waiting for Fidel*, after Stirling and Smallwood have departed, the awestruck final sequence of the huge Castro rally foreshadows the contrast in import between the Westmount election and the PQ's astonishing provincial victory. It's happening in the same city, across town, but Rubbo is not there; he—and we—watch it on television, as if it is happening in a foreign land. But there was also a hint of the same feeling in *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* when, over the final credits and the shots of thick forests, we hear small-arms gunfire, reminding us of the shooting war taking place around Saigon. In *Wet Earth and Warm People*, Rubbo senses the nearness of mysteries he nevertheless cannot access. Even his first film, *The True Source of*

*Knowledge These Days*, had a touch of this feeling of not being where the real action is. The only truly moving sequence in that film is the pair of stories related through voice-over by the two students who had gone to Mississippi—roughly two thousand miles from Stanford—to support voting rights. Rubbo may be present in his films, but his films themselves are not always present at the center of the action.

It would be easy to dismiss *I Hate to Lose* on the grounds of the irrelevancy of its subject. The Westmount vote was inconsequential, and Rubbo himself regarded the film as a failure. However, just as being off-center, so to speak, in *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* and *Waiting for Fidel* yielded emotions and insights that probably could not have emerged had the films been done as initially intended, *I Hate to Lose* accomplishes something unusual and astonishing: it shows a minority but long-dominant culture—represented by the well-to-do Westmount Anglophones—suddenly discovering what it feels like to be outsiders in one's own city. The scenes of joyous celebration coming over the television as the privileged Westmounters watch—when they can bear to—in awe and shock convey starkly this feeling of sudden outsider status. Empathic viewers of the film can put themselves in the Westmounters' position and experience, vicariously, that feeling of suddenly being an outsider. And conversely, even though the film views the election through the point of view of this once complacent, dominant minority, it conveys a sense of what the other side must have felt in the years leading up to the election. For Piers Handling, in his 1984 revision of his earlier essay on Rubbo, the election night sequence

contains some of the finest work that Rubbo has done. ... Even though the Parti Québécois victory is happening all around them, it is something they cannot bring themselves to see. It is an event that is happening "out there somewhere." Television sets in the background reveal the extent of the PQ victory, but ... their attention is concentrated on the immediate fate of their riding. [Springate's] unforgiving and vindictive victory speech is intercut with Lévesque's highly emotional appearance in the Paul Sauvé arena, again shown only on television sets, as if one step removed from reality. Yet the English "reality," symbolized

for generations by the name Westmount, is sad, confused, and lost, detached from the society to which it belongs.<sup>6</sup>

And that it comes at the end of the film, after nearly an hour of watching the low-key, coffee-klatch, minimally impassioned campaign among the Anglophones lends the scene a frisson that it might not otherwise have had.

Graham Fraser corroborates the impression of a shocked English Canada conveyed in the film:

In Montreal, a long night of celebration began. In English Canada, a sense of shock set in, as if there had been an earthquake, or a hostage-taking. An adventure was about to begin, and no-one, least of all René Lévesque, was sure where it would lead.<sup>7</sup>

But this was to be the high point for Lévesque and the PQ. Daniel Poliquin points out that there was an irony in Lévesque's victory:

More and more Québécois felt increasingly secure about the future of their language. And with the weakening of age-old nativist insecurity, the need for an independent Quebec became less acute. All his life, René Lévesque had wanted Quebecers to feel confident about themselves; now they felt so confident they no longer felt the urge to separate: a classic case of the law of unintended consequences at work.<sup>8</sup>

While pondering his next major project, Rubbo agreed to direct a short follow-up to *I Hate to Lose*. On *Tigers and Teddy Bears* (1978), Rubbo is credited as sole director, writer, and editor, but of all the films Rubbo had made since *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*, *Tigers and Teddy Bears* is the least Rubbo-like. The film is built on interviews with the three Anglophone candidates from *I Hate to Lose*, along with the Quebecois candidate, who says he ran for symbolic purposes what he knew was a hopeless campaign, and a wonkish political science professor from McGill University. An unidentified person narrates the film. Rubbo

is heard asking only a few of the questions, and they seem rehearsed, or read.

The film is a debriefing of sorts, shot a few months after the election. Although not particularly interesting as a film, it yields some insight into the characters when the candidates are asked why they fared as they did. Springate's response is forceful. Repeatedly jabbing his forefinger at the off-camera interviewer, he says he won because "I *stick* to my *word*. And that is essential in politics. If I tell someone I'm going to do something, I *do it*. Right or wrong, against my party or not, if I give my word, it's *gold*. And that's what hit home more than anything else." A bit later, now pushing his palms forward instead of jabbing his forefinger, he paraphrases: "I don't waffle. Here's where I stand. That's leadership. Straightforward." Fairhead is low-key. He admits to being a weak campaigner—dogged but easily discouraged. When asked how important he thinks charisma is in an election, Fairhead says, "Very important—I wish I had more of it." Auf der Maur expresses doubt about the political system and laments voters' tendency to base opinions on impressions rather than facts. Politics, he observes with distaste, "is like selling soap." The candidates' reflections reveal much about their own characters. Rubbo corroborates their observations with amusing scenes from their campaigns: blustering Springate, who seems to enjoy collaring voters; diffident Fairhead, side-stepped by the people he approaches as if he were some kind of street pervert; and mild-mannered Auf der Maur, yelled at by the Russian immigrant for whom he is too left wing. It is Auf der Maur who gives the film its title. In politics, he muses, "some people are tigers, and some people ... are teddy bears."