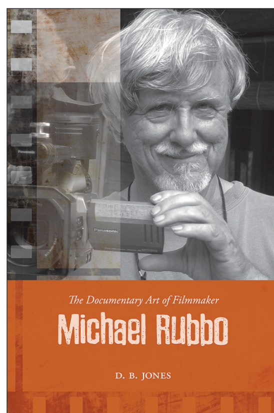
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



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

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.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

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

Filmmaker Front and Center

Wet Earth and Warm People

In 1967, before he even thought of making a film on Vietnam, Rubbo had submitted a proposal for a documentary about Indonesia. The densely populated but mysterious country was Australia's closest neighbor and a source of fascination to adventurous young Australians. Rubbo had twice visited Indonesia as a college student, and he had developed an affection for its people. The original proposal had gotten no traction, given Rubbo's inexperience and lack of Canadian angle. But now, the Canadian-content requirement, although still official policy, had been weakened—mainly by Rubbo himself with *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*. And the Film Board, always interested in broad global issues, was becoming concerned about overpopulation and the problems associated with it. Paul Erlich's alarming bestseller, *The Population Bomb*, was published in 1968. Indonesia was the world's most densely populated large country. Rubbo had little trouble getting the project approved. He filmed it in 1971 on a five-and-a-half-week shoot.

Although he had been in frequent correspondence with a few Australians working in Indonesia, he decided against using Western intermediaries. Instead, he took his personalization of the Film Board documentary one step further. In *Persistent and Finagling*, we glimpsed Rubbo now and then, mostly as an involved bystander egging the women on. In this film, he would be on camera in nearly every scene.

4.1 End of opening shot. Screen grab. *Wet Earth and Warm People* (1971). The National Film Board of Canada.

Rubbo wanted to gain Indonesian perspectives on overpopulation and its attendant problems, but willy-nilly the film became more an appreciative travelogue than a sociological inquiry. The film meanders, starting in Jakarta, moving to Java's interior for the middle third, and returning to Jakarta for its conclusion. There is no clear story line other than Rubbo's travels. But if it is a travelogue, it has moments of beauty and charm, and it is more interested in people than in sights.

The film opens on an early morning in a busy Jakarta street, the camera moving around amidst *betjaks* (the pedicabs that the Vietnamese called "cyclos"), pedestrians, idlers, and cars. The cacophonous confusion recalls the opening sequence of *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*. But there are important differences: instead of a series of very brief shots strung together in a temporal mosaic, the opening of this film is a single hand-held walking shot lasting about thirty seconds, continuing through the title. It ends on young boys staring at the camera. The

length and style of the shot foreshadows the film's meandering path. The shot's concluding image initiates a visual but also thematic leitmotif: people staring at the camera and crew in ingenuous curiosity. While the Saigonese in *Sad Song* seemed grudgingly blasé about the presence of a foreign camera crew, this was still a novelty to most Indonesians in 1971. They are as interested in the film crew as the crew is in them.

The next shot begins on the ultra-modern (for 1971) Hotel Indonesia and then pans to the betjaks lined up across the street after a busy night. The contrasts of old and new, and rich and poor, represent a twin tension in Indonesia. Rubbo enters the frame and speaks with a betjak driver, Husin, whom he knows. After some conversation, Rubbo tells us that Husin will have to go home via rutty back roads, because the city government is engaged in a campaign against the betjaks. The government says the two hundred thousand or so betjaks in the city clog up the roads, but Rubbo suspects the real objection is that they look primitive in a country that wants to appear modern.

Next, on a recently built freeway, Rubbo is in the back seat of a car with General Hoegeng, chief of the national police. Hoegeng stops to order a host of betjak drivers to move off the road. For the next few minutes, the film cuts back and forth between scenes with the general and scenes with Husin the betjak driver. Husin is a cheerful man with a hard life. He has to take daily medication that he cannot afford. While occasional shots depict the general as a typical bureaucrat, standing on ceremony or pushing papers, there is no attempt to portray him as a bad guy or to make fun of him. The contrast is between poverty and plenty, not good and evil. When Rubbo worries that his filming in Husin's compound might get Husin in trouble—for showing poverty—he goes to the general and expresses his concern. The general assures Rubbo that he will take care of it. Of course, he knows he is on camera.

If the film seems to lack a direction, Rubbo senses it. Back in the busy side streets, he laments, "We get bogged down in a maze of stories that start and then … just … fizzle out." He learns that the street vendors, like the betjak drivers, are under attack, but his attempts to find out why elicit "hostile looks. We just feel … personally lost, and out of place. … There are a hundred and ten million people in these islands of Indonesia … and we feel as if they're all staring at *us*." Over a panning

shot from inside the crew's minibus showing kids and young men's faces pressed against every window, gawking at them, Rubbo says, "Even in our little bus … we feel like freaks … in a cage of people."

The segue to the next scene exemplifies the film's walkabout structure, rescues the crew from stares for a while, and gives the film impetus. Hot and thirsty, the film crew buys drinks from a street vendor, who turns out to be an actor in a "people's theater." He invites the crew to the theater compound. Everyone living here is involved in the theater somehow; even the children mimic the actors and dancers, as if in training for their future profession. In a rehearsal for a puppet show, the puppeteer pokes fun at Rubbo, having his pompous puppet say "I am a film star from Canada," much to the troupe's delight. The sequence lasts ten minutes and includes an actual, intense squabble between two male adults living in the compound, much rehearsing, and an entertaining performance that "seems to last almost all night." It ends with a cutaway to an actor affectionately stroking his sleeping child's temple—one of those small personal moments Rubbo loves to capture.

When the theater manager suggests that Rubbo take his crew to the countryside—because Jakarta is not Indonesia; Indonesia is villages, the theater manager says—the film team heads to a village hours from the city. They get there by *opelet*, a van-like vehicle that frequently breaks down, and they will return by rafting down a river along with some bamboo sellers. In the country sojourn sequence, Rubbo is quieter than earlier (or later), letting us take in the sights and sounds ourselves for longer stretches of time. They are beautiful and often strange—four men clothed in black pants and white shirts marching ceremoniously alongside a rice field, playing gamelan music; all sorts of primitive tools being used in food preparation. Rubbo tries to engage a village official in a discussion of family planning, but not even Rubbo seems passionately interested in the problem at this point.

The comparatively laid-back, quietly observant mood of the rural sequence is interrupted by a film screening that Rubbo organizes for the village residents, most of whom had never seen a film. On the first night, families come from as far as twenty miles away to see it. But the generator conks out, and after three hours of trying to fix it, the crew gives up. They try again the next night, using a spark plug commandeered from the opelet. Rubbo's Indonesian production manager has

prepared a speech for Rubbo to deliver. He does, in stumbling Indonesian, which the crowd finds hilarious. When the projector works, the audience is treated to an NFB film from 1949, *How to Build an Igloo*.

But just before and just after this scene, Rubbo acknowledges his failure to penetrate deeply into the lives of these people. “Making friends we hardly see the hunger … behind the smiles,” he says over a shot of him meeting a villager. Later, over an extreme long shot of a strange dance that at first we can barely discern, he says, “There are many mysterious things here. I think we miss these mysterious things, because we come with our … technology, our films.” And during the raft trip on the return to Jakarta, over a shot of a horde of children running along the river bank after the film team, Rubbo acknowledges a human difficulty: “We’re tired, we’re dirty, fed up with the stink, with the heat, and with the following and the watching that starts again.”

Rubbo spends most of his return to Jakarta interacting with General Hoegeng and Ali Sedikin, Jakarta’s governor. With Sedikin, Rubbo engages in a friendly debate about the betjaks. To Rubbo, they seem very practical for a crowded city: they cause no pollution, no noise, no damage to the roads. Sedikin reminds Rubbo that the betjaks crowd the roads, draw people into the city from the villages, and attract transients. In voice-over, Rubbo repeats what he had said earlier, that he suspects the real beef against the betjaks is that they undermine the image of modernity that Indonesia wants to project. But Rubbo’s respect for Sedikin grows as he learns more about his point of view. Sedikin is concerned about what kind of life the new generations will have, and he feels responsibility towards them. He takes Rubbo on a visit to a slum and then to a new development. Sedikin shows him a paved road, and then points to the modest new homes being built because of it. Rubbo says that Sedikin believes this illustrates that “people will carry out the development themselves, if you get them out of the muck.”

General Hoegeng seems reasonably compassionate, understanding, and dedicated. We see him on his front porch with a few friends practicing a ukulele-accompanied song they will perform on television. He keeps pet orangutans in his backyard; a two-shot shows him and Rubbo each cradling a baby orangutan in their arms. The general usually arrives at work before anyone else. When asked why, he says, “Although I am chief of national police, I’m just a common cop.” A few

4.2 Last shot of the film, under credits. Screen grab. *Wet Earth and Warm People* (1971). The National Film Board of Canada.

months later, Rubbo reports, the general lost his job: "They say he was incorruptible. It may be that he was *too* incorruptible. He'd even put his own relatives away, when they deserved it."

The film's concluding shot echoes its opening. As if taking up from where the former left off (on the three children staring at the camera), it is a traveling shot from the back of a vehicle, probably the opelet, of scores of excited children running after the crew as they drive away from a village. The shot lasts a little over forty seconds, through the end credits. At one and the same time, it reinforces the notion that Indonesia has a population problem, that there's probably nothing anyone can do about it, and that the country must be doing something right if they can produce such likeable and apparently happy people. In its way, it is a rebuke to the arrogance of Westerners urging their solutions to Third-World problems.

The CBC did broadcast *Wet Earth and Warm People*, but the film was received tepidly. Although it had a narrative thread—the long sojourn in the village, framed by the two sequences in Jakarta—it was a thin one, and it lacked a deep structure, unlike *Sad Song of Yellow Skin*. And it had none of the character development that made *Persistent and Finagling* compelling. Not much seemed at stake in the film. There was no war—just too many people and too little wealth, and even this issue was merely touched upon in interactions between Rubbo and Indonesian officials or in his narration.

What annoyed people the most was Rubbo's presence on camera. He is involved in at least eighteen separate scenes. To some viewers this seemed self-indulgent. At first, I was one such viewer. After the film was shown at the 1972 Melbourne Film Festival, I reviewed it together with *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* for an Australian film magazine, *Lumiere*. Rubbo's presence, his outfit (a safari suit of some sort), and his on-camera hamming (as I saw it then) annoyed me. But nevertheless I thought the film was very good. I resolved the contradiction, at least to my own satisfaction, by understanding Rubbo's prominent presence in the film as a way of showing the truth of the situation he was in.[1] In such an environment, in those days, a Westerner with a film crew would inevitably become the center of interest wherever he filmed. The truth of the situation was the intrusiveness of the film project; it got in the way of everything else. And yet, knowing something of Indonesia myself, I thought the film's representation of the corner of Indonesian life it depicted was more authentic than anything else on the country I had seen.

When it was broadcast on the CBC in 1972, a reviewer for the *Montreal Gazette* (9 August 1972) called the film "shallow … having rather more the appearance of a missionary's travelogue." The rival *Montreal Star* (10 August 1972) found it "pointless": "What were we supposed to make of *Wet Earth and Warm People*? What exactly is going on there, beyond poverty and misery and the rainy season?" The same day, the *Ottawa Citizen*'s reviewer said the film was invasive and exploitative.

The film certainly lacks the emotional urgency of *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* or the character development in *Persistent and Finagling*. But it is more than a travelogue, and more than its acknowledgment of

the observer's effect on the observed. It reveals the difficulty that a Westerner experiences, particularly when accompanied by a film crew and its equipment, in establishing close contact with people unfamiliar with foreigners or filmmaking. The difficulty is both epistemological and emotional. How does one find the truth here, and how does one establish meaningful human contact? Rather than hide this problem, Rubbo acknowledges and foregrounds it. Showing a film on igloos to Indonesian villagers is a humorous and self-deprecating way of suggesting the cultural biases that make it hard for a Westerner, however sympathetic, to connect. His complaints about being hot, dirty, and stared at is another acknowledgment of his personal limitations. He worries that the film team may be "missing the many mysterious things" that are around them. One mystery, however, is right before our eyes: why are these people, especially the kids, apparently so unreservedly happy, despite their poverty and their indifference to Western solutions such as family planning? Once you stop looking to the film for information, data, policies, and that sort of thing, and simply experience it, affection for the people and a certain awe for their vitality wash over you, and you might suspect that these people know something about life that we don't.