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The Documentary Art of Filmmaker Michael Rubbo, by D. B. Jones. University of Calgary Press, 2017, 262 pp.

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The immediate reception of Michael Rubbo's early documentaries was eerily similar. He was attacked both for their form and content. The producers at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), where all the Canadian National Film Board's (NFB) films were supposed to be screened, at first rejected the personal narration in *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970), which they deemed unprofessional and inordinately pacifist. Programmers at CBC refused to screen *Waiting for Fidel* (1974) as they judged the presence of the filmmaker as self-indulgent and excessively sympathetic to Fidel Castro. The film could subsequently only be released in festivals and art-house circuits. When Rubbo showed *Solzhenitsyn's Children… Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1979) at the famed Grierson Seminar, the consensus was that the film was "meandering and self-indulgent with little of value" (122). These were the early days of the first-person documentary: Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas had just broken the myth of the authority of the nonpersonal voiceover. In Japan, Hara Kazuo, along with some colleagues, had been experimenting with the first person mode of documentary or what has come to be called the "self-documentary" (*serufu docyumentarii*) or the I-film, but those works remained lesser known, as much as they do today (Lebow 260). It was only later that others in the US North East, like Ed Pincus, Alfred Guzzetti and Ross McElwee, would go on to achieve widespread acceptance and fame in experimental film circles. As film scholar D. B. Jones argues in a new and detailed study of Michael Rubbo's films, it is the Australian-born filmmaker's fearless and unflinching experimentation with the personal mode of narration in the 1970s that has enabled contemporary filmmakers like Michael Moore, Nick Broomfield and Alan Berliner to hone their skills in the format and claim it as their own.

Jones' book comes amidst a wave of writings in recent years that explore what is commonly known as the essay film, diary film, autobiographical film, or the first-person film. As this literature points out, the idea of the essay film has always existed in the history of cinema but has recently come centre stage with the death of the myth of objectivity in broader academia. Timothy Corrigan traces the origins of the essay film to literature and assigns it a "tripartite structure of subjectivity, public experience, and thinking" (63). Others like Nora M. Alter and Laura Rascaroli have tried to classify the coinage in filmic terms. Rascaroli calls the essay film "a mode", positioning it at the "crossroads of documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses" (194). Alter has described it as a "genre of nonfiction filmmaking that is neither purely fiction, nor documentary, nor art film, but incorporates aspects of all of these modes" (4). While Jones alludes to Rubbo's films as being essays stating, "*Sad Song of Yellow Skin* […] was an essay", he never engages with any of the scholarship about essay film, which is a weakness of the book (24).

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Contemporary film history would undoubtedly classify Rubbo's films as essay films, and as a reviewer it would be remiss of me if I did not point out this omission.

Jones' critical assessment of Rubbo's films is spread across thirteen chapters, sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion. Each chapter charts Rubbo's professional trajectory in chronological order, with a focus on one, two or, sometimes, three films. The first chapter details his time at Stanford University as a student of filmmaking and his subsequent apprenticeship with Tom Daly, the legendary producer at the NFB in Canada. Rubbo's early film career is reminiscent of another itinerant documentarian with progressive leanings who travelled to different parts of the planet to document important world events on film—Joris Ivens. Films that made Rubbo famous and are still considered noteworthy in the documentary film canon—*Sad Song of Yellow Skin* and *Waiting for Fidel*—are analysed in detail. The author has known Rubbo personally since this period and his earliest article about the filmmaker dates back to 1973, as per the bibliography. Each chapter generally follows the same format, outlining the production history of films, their immediate hostile reception, and their eventual positive appraisal. Rubbo was not interviewed for this project, but the revisionist take is delivered through other writers and Rubbo's quotes in extant interviews. Jones makes a passionate case for re-evaluation of other lesser known films like *Persistent and Finagling* (1971), *Daisy: Story of a Facelift* (1982), *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* (1984) and *All about Olive* (2005). The last three chapters deal with Rubbo's recent work: his children's films, documentaries he made after returning to Australia from Canada, his numerous YouTube videos, and his bicycle art.

In order to situate Rubbo's work and Jones' assessment of it in the context of recent scholarship on essayistic and first-person cinema, I will evaluate Rubbo's key contributions to documentary film theory in three broad themes. Jones argues that Rubbo's most salient influence on documentary filmmaking is his use of the "conceit of the elusive interview" as a narrative structure (207). This is most evident in *Waiting for Fidel*, where Rubbo, along with a Canadian media magnate and a Canadian politician visit Cuba, in the hope of an interview with the Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, which they hope they could sell to broadcast networks in the US. This was the 1970s and a film with current footage of Castro would be highly sought after. Ultimately the interview never materialises, but all the proceedings in the documentary are directed at the prospect and anticipation of the rendezvous. The expectation acts as a catalyst for discussions about politics in Cuba and Canada, economic ideologies of the media magnate and politician and even a clamorous debate about what is the right ratio to shoot with while making a documentary film on 16mm film. Rubbo's crew was in Cuba not in pursuit of a reluctant Castro, but rather at his invitation. The failure to interview Castro was an unexpected setback to which Rubbo had to adjust while on location. This also brings into focus another aspect of Rubbo's work, Jones says, that the real action is always elsewhere. This is indeed a philosophical position; if broadcast journalism seeks to get to the centre of action, to the money-shot in a fetishistic pursuit of headlines, the documentary filmmaker can get to the essence of history, not by any direct confrontation, but from a perch in the periphery in an act of circumambulation. Documentary is what happens when you are in pursuit, but not literal attainment, of the pursued subject. While Jones' claim that this trope had a direct on Michael Moore and Nick Broomfield's films is debatable, the assertion that Rubbo was one of the first documentary filmmakers to use the "conceit of the elusive interview" as a narrative device remains unimpeachable (207).

We in documentary studies value the ethnographic filmmaker, who spends months and years living with her subjects, learning their language, earning their confidence, and making a film after prolonged close observation (Heider). But Rubbo never believed in any such things. He was a *flâneur*, a foreign correspondent curious to learn, an amateur who was always willing to record human behaviour, but made it pass through the lens of his personal beliefs and then shared a transformed reality with the viewing public. As Jones says, Rubbo always saw himself as an "on-camera protagonist who drives the action, adapts to unforeseen circumstances, discloses aspects of the filmmaking process, and sometimes stumbles" (205). But as we well know, such an approach inevitably raises questions about documentary ethics. The author finds Rubbo's documentary film practice extremely ethical. He writes that, "[i]f reality doesn't present enough surprise, Rubbo, with his audience's knowledge, will contrive situations in order to generate it" (215). He gives three examples, which he calls "contrivances"—persuading the Canadian magnate to allow his argument with Rubbo to be filmed in *Waiting for Fidel*, leaving the camera with the Atwood family in *Margaret Atwood: Once in August* and, in *All about Olive,* allowing the centenarian Olive Ridley to direct the re-enactment of a childhood incident that affected her deeply. Rubbo's quote, cited by the author, reveals his ethics of filmmaking: for Rubbo, documentary filmmaking "is all about encounters, sensing their meaning and their value to the project at hand, while at the same time being a feeling human being who likes people and wants to spend time with them for other reasons" (217). This mix between artifice and truth, spontaneity and planning, delivered through the explicit first-person filter, as in self-confessed and without any veiling, should make Rubbo an essential part of any essay film canon, seems to be the argument that Jones only hints at. I would add that it is no coincidence that his films first arrived at a time when French cinéma vérité had triumphed over American direct cinema as a method and Chris Marker was still perfecting his essay film aesthetic.

A phraseology from the book that may be worthwhile to add to the vocabulary of documentary studies is "*plein air* documentary". Borrowing a term from art history usually traced to nineteenth-century French painting, Rubbo has described his painting style as "*plein air*", and Jones tries to extend this concept to his entire documentary work. "*En plein air*" was the act of painting outdoors which was counter to the academic mandate of painting inside a studio. Jones argues that there is a certain "painterliness" in Rubbo's films, not in terms of each frame being a painting, but in terms of its editing. "The painterliness in Rubbo's work lies not in individual shots but in the whole film as it unfolds over time, including the sounds—dialogue, narration, music, location sounds" (197). Jones says that to grasp the aesthetic of a Rubbo documentary, one has to consider the film as a whole, as in some ways like a painting done outdoors, which connotes its improvised, dashed-off quality, where the effect lies in the overall impression and not in the details. He offers the example of *Solzhenitsyn's Children... are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris*. Like most of Rubbo's documentaries, it was shot on the run, extemporaneously and without a script. Jones says that all sequences play out as spontaneous brush strokes, impressionistic, by themselves they are just snippets of meaning, but they come together to produce an overall representation of the vitality of the intellectual climate of Paris in the 1970s. He argues that, like in his actual paintings on the canvas, Rubbo's documentaries show a "respect for surfaces and an ability to reveal emotional depth through capturing and arranging them" (203). Jones speculates that Rubbo may have learnt his *plein air* editing from Tom Daly, his mentor at NFB. I would complete this argument and say that if *en plein air* was a revolt against academic studio painting, Rubbo's distinctive first-person narrative style was a revolt against the observational mode in vogue at NFB.

In sum, D. B. Jones urges us to recognise and appreciate the extensive oeuvre of Michael Rubbo's work in documentary film, which in recent years has been relegated to relative obscurity. The obvious way to do this is by putting Rubbo in conversation with literature about the essay film which has been on the rise in recent years. In order to begin this process, we could start by making a heuristic distinction. While all first-person address seeks to blur the boundary between the subjective and the objective, between I and the You, between fact and fiction, the ultimate referent of Rubbo's content was never explicitly his personal life. This is the case in many essay films, but Jones stresses this aspect on multiple occasions. It was societal issues and world events that he found urgent at a particular time. Starting his filmmaking career in the late 1960s and early 70s, he would certainly have been influenced by cinéma vérité in France and direct cinema in North America. It would only be fitting if I ended this review by offering my personal opinion about Michael Rubbo's extraordinary body of work—it is the missing link between French cinéma vérité and first-person, autobiographical, deeply personal essay film that arose in North America from the relics of the staid observational aesthetic.

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