

Human Remains

by Rhys Graham

Rhys Graham is a filmmaker and writer based in Melbourne.



Human Remains (1998 Denmark 30mins)

Source: CAC **Prod Co:** Danish Film Institute **Dir, Scr:** Jay Rosenblatt **Phot:** Rosenblatt, John Turk **Ed:** Amy Hunter.

"I see a camera as a sort of weapon for good and bad purposes. As filmmakers, we can uncover, expose and effect social change; but the medium can be used as an exploitative device that adds to our problems. Filmmakers don't take enough responsibility for the images they put on the screen." (1)

The opening scene in Jay Rosenblatt's *Human Remains* shows archival footage of a man, face concealed, engaging with a young girl in a way that appears tender and intimate. The sequence, like much of the film, is optically printed, slowed to a frame rate that emphasises and delineates the delicate motion of gesture and facial expression. The unsettling significance of this process only becomes apparent when the man turns, moment by moment, and we see revealed the most notorious and reviled face of the twentieth century: Adolf Hitler.

Human Remains is an acclaimed short film by psychologist turned filmmaker, Jay Rosenblatt. In much of his work, Rosenblatt lyrically weaves together documentary, narrative and avant-garde techniques to deal with elements of human psychology. Usually working alone or in collaboration with Jennifer Frame, Rosenblatt adopts a minimal, independent approach to his film practice, with an insightful intelligence that distinguishes each undertaking. His body of work is characterised by the experimental tradition of working with the *familiar* - particularly found footage and cinematic or archival remnants - to reveal or create layers of meaning. In this sense, his work can be compared to artists such as Matthias Müller, Martin Arnold and Jackie Farkas. In *The Smell of Burning Ants* (1994), for example, Rosenblatt uses recontextualised footage and staged scenes to

examine the ways that modes of masculinity are initiated in the cruel interactions of young boys. In the recent *King of the Jews* (2000) he uses cinematic and televisual portrayals of Jesus Christ to investigate anti-Semitism in Christian cultures, and to present a personal insight into fear, guilt and forgiveness.

In *Human Remains*, Rosenblatt departs from Hannah Arendt's notion of 'the banality of evil' and explores, with occasional wit and the mournfulness of recalled suffering, that it is this banality that makes it impossible for us to distance evil from everyday life. Hitler, along with four of the world's most infamous dictators, Mao Tse Tung, Josef Stalin, Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco, become the objects of an incisive study that suggests that even the most monstrous of men are made common by banal human activities. Rosenblatt's shared knowledge of their eating habits, sleeping patterns, likes, dislikes, and unrealised ambitions, recall these historical figures from the other-ness of 'evil' and bring them close, too close, under our skin, to a place where the sheer fact of their humanity confronts and challenges our understanding of these horrific histories.

Over a period of eight months of research, Rosenblatt mined biographical sources of the men for clues and information on their private lives. What results is a revelation of the most intimate details. Through fictional scripted narrations, we learn the minutiae of the private everyday life of each man in turn. Importantly, the filmmaker avoids any reference to the events that made these men figures of terror, cleverly imbuing the mundanity of their recitation with an intensity of meaning. When Hitler confesses, "some thought I was quite a lady-killer", or "I had difficulty making even the tiniest decisions" our awareness of the past make these trivial comments both wry and chilling. A similar slippage of meaning occurs when Mao, talking of his favourite dish of bitter melon reflects, "everyone should taste some bitterness in their life", or Stalin reveals, "I had a good sense of humour", or Franco restates his own dying words, "How hard it is to die." This occasionally brutal irony appears most transparently when Rosenblatt juxtaposes Mussolini pronouncing, "when willing, the Italian people can do anything", with a slow pulsing image of the corpses of Mussolini's victims. This is one of the few, brief glimmers of the things we already know of these men.

The performed voice-overs occur on two simultaneous levels: firstly, in an acted narration in the original language of each man; secondly, in a translated monologue which speaks over, but does not obscure the first voice. It creates the sound of a chorus, as well as the carefully chosen words of confession. This device implies a constructed 'authenticity' by suggesting that the words spoken are that of the actual dictator, gently confiding in us, translated by the filmmaker after the fact. At the same time, this layering of meaning is what is most important to Rosenblatt. Each brief revelation is meaningful because of the additional complex layers that the audience brings to the film. In this way, Rosenblatt is exemplary. The viewer of his work is always active. Stitching together meaning for themselves, making the investigation their own.

There is also a somewhat elusive technique at work in *Human Remains* that arises from Rosenblatt's use of the technique of optical printing. For many, the archival clips of these figures are familiar visual remnants from an unimaginably horrific past. Over time, these fragments have metonymically come to represent a knowledge of each dictator: we 'know' Stalin through his visage, Hitler through his

carriage and stance, and Mao through his wardrobe. At one historical remove, Rosenblatt deals directly with these artifacts, reconfiguring them from a distanced and therefore 'safe' understanding into an intimate and challenging knowledge of these men and their actions. This rupture in known history, created by the act of reprinting the images, changing the spatial and temporal configurations of each shot, creates a reflective space between the archival remnant and the filmmaker's intention. It is in this space that Rosenblatt labours, finding subtle ways to investigate psychic undercurrents that may have gone undetected. In this space he seeks to create a new way of seeing, while also reinforcing the audience's awareness of the act of cinematic engagement as a potent space for reflection and criticism.

Though disturbing in its content, *Human Remains* is frequently graceful and poetic. Rosenblatt's meditation on the minute gestures and glances of the dictators makes for compelling viewing. In slow-motion sequences, Rosenblatt shows Stalin examining the sweat he has wiped from his brow or Mussolini turning to gaze directly into the camera. The latter image is the strongest of all. At different points in the film, each of the men turns to the camera and locks gazes with the audience, if only for a moment. This, combined with the intimate narratives invokes a highly personal engagement between the viewer and the film. We are invited to examine their bodies and faces, their movements, smiles and habitual actions in a way that is devotional if not fetishistic. Rosenblatt, through all this, assumes the viewers knowledge of recent history. For, of course, he is not examining these men with the eye of the seduced camera. Rather, he uses intimacy as a way to rupture the emotional gap that a world-weary audience might project onto this subject matter. His approach reminds us that we can't linger this close to evil without daring to look it in the eye and ask ourselves, deeply, what it is that we see.

In this way, *Human Remains* creates a new strategy for the discussion of 20th century dictators. Arendt introduced the notion that investigating those responsible for horrendous crimes against humanity led to "a lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us - the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil" (2). At the beginning of a new century we have taken for granted that this evil occurs. What Rosenblatt reminds us, in a most uncomfortable manner, is that these men are not monsters, and therefore are not able to be distanced from everyday human interaction. They are men, full of foibles, failings and absurd obsessions who are also capable of committing the most monstrous of crimes and implementing the most inhumane of regimes. *Human Remains* challenges us to ask how could a man who seemed inordinately preoccupied with his bowels and dietary habits also initiate the systematic murders of millions. Or how could another man, unable to muster the energy to get out of his bed, or to clean himself, eradicate the culture and society of the world's largest populace.

Rosenblatt's extraordinary insights are often as psychologically revealing or comic as they are mundane. Hitler and Mao had only one testicle. Franco was an aspiring filmmaker. Mao never bathed ("My genitals were washed inside the bodies of my women") and brushed his teeth with green tea ("a tiger never brushes his teeth"). Yet it is the broader context, examining men we know to have violently changed the face of the world, that makes the simple details so chilling. In an interview, referring to the parallels between a previous career as a mental health counsellor and his work as a filmmaker, Rosenblatt suggested that his approaches are always

"to confront people on a subliminal level with things which they would prefer avoid". (3) In this journey into the dark hearts of humankind, two recurring images are used by Rosenblatt to link each sequence: a dark, dimly perceived image of a gravedigger overturning soil in a graveyard, and the repetitive clatter of a train riding along the rails. It is these images that prepare us to journey forth and dig deep into an archive of historical visual artefacts, some familiar, some not so, which will overturn corpses and remains that do not rest in peace in our collective memory.

This film screened at the [Melbourne Cinémathèque](#) on December 6, 7:00 p.m.

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Endnotes:

1. Rosenblatt in interview with Sura Wood, *The Human Condition*, Release Print, Film arts Foundation, September 1998 
2. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin, New York 1994, p. 252 
3. Rosenblatt in interview with Sura Wood, *The Human Condition*, Release Print, Film arts Foundation, September 1998 

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