



## JAY ROSENBLATT

TEXT JAMIE HOOK  
 PORTRAIT ANTHONY PIDGEON

A MANIPULATOR OF FILM, JAY ROSENBLATT WEAVES CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED LAYERS OF FOUND FOOTAGE AND FORGOTTEN FILMS INTO EXPERIMENTAL CINEMATIC REMIXES.



LEFT, FILM-MAKER JAY ROSENBLATT, AND ABOVE, GENDER AND MALE SOCIALISATION IN *THE SMELL OF BURNING ANTS*. 21 MINUTES, 16MM, 1994.

**FILM IS AS** much a graveyard as a living art. The corpses of images, both grand and humble, decompose just below the surface of Hollywood's eternal, ephemeral present, an invisible reminder of the forgotten human potential of moving pictures. Jay Rosenblatt's work grows from the fertile loam of these lost pictures. A found-footage film-maker, his short but epic meditations on faith, humanity, and social constraint are assembled from the vast unconscious of forgotten films. Indeed, few film-makers working today are as emancipated from the drudgery of actual production as Mr Rosenblatt: his shots come instead from garbage cans, old warehouses, estate sales, and innumerable film archives, both national and international. Yet, this is not to imply that his visual artistry is less pronounced. For someone who does not shoot their own footage, Rosenblatt's films contain a shocking number of indelible images. Take his 1994 film, *The Smell of Burning Ants*. In this 21-minute meditation on the birth of masculine aggression, he contrasts the images of a scorpion committing suicide with footage of boys bullying

someone in a school playground. His film builds from this basic juxtaposition to question the very essence of male and, by extension, human brutality. Throughout, Rosenblatt evokes emotion through the viewer's subconscious instead of manipulating a reaction. One is engaged, but at a critical distance, by the abstraction of imagery, both in subject matter – largely 1950s vintage home movies of young boys – and of style: he extensively manipulates his images, re-photographing them to distort time, contrast, and movement.

**HUMAN REMAINS**, Rosenblatt's 1998 follow-up to *Burning Ants*, maximises this distancing effect in exhuming the eccentricities of five of the 20th century's most reviled dictators: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco, and Mao Zedong. Perhaps the closest thing to a comedy Rosenblatt will ever make, *Human Remains* abounds with ironic juxtapositions. "I always had terrible trouble with gas," Hitler intones, as we see him shifting uncomfortably. Later, Mao, seen in grainy black and white, complete with an inner tube bobbing on the surface of the Yangtze, recalls:





LEFT AND ABOVE, *HUMAN REMAINS*, ROSENBLATT'S REFLECTION ON BANALITY AND EVIL. 30 MINUTES, 16MM, 1998.

RIGHT AND ABOVE, FOUND FOOTAGE AND PERSONAL HOME MOVIES FROM *KING OF THE JEWS*. 18 MINUTES, 16MM, 2000.

"I always enjoyed swimming in polluted water". And yet, Rosenblatt's immaculate construction – *Human Remains* features the most elegant and complex sound design of any of his films – seems calculated to maximise the viewer's detachment. Indeed, the most disturbing conclusion to be gleaned from *Human Remains* is not how eccentric or evil these five men were, but how deeply human.

**THROUGHOUT HIS WORK**, Rosenblatt demonstrates a deep ethical conviction. His subject may be alienation, and his methods may be distancing, but these elements contribute to his transcendent humanist vision. *King of the Jews*, his latest work and first true masterpiece, examines the history of Christian anti-Semitism by contrasting Hollywood depictions of Christ with both Rosenblatt's own home movies and archive footage of war and the Holocaust. The film unfolds in three acts, moving from personal to universal, sound to silence, judgement to transcendence. Beginning Act One with home movies illustrating Rosenblatt's own childhood recollection of hostile

family attitudes towards "Jersey City" (as his parents referred to Christ), *King of the Jews* moves on to universalise the question of Christ's Jewishness in a devastating second act. As Rosenblatt's personal narration gives way to subtitles chronicling the historical manipulation of Christ's Jewishness, specific images give way to a dizzying assortment of richly poetic visual allusions: shots of wooden cogs turning; of a car in a dark rain; of a man hanging. As the subtitled narration comes to the conclusion that Christ would have died at Auschwitz, and smokestacks fill the frame, one almost feels fearful of how the film might resolve itself. And yet, in a third act consisting of little more than Hollywood images of Christ, rearranged and set to the strains of Arvo Part's *Cantata in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, Rosenblatt manages to craft a sustained ode to the redemptive possibilities of transcendence that, for sheer emotional power, ranks with the final moments of Carl Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. That he uses "found footage" to create this coda attests to his profound style as a film-maker ■

**LINKS**

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Jay Rosenblatt or his films, go to [www.jayrosenblattfilms.com](http://www.jayrosenblattfilms.com)

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF JAY ROSENBLATT

131