



## *Human Flow*

Director Ai Weiwei 艾未未,  
Germany, 2017.  
Documentary, 140 min.



**Venice Film Festival Awards** (Fair Play Cinema; CICT-UNESCO; Fondazione Mimmo Rotella; Human Rights; UNICEF; Fragiacomio). **Bambi Awards:** (Courage)

In this meditation on the global refugee crisis, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei extends his humanitarian crusade to embrace the more than 65 million people forced to leave their homes to escape famine, climate change, and war. Filmed over a period of one year in 23 countries and more than 50 refugee camps with 25 film crews and a range of technologies, this documentary includes Ai's friendly interactions with refugees in various settings, their individual stories, and interviews with various experts in humanitarian aid.

The film opens with an aerial view of a tiny boat in a vast blue sea. As the camera slowly brings us closer, we see a boat filled with orange dots that becomes a rubber boat filled with people wearing life-jackets. Then men, women, and children are pulled ashore by rescuers, given blankets and hot tea—the jostled camera capturing the stumbling, jumbled perceptions of their arrival from a refugee camp in Iraq, most fleeing Syria. From Greece they hope to travel to Europe; 56,000 have arrived in this one-week; in 2015-16, more than 1,000,000. Ten individuals each stand for a silent solitary 10-second portrait, backlit against a white tent wall in the Iraqi camp.

And so begins Ai Weiwei's dogged journey: Lesvos, Lesbos, Bangladesh, Northern Greece, Serbia-Hungary Border, Syria-Jordan Border, Southern Italy, Athens, Eastern Turkey, Lebanon, Gaza, Kenya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Berlin, Paris, Calais, Iraq, and finally a nod to the Mexico-US Border. Everywhere we see people and conditions that are at once universal and uniquely personal. Strewn along the way are crumbs of insight: choice lines from literature, scripture, documents; interviews with 60 individuals, some experts; a few data points. Even the process of making the film is a part of the film: shots of cameras, film crews, set-ups, unanticipated and awkward moments that would normally be lost to a final editing—all are folded into the flow. Everything speaks for itself.

Amid the starkness occasional magical images emerge: silver and gold metallic blankets sparkle with a thousand points of light in the night; seen from above a white tiger endlessly chases its tail around and around and around, a violent wind whips unchallenged through an abandoned building and a white sheet flaps noisily, horses trot on a deserted beach. And Ai's figure: his husky body becoming so familiar you easily spot it in a crowd, even from the back, even as a distant silhouette.

In *Human Flow*, spectacular aerial and long-distance land views in which human beings resemble insect populations or migrating animals are interleaved with face-to-face intimacy as Ai interacts with individuals and the microcosms of individual and family existence. Those familiar with the artist's installation works—particularly since the 2008 Sichuan earthquake—will recognize this esthetic language: a dynamic dance in which aggregated masses of apparently identical units are juxtaposed with a granular focus on the distinctive identities of their individual components. Think of his museum installations: 100 million *Sunflower Seeds*<sup>1</sup> (2010, Tate Modern); *Bowls of Pearls* (2006, Mori Museum); *Hexie/river crabs*, and *Snake Ceiling* made of school backpacks, one for each child who died in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (2010, Hirshhorn). Masterful, all.

<sup>1</sup> See the entire production process for *Sunflower Seeds* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PueYywpk JW8> (15 min.).

### The Terrible Questions

A ‘normal’ film tells us a story, while the storytellers themselves—director, camera crew, etc.—like the Wizard in Oz, remain invisible. *Human Flow* is not a normal film. At the same time as we are brought to empathize with the refugees, Ai Weiwei slyly pulls aside the curtain to link us as well to the conjurers of the narrative: himself, his crews, and the cameras. By breaching the ‘fourth wall’, by making us privy to the process of objectifying the refugees, our audience position has been subtly shifted to that of willing bystanders—which brings us to the threshold of the first terrible question. Now as witnesses: what if any, responsibilities—moral, economic, political, humanitarian—do we owe to these suffering fellow human beings?

As members of the ‘developed’ West (or North in the new geographic parsing) how are we to deal with the human consequences of crises largely brought on by our own unsustainable consumption of the Earth’s resources? By our economic systems that have robbed poor people of their self-sufficiency, and in so doing of their human dignity? What do Americans, in particular, owe to peoples whose lives, livelihood, and property have been destroyed by decades of our far-away military incursions?<sup>2</sup> Or our political failures *not* to act? This is only the beginning of the terrible questions that will not go away.

Some facts are clear. Closed borders and ruthless law enforcement have created situations in which the refugee lifestyle is no longer a transitional phase but a permanent state of being—the ‘average’ refugee is homeless for 26 years. Refugee camps, intended as temporary, have become permanent, some now in existence for as long as 60 years. Entire generations have been born without vaccinations; children have grown up without schools. Absent a sense that their lives are valued, individuals with nothing to lose are easily ‘radicalized,’ willing to forfeit a life not worth living. *What will we do?*

### The Director: Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b.1957, Beijing)

Ai’s father, a poet, was sent with his family to a labor camp in Heilongjiang 黑龙江 Province in 1958 during the Anti Rightist Movement, and in 1961 to Xinjiang 新疆 where they lived until Ai was nearly 20 years old. In 1978, he entered Beijing Film Academy (北京电影学院 *Běijīng Diànyǐng Xuéyuàn*), a member of the ‘Fifth Generation’ cohort, where he studied animation and helped found Stars (星星 *Xīngxīng*) a trail-blazing avant-garde art group active 1979-83.

Joining the first wave of students to study abroad after Mao’s death (1977) and Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the early 80s, Ai went to the US, studying English at the University of Pennsylvania and UC-Berkeley, then on to New York where he attended the Art Students League (1983-86), and lived in the East Village for the next ten years. After dropping out of school he took odd jobs, drew portraits on the street, became familiar with the contemporary art scene, experimented with conceptual art, continually photographed his surroundings, and reportedly became a professional blackjack player.

Ai returned to China when his father fell ill in 1993. He co-authored a series of books about the new generation of art, helped establish Beijing East Village (北京东村 *Běijīng Dōng Cūn*), an avant-garde art colony. By 2000 he was drawing international notice with the irreverent group exhibition *Fuck Off* (不合作方式 *Bù Hézuò Fāngshì*, lit. ‘uncooperative attitude’) which included photographs of himself giving the finger to the White House and other revered establishment sites, and dropping ancient Han Dynasty vases or decorating them with the Coca-Cola logo. From 2005-09 he posted ‘scathing social commentary’ on a blog that was shut down, after which he turned to Twitter. During this time he was commissioned by the government to design the ‘Bird’s Nest’ (鸟巢 *Niǎocháo*) Stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics in joint collaboration with a Swiss architectural team.

After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake Ai started a citizens’ investigation to ferret out the names and ages of the school children who died, and his consequent memorials through multi-national art installations drew worldwide attention. In 2011 his new Shanghai studio was razed by government officials on the grounds that it had not received the required approvals, and he was arrested and jailed for ‘economic crimes’, which triggered protests from the international art community. In 2015 he moved to Germany, and in 2019 to England. Although Ai’s prolific output has included a score of short films, *Human Flow* is his first feature-length documentary. For a 42 min documentary on the making of *Human Flow* see *Ai Weiwei: Drifting* on YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MkcTI00\\_uw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MkcTI00_uw) .

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<sup>2</sup> Notably absent from *Human Flow* is any sustained attention to US/Mexico border issues, but at a Q&A after the movie’s New York premier, Ai “hinted that his next film will be dedicated to the issue of the US border.” See Sarah Aziza, “Ai Weiwei’s ‘Human Flow’ Eloquenty Calls the West to Account for the Refugee Crisis” 10/24/17 <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/ai-weiweis-human-flow-eloquenty-calls-the-west-to-account-for-the-refugee-crisis/>