

Article**Subha Das Mollick****Magician of The Found Footage**

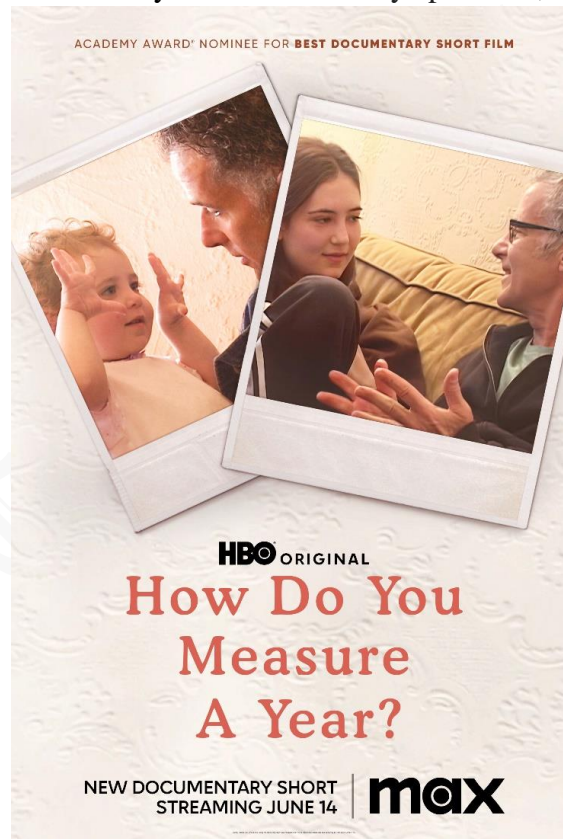
An assessment of Jay Rosenblatt's unique cinematic craft and how he has crafted his definition of the term 'documentary.'

Among the five short films nominated for the Oscars 2023 in the short documentary category was a 29-minute film called *How Do You Measure a Year*. Directed by Jay Rosenblatt and produced by his own film company, Locomotion Pictures, *How Do You Measure a Year* is an intimate, tender study of a daughter growing up from a two-year-old toddler to a young woman of 18, ready to come out of her father's wings and spread her wings to savour life as it comes.

To the filmmaking community of Kolkata, Jay Rosenblatt and his daughter Ella are no strangers. In 2006, Rosenblatt came to Kolkata as a tutor for the mentoring and pitching programme "Docedge". He brought a package of his films - *King of the Jews*, *I Used to be a Filmmaker*, *I Like it a Lot*, *I Am Charlie Chaplin* and *Phantom Limb*. All the films spring from the depth of his lived experience and chronicle deeply disturbing or intensely joyful sagas or life-changing moments of revelation. As a filmmaker, he distils nuggets from the emotional crosscurrents sweeping him, as it does all of us, all the time and uses the distillate as raw material for cinematic self-expression. To create this expression, he must distance himself from the emotion and examine it from multiple perspectives. His films are almost always divided into segments. His style of chronicling is fragmented. Like a cubist painting, he creates unity with various perspectives.

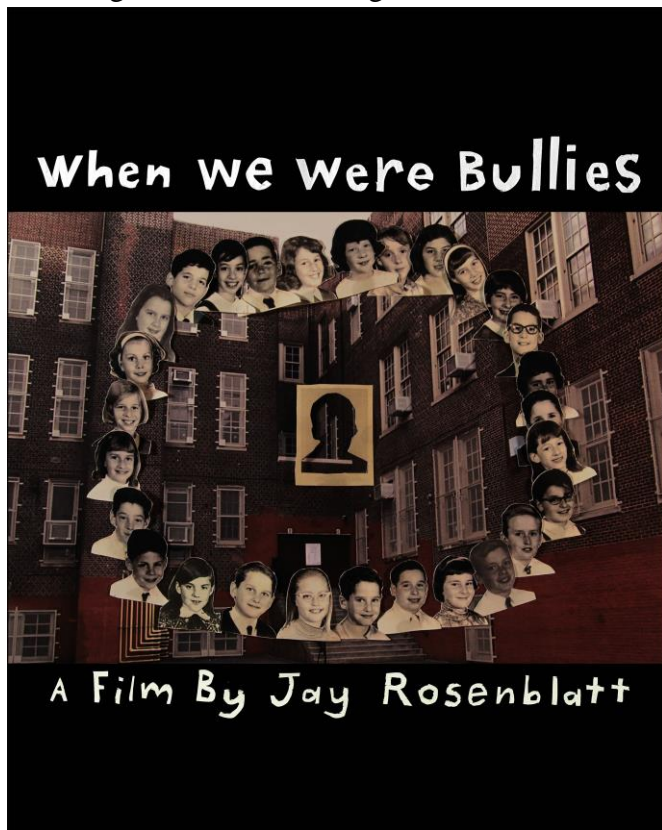
The essence of his art may be summed up in his own words, "I make films to help dissolve the false separation we maintain between self and other. My work opens up wounds to let the poisons out. It is provocative and poetic at the same time. It is extremely personal, stemming from current and childhood autobiographical material. I believe that one can reach the universal by being as personal as possible. Mining this emotional terrain energises me as an artist."

In *Phantom Limb* (2005), he expresses feelings of guilt and grief, of loss and longing. Rosenblatt and his parents have lived with these suppressed feelings for years after losing his younger brother to a deadly disease at the tender age of six. Different dimensions of this complex, bottled-up emotion have been expressed using library



footage he accessed easily. In the early 90s, the San Francisco school district was removing all their 16mm educational films as they transitioned to video. Rosenblatt ended up with about 1000 16mm prints from this collection. Some of these have found their way into *Phantom Limb*. Stock footage of funerals, crumbling buildings, instructions on how to sanitise medical equipment and a child throwing tantrums - have acquired new meanings in the way they have been contextualised in the film to express different

stages of grief. But the film is not all stock footage. Visuals of sheep shearing have been specially captured for the film and used as a metaphor for renewing oneself and coming to terms with the loss.



Divided into twelve segments titled ‘separation’, ‘collapse’, ‘sorrow’, ‘denial’, ‘confusion’, ‘shock’, ‘rage’, ‘advice’, ‘longing’, ‘depression’, ‘communication’ and finally ‘reunion’, this 28-minute long film has been, for the filmmaker, an exercise in the catharsis of long-suppressed emotions. For the audience, *Phantom Limb* offers a unique journey into the realm of loss and redemption through unconnected situations bearing deep resonances of loss. The choice of visuals to convey the emotions cannot always be rationalised. The unconventional approach may baffle the spectator for a while, but soon, the film grows on the spectator. An emotional connection is made at the unconscious level. Repeated viewings reveal the finer points of the conscious mind. Just before the title “Phantom Limb” appears on screen, there is a shot of a fallen tree falling on the ground. Only in the second or third viewing will the spectator realise that this visual is a metaphor for a cut-off limb - a situation that appears in the ‘longing’ segment much later in the film.

During the post-screening discussion at Docedge, Rosenblatt mentioned that at the film's

premiere, his parents cried throughout the movie, shedding tears that they had perhaps kept bottled up for years.

If *Phantom Limb* bears a grim and sad mood, *I Used to be a Filmmaker* (2003) is delightful and refreshingly funny. Rosenblatt celebrates his new fatherhood status in this film and correlates his father persona with his filmmaker persona. The film begins with the nappy-changing ordeal of the newborn baby and takes us through the first year of her life, captured in two dozen tiny segments. The names of the segments have been borrowed from the filmmaker's lexicon. In the piece titled ‘Establishing Shot’, we see father and daughter face to face. As sunlight floods their profiles, the father tries to humour his irate baby daughter. In the segment ‘Footage’, the baby points her tiny feet at the camera. In “Flashback”, baby Ella, now able to sit up on her own, looks at the ultrasound image of her days in her mother's womb. At the film's end, the filmmaker's father asks his daughter, ‘Do you like the video camera?’ Daughter nods. Father's next question follows, ‘Do you want to be a filmmaker when you grow up?’ Daughter replies, ‘Ya! O ya’.

Rosenblatt's 2022 film *How Do You Measure A Year* is, in a way, a continuation of his 2003 venture *I Used To Be A Filmmaker*. Rosenblatt did not give up pointing his camera at his daughter. He turned it into a birthday ritual. This ritual forms the foundation of the film, which begins with an on-screen text that informs the spectator that what they are about to watch is the result of a birthday ritual carried out for seventeen long years. A quick montage that follows the text is like a 30-second summary of a 30-minute film.

However, this initial mental preparation does not make the film predictable. It is as full of surprises as a child's words and actions. *How Do You Measure A Year* does not present random shots of a child growing up. It is well structured into seventeen tiny segments, each a capsule of the birthday ritual of the year. Year after year, Ella sits on the couch, faces the camera and answers the same questions like ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’, ‘What is the meaning of power?’, ‘What are your dreams?’, ‘What are your fears?’ and so forth. What emerges in the course of the film is not just a documentation of a cute

toddler with golden hair metamorphosing into a lovely, graceful young lady with auburn hair, but also Ella's shifting emotions towards her father, the strains in their relationship, her changing ideas about herself, her developing concepts of power and fear and her focus on her future.

Ella's face, usually held in close up, is a canvas of shifting emotions - sometimes bright and sunny, occasionally gloomy and sometimes in deep contemplation. Up to age 6, Ella believes 'power' is all about muscle power. From age 8, she realises that 'power' is beyond muscle power. She says, "I think power can also not have something to do with physical - how strong you are - but also how brave you are if you are willing to stand up for someone". At age 12, she says, "Power is being yourself. That takes a lot of power."

At age 3, Ella says that when she grows up, she wants to 'wear make-up and eat gum'. At age 8, Ella sings, 'Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes How do you measure ... Measure a year'. At age ten, she says she wants to be an artist or comedian. 'What are you most afraid of?' is one of the questions Ella asks yearly. At age 11, she says, 'Life. I am afraid of living. At age 14, she is grumpy and not in the mood to answer questions. Sleeping is her favourite pastime. At age 18, she is in tears, grateful to her father for all he has done for her and appreciative of the yearly ritual the two of them have followed. Father and daughter - the two protagonists embrace each other - not posing for the camera but oblivious to the wide-eyed camera. The ritual comes to an end, and so does the film. The credits roll as Ella's song 'How do you measure a Year' fills the soundtrack.

In this age of technical gizmos and spectacular CGI, Rosenblatt takes us back to the basics. His film hinges on the essential power of cinema demonstrated by the Lumiere brothers almost 130 years ago. The novel medium surprised everybody when the Lumiere actualities were screened at the Grand Salon in Paris in December 1895. The audience mistook the 2D representation of reality as the real thing and thought that they would be run over by the train entering a station. It was sheer magic. In the course of time, in the hands of artists,

technicians and magicians, the magic of cinema was brought out in myriad ways. Jay Rosenblatt is an addition to the long list. He has created history by taking seventeen years to complete a 30-minute film.

The magic of *How Do You Measure A Year* lies not just in framing seventeen growing years of a girl's life into a 'time lapse' movie of coming of age but also in the synergy between the filmmaker, his camera and his subject, who happens to be the person he loves dearly. By taking his subject's full consent, he frees the camera from being a fly-in-the-wall observer to participating in the yearly ritual. Interestingly, despite being conscious of the camera's presence, his subject does not play with the camera. She remains true to herself. While catalysing a response, the camera becomes privy to the complex play of emotions in the subject's mind. It captures the truth beyond the surface actuality. *How Do You Measure A Year* turns out to be cinema verite in the truest sense of the term. The 'truth' captured gives the film a timeless quality.

The rare vision of this truth has perhaps catapulted this 'home video' into the realm of the Oscars. If Ella's definition of power is 'being yourself', possibly her father's definition is the ability to move his audience. The power and beauty of *How Do You Measure a Year* lies in its simplicity. On his daughter's birthday, he exposed a 45-minute tape to record Ella's responses to his questions every year. He shot with the same PD 150 video camera all through the years, except the year of her 18th birthday, when he found "the PD 150 really on the blink". This being the final year of the ritual, he decided to switch over from the 4:3 aspect ratio to the 16:9 aspect ratio when he left Ella alone with the camera. This widening of the frame added a bit of drama to the finale. After exposing the 45-minute tapes yearly, he never played them back to check the recording. They were shelved as a personal archive. During Covid, when he was confined at home, he took out the tapes and checked the footage for the first time. That is when he realised that there was a film in this archival footage. The editing process was sheer joy, although it was a challenge to maintain an objective distance and not get carried away. Ella, too, began to love her time capsule, even though some moments were

embarrassing for her. She accompanied her father to the Oscars ceremony held on March 12, 2023 .

This is not the first time Jay Rosenblatt's film made it to the Oscars. His 2021 film *When We Were Bullies* was nominated in the short documentary category 2022. This film is about digging up the memories of a shameful bullying incident of which he was a part more than fifty years ago. A lone 5th-grade boy from the PS 194 Elementary School in Brooklyn had been set up by his classmates, who punched, kicked, spat, and yelled at him. Rosenblatt was among the bullies. A chance encounter with the guy who had been the instigator of that fateful day triggered Rosenblatt's old memories. He revisited his old school and the scene of the crime. He tracked down twenty of his former classmates and their teacher. He turned the camera on their past to try to understand how he and his classmates remembered what happened and what it meant to them all these years later. The result was a deeply personal essay about the director's childhood, a work of art that is sad and funny, created with a mix of found footage, cleverly animated old photographs, first-person voice-over and on-camera interviews. The *Phantom Limb* incident of his brother's death also recurs in this film as a life-changing experience in the filmmaker's life. In many ways, *When We Were Bullies* is a continuation of his 1994 film *The Smell of Burning Ants*, a haunting documentary on the pains of growing up male. The film explores the inner and outer cruelties that boys perpetrate and endure.

This is how themes that he finds deeply disturbing or profoundly moving keep recurring in his films. Rosenblatt has made 35 films in a career spanning as many years. The duration of his films ranges from 1 minute to 30 minutes. Atom Egoyan has called him "An exquisite artiste who makes beautifully crafted miniatures". Many of them spring from deeply personal experiences. Rosenblatt says,

Images courtesy Jay Rosenblatt

Details of all Rosenblatt films are available on his website, www.jayrosenblattfilms.com. Interested viewers may order the DVDs of the movie or view them on rent.

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"Sometimes it starts with an idea, a mood (depression in *SHORT OF BREATH*) or a subject that I'm interested in (i.e. suicide for *THE DARKNESS OF DAY*)."

Among the films that have not sprung from a directly personal experience is the 1998 film *Human Remains*, which won him innumerable awards, including the Jury award at Sundance. In this film, he creates intimate portraits of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao and Francisco Franco through private and mundane details of their everyday lives. Rosenblatt says that the image of Hitler eating a piece of bread triggered the idea of *Human Remains* in his mind. What followed was intensive research, resulting in a darkly poetic study of horror "based entirely on facts, creatively combining direct quotes and biographical research".

All of Rosenblatt's films are experiments with form. The cinematic expression in each film springs from its content. The content is often archival footage that gets new meaning and new context in his movies. Rosenblatt says that editing is his favourite part of the filmmaking process. "For years, I would spend my summers (when not teaching) looking through these films and cutting out images that intrigued me. I've used many of those images throughout the years. But, in working with these images, I was intrigued with the recontextualisation of imagery and how the meaning of the images changed through editing and the soundtrack. I felt I was taking images from our collective unconscious and making them my own."

Rosenblatt has consistently steered clear of grand subjects and big-budget films. He is not obsessed with creating captivating images. The magic of Rosenblatt's films lies in his uniquely personal take on his subjects. The fact that in two successive years, he made the Oscar nomination list testifies that it takes little more than simplicity to surprise and shake an audience.