

Ai Weiwei's Human Flow – 'urgent'

This excellent documentary does not pretend to reinvent the form. Its mission is to humanise the migrant crisis



Ai Weiwei's 'Human Flow'

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Film festivals are often places of jarring contrasts and Venice this year is no exception. After two flamboyant fantasies — Alexander Payne's *Downsizing* and Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* — came a cold dose of hard reality. Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* is a documentary that attempts the near-impossible: to capture and convey the scale of the migrant crisis. Figures and newspaper headlines flash up alongside wise words from poets and politicians but the numbers and texts quickly start to seem superfluous next to the images. Ai shows us panic-stricken masses amassed at borders; Syrians scrambling over rivers and along roads; the stupefying squalor of refugee camps; a boatload of sub-Saharan Africans wrapped in shiny metallic shrouds like unwanted Christmas presents. Almost two and a half hours of this.

Only occasionally does Ai allow images to drift into abstraction. A drone-borne camera rising up over a sea of discarded life jackets begins to look like a gallery installation, another overhead shot of an indoor camp at Berlin's Tempelhof Airport recalls "S.A.C.R.E.D.," Ai's diorama depicting his own detention by Chinese authorities. He has faced criticism for some of the methods he has used to draw attention to the crisis but, for the overwhelming part, *Human Flow* finds Ai not in artist mode but in activist mode, and his approach is unpretentious, straightforward.

Though he foregrounds himself little, we see him mingling with migrants, sometimes joking and dancing, but also unintrusively comforting a mother who weeps until she vomits. For all the film's emphasis on scale, these are the moments that linger: pain, grief and hope etched into the faces of individuals. *Human Flow* does not pretend to reinvent the form and other documentaries are more artfully constructed, yet in its urgent mission not just to shock us into action but to humanise those affected, it is entirely successful.