

A conversation with Mats Hjelm

This text is based on extracts of a conversation that took place at the end of May 2000. Mats Hjelm was in mid-production and I had seen a small part of his new work Man to Man. Man to Man is the second instalment in a proposed trilogy, in which White Flight, shown at Index 1997, was the first part. White Flight was a video work in which Mats Hjelm juxtaposed his father's documentary films from Detroit 1968 with his own recently filmed material from the same location.

Helena Holmberg: *Would you like to start by describing the circumstances surrounding the whole project?*

Mats Hjelm: Because of my father becoming ill and then passing away, a conversation started between us that should have happened a lot earlier. During these conversations, the idea for White Flight emerged. In White Flight I am comparing myself with my father. I'm showing that I too can make a film. It was a work he would have accepted and something of a tribute. But when I had completed White Flight, I came to a halt. It was a dead end.

HH: *Do you think White Flight was too close to your father's conditions, that you used his filmic expression?*

MH: Yes. Everything I had been thinking about during the year after his decease was in White Flight, but as a untreated subtext. In Man to Man, it is this subtext I want to focus on. I'm searching for the kind of things I recognise. After things I have a feeling about, after something that influences me, not as a possible subject of debate but as an image. Similar to Marcel Proust, when he writes about the tastes familiar from childhood. I break all literal references. As soon as images can be read together in an obvious or fixed way, then I remove them. Instead, I want to construct this tone, the emotional layer that is inside me. The perspective of time that I'm using are the years of my father's highest creative period, when he was travelling, making films and was seldom home.

HH: *Can that which is private be as political as the reality portrayed in White Flight? You recreated your father's role as a journalist. There was a dutiful look back that permeated White Flight. Francesco Bonami wrote in the catalogue to the Unfinished History exhibition, of your ambition to return people's history to them. Can you be as political in a work such as this one which is closer to the bone, or is it an ambition you have relinquished?*

MH: I'd say I am more political in this work. It is not about a single event, it's about masculinity and power.

HH: *Is power a recurring element in all your work as an artist?*

MH: It's constantly about power. Man to Man is not an obvious political statement, but it is about the foundations of politics, of morals. When Francesco and I discussed this, we talked about 'pre-politics', the issues that transform into a political evaluation. What I was actually interested in with White Flight wasn't the political currents in the 60's but their background, the injustice itself. It's what I am again looking for here, the foundation to a political position.

The point of departure for the work is my father's material. I've removed small stories from their context, stories that in some cases have been secondary in the original films. I consider the sequences I've filmed myself as partly filmic transport, but there is a lot more of my opinion this time. It is more fragmentary, more sentimental, more personal. Despite that, I consider it very much 'pre-politics'.

HH: *In our talks about Man to Man, you have frequently returned to the sentimental. Certainly, sentimentality is often manipulative, but on the contrary I think you avoid being too direct. You've already mentioned that you try to avoid placing elements together which emphasise each other, but rather choose elements that conflict with each other. Where does the sentimental fit in?*

MH: When I speak of the sentimental, I mean 'sentiment', in reference to the emotions. I construct the work using illogical, rather than logical, arguments. In this case, sentimentality for me means looking back at a time in my life when things weren't formulated in the same way as when you are an adult.

HH: *At some point, we talked about a 'child's point of view', a short-sightedness or lack of overall perspective.*

MH: I consider it now as a sort of tunnel vision...

HH: *The non-chronological narrative was an important component in White Flight, do you think that this new material demanded new structures?*

MH: An important element in this work, which differentiates it from White Flight, is that I shift between two or three images next to each other on the same screen. It proved extremely difficult to edit in the same way as White Flight.

HH: *I think the decision to work with a non-chronological narrative is interesting because one escapes the cinema situation and can use the exhibition medium in another way. With White Flight, you could choose to watch ten minutes or to stay longer in the space and see new combinations of the material. It was a generous methodology, that as a viewer you could choose how to react with the work.*

MH: I think that on a level of experience, both works are quite similar. For example, there is no point where a viewer should begin watching. The difference is that I have chosen not to randomize sequences during the screening, but instead randomized the material during editing. Also, there'll be no fade to blacks appearing at rhythmic, regular intervals as in White Flight. I've decided not to do the same kind of compartmentalisation.

HH: *You've sought after a more even flow this time?*

MH: Yes, I noted that I succeeded in getting people to stay longer than I thought they would. The expectations I had about a non-linear narrative during White Flight were fulfilled actually and this is a way to move on.

HH: *You mentioned Proust earlier, his memory process. It makes me think of that scene when he is lying in his hotel room and drifting between being awake and falling asleep. Is the non-linear narrative one way of attempting to capture that state of being?*

MH: Yes. It is a lot about a state of being. Wherever you enter the work, it has the same 'drive'.

HH: *Then how do you manage the dialogue?*

MH: Man to Man has dialogue in Swedish, French, English and Portuguese. There won't be any subtitles. Insecurity is a quality. Also a lot of the footage cannot be clearly understood. Whatever you watch, how much have you seen? There are films you've watched several hundred times and still new things appear. The translated dialogue will be available instead as a print out so the audience can read it.

HH: *Those who saw White Flight remember the aria running through the whole work. Have you also worked with music this time?*

MH: There's music. Different, but there are many similarities. It's Yma Sumac who is actually an Indian princess or Amy Camus from Brooklyn NY. Nobody really knows. She has a voice ranging over four and a half octaves. She sings a song that is based on a fragment of a folk song. It's less rhythmic, but more like a soundtrack, it changes character quite often. And, if possible, it is even more sentimental.

HH: *What would you say about your relationship to technology. Do you think it has changed over time?*

MH: I've always wondered about artists who say that 'the computer is just a tool.' There is something contained in the medium that is much greater than yourself. At the same time, as I'm working with this, the technology is completely subordinate, I am just using it as a tool...I've moved on from being an artist that does quite technically advanced things, to doing simpler works. Now I don't attempt anything that I can't do myself.

HH: *In White Flight, I remember that you spoke of the angel statue as an emblem of the whole work. Is there any such central image in Man to Man?*

MH: Yes!

The angel image became central because it was at the centre of their struggle. The blacks painted it black and the whites washed it every morning. Concerning this work, there is a key scene, although it is not included yet. It was so obvious, this picture, this...Image. And I still haven't included it yet. It's a picture from Vietnam. Two elderly men and two small boys. They pedal a water wheel getting water out of a rice field.

HH: *What's special about it?*

MH: Partly, it has a special rhythm. Partly, because it's an old man and a small boy. An adult man is not present.

HH: *Man, before and after?*

MH: Yes! Exactly.

The result of this is probably a work in progress. It will not be finished. I'll have made a new contribution in a world dealing with men's legacy to each other.

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