Mark Cousins in conversation with Alexander Velody

WATCHING WITH MARK COUSINS – THE STORY OF LOOKING



Mark Cousins is a Northern Irish director and writer. Well-known for 'The Story of Film: An Odyssey' (2011, headlined as the cinematic event of the year) and A New Generation (2021)'. Both comprehensive chronologies of world cinema are praised for their detailed and diverse approaches. His esteemed film-making career spans five decades.

The following interview is presented as a discussion in response to the latter half of his film 'The Story of Looking.' The film meditates on the richness of visual experiences, framed around Cousins preparing for surgery to restore his vision during COVID. For the majority of the film Cousins narrates alone in the dark from his bed; as such, this interview was conducted via Zoom with us both in our respective beds. The hope was this exercise in free association and viewing would provide an emergent insight into Cousins' film philosophy, hence our comfortable viewing locations to encourage us to pause the viewing and discuss thoughts freely as they came to mind. I collated the most striking thoughts relevant to the systems facilitating filmmaking; the still and timestamp from those moments are provided.



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Mark Cousins: I should note, this film is made for viewing on a larger, cinema-type screen, so we have to imagine it bigger than how we are seeing it. I intended to direct the viewers' eyes around the screen, such that in a theatre its audience's eyes would be moving in unison focusing, like in a tennis match. The job of directing is to move the audience's eye. The last shot of a static painting by Frida Kahlo, I use to try and move your eye up and around. I want to feel as if you and I are watching this alone together, which is actually what is happening. I am saying, have a look up there or will you look down there.

Alex Velody: There is a great sense of discovery in that scene which was lovely.



AV: One thing that struck me is that you make use of tools that are quite modern. For instance the talk on selfies here or twitter. Do you think this film could have been made ten or twenty years ago to the same effect?

51:59

MC: Probably not. I have really benefited from being in the generation that has benefited from the democratization of the film process and the miniaturization of film equipment. When I was around 23 and began directing , you would need around five people for something like this, probably all in my bedroom, lighting and shooting, etc. But here, it was only myself in my bedroom. So the simplification of the filming process, as a result of better technologies and digitalization, meant that you can make a more intimate type of cinema, and speak to people from your bed via social media and Twitter.

This film, 'Story of Looking', is sort of a self portrait in a way incorporating a personal Internet usage. You could not really make self portrait films in earlier eras, unless you used eight millimeter, less available due to its high cost. Some people did, most people couldn't. You had to be very rich to do so.

AV: Another thing that came to mind, lockdown was a very individual kind of experience. We see here that you are the only person making this film in your bedroom alone. Yet a lot of the film seems to push outwards and focus externally, so although we are talking about your experience with your eye it's really completely told through other people.

MC: I think that's definitely the case. I would say that I have got a centrifugal imagination, I'm interested in what's out there. I've never been somebody who's thought of myself as having a rich inner life that I need to reveal to the world. It's the out thereness, the extraordinary complexity, surreal, beautiful, awful nature of the external world, which is exciting for me as a filmmaker. And that's why looking has been a central theme. You don't need to invent a system, an image system. They are out there. They are everywhere. You just need to notice them. Pay attention, be curious, and notice them. And I think that's the direction my work has increasingly progressed towards. Whether the film is about cinema, or something else, they are all about observance: a sort of dialing down yourself and dialing up the external world.

One of my heroes is Copernicus. He asked the simple question, what if we are not the center of the world? What if my bed is not the center of the world? What is it? What if it's just an observation platform. I kind of struggle with a great kind of distaste for indulgence, or some kind of narcissism in art. It's just one thing, perhaps above all things, that puts me off and for me it is less interesting looking outwards – the thing that I find really valuable.



56:36

MC: Here comes to mind the 'rule of play' in childhood. It has been a key concept for me, having done about five projects which are all quite childlike. And remember earlier, I was saying that we should watch films like a child. When I think of that aspect of what a child does, and I can treat a camera as a toy, its very useful for me as a filmmaker.

AV: Watching your films, I get the impression that whenever you go outside you have a gopro with you, collecting footage or learning like a child. All of your life seems to be recorded in some way. Could you comment about how your process developed?

MC: I always have cameras with me. I'm particularly interested in the frame, this disrupted frame here, (figure x) as the camera is knocked over. The frame change for me is fun, exciting, and so vivid. Through the frame it helps me discuss the actual life of the world. In other inteviews I have mentioned Gertrude Stein, the great writer, philosopher, thinker. She once said, imagination is observation plus construction. That resonates with me, and I think helps explain how I view my filmmaking; I go out with my camera, observe the world, and then in the editorial suite, I construct it. So to me, the most important bit is observation. Die yourself down, extract yourself from the picture, see what you may find. Then, after gathering your wood, make your table. Does it wear? That idea then of being not the source of light, but refractor of it, interests me. In this film, my view is refracted and imagined as a child's one. The location here is a refugee camp where I briefly volunteered and later tried to incorporate it into a sort of image system, after we had just looked at (dead) bodies.

AV: This process of observation plus construction equals imagination, is this something you felt you have cultivated over time?

MC: I came naturally to it. Filmmaking, particularly the actual shooting was a release, was an escape. I'm quite an anxious person, but I'm not anxious when I'm shooting. I'm the opposite of that. It's the kind of losing yourself between action and cut.

One other thing I suppose I could add here, going back to the previous sequence of bodies, and given that you come from a philosophical perspective, I think it's always been very important for me not to feel just like a brain in a jar, just a person who thinks. Watching a horror movie and when you feel your body tingle, you know that your nervous system is part of the process. There are always bodies in my film, often some degree of nakedness as well, to make the point that we are not only cerebral creatures. Not very many filmmakers, or documentarians, appear naked in their own films, but I do. And that is a little way of shocking the system to say, this is not an academic world view. It is not trying to just be analytical, it is our whole sensorium that should be in a film.



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MC: This makes me think of how COVID was a paradoxical time, wasn't it. If you were lucky enough not to get very sick, it was a good thinking time. Essentially each new day was bound to the same four walls. Either you had to be content with that, or seek out something else. Somehow. In a sense, it was a great time for image systems, as life became so repetitive for many of us. Same routine, slightly modified, day after day, week after week, month after month, but also our inner selves were more active than perhaps previously, because we were not seeing anything particularly new in the exterior world. So, we were relying on memories and their comfort through difficult times.

AV: When you talk about our 'looking lives', this is naturally very subjective being grounded in each of our own individual experiences. The presentation of this film leans into this, a lot of this footage being not didactic in structure. Rather the footage seems to be acting as a prompt or offering to connect to our own 'looking lives' through free association.

MC: We need this kind of fluidity, of thought and feeling, a slightly open structure; without trying to find a point in it. In this film I am trying to open you up. In this scene (figure x), we are confronted with the eyes of my friend, an Ethiopian doctor, on a huge screen.



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But, from his eyes, there is almost a kind of warm challenge to open yourself up to his thoughts. It's like, really, what have I seen? How many dead bodies have I seen? How many sunsets I've seen? You know, what kind of looking human being am I? So, there is a kind of attempt at warmth here, a gentleness, I think, to connect the viewer to his looking life.



1:19:13

AV: What informs the films that you choose to display in both this and your other projects?

MC: Just here I have been talking about visual shocks, the way something stays in your mind, like that moment from Citizen Kane: an old man remembering an erotic moment in his youth when he saw a girl that remained in his mind. I think a lot of these things for me are like that. When I was writing the book, The Story of Looking, I realised that those two images of Ingrid Bergman and Casablanca were composed exactly the same way. So, like, I just remember this media. That's what this film's about, in a way, that montage sequence when I'm getting my eye cut open, it's like a wheel of imagery that's spinning in my head.

Also, it has a wide array of film combined together, making it very international. There is those of Indian cinema and African, hence why the BBC did not take this project because, it is too international for them. But for me, it is sort of a matter of politics. In the era of Brexit, and the far right, you have to be passionately international and care, if you care about cinema, it is cinema from all around the world. 'Representation' is just displaying everyone and its passion is not about doing the right thing. Cinema is more than me, or you, the UK, or Europe. It's incumbent for me to include all differences, sexes, ages, etc. I get particularly annoyed with film fans who you know will watch taxi driver for the twentieth time and think that Indian Cinema is solely Bollywood when it's really not, so you just have, we just have to be interested in more than ourselves. We're nearly at the end of this film.



THE END 1:24:35

MC: There you go.

AV: Oh, wow. It was really beautiful. Thank you, Mark.

MC: You're welcome. It's quite, in a way, a melancholic film. But actually, I talk about joy at the end. There's a sequence, of course, of me imagining myself as an old man but still being grateful for my vision.

AV: I think, in perceiving the world, you do get so habituated to it that you forget to really look, and you kind of let the world pass you by in that regard.

MC: Everyday things.

AV: For sure. What you were talking about just there, a terminology of expanding and extending boundaries, it is very common in your filmography.

MC: I think people are so busy leading their lives. Iin art and cinema and music in particular, and dancing and swimming and cooking and whatever the great things in life are, they allow you to expand. A day is an extraordinary thing, just to live one more day

is extraordinary, and you have to grow into a day, need to breathe into it and enjoy it as much as possible, because there are so many terrible things in the world. I think that a good film is conscious of expanding in some way. It makes you feel bigger, fuller, more alive, less sleepy, than you felt previously.

AV: And do you find in our cinema culture, we are becoming less open minded in some regards?

MC: I'm not a pessimist to be honest. I think there's a lot of great stuff. There are more people making cinema and in art in general, and a more diverse range of people making, which is really good. Overall, the river has become a delta. Things have expanded,, there's more of a multiverse than ever. My concern is something that I mentioned earlier, that there seems to be an increasing effort on the self in the creative world and the cultural world, and I think the self can be a dead end in a way so I'm concerned with that. But overall I think, culture is moving broadly in the right direction in that there are more people from different backgrounds, My particular background, working class, you still do not get many people like that in movies and the arts. Of course, that's a story to tell for another day. But overall, things are better than they were, culturally, but I think philosophically we are not in great shape.

AV: I like that kind of analogy of a river, where do you think the river is going if you will?

MC: The thing about the delta is, it spreads out and it fertilises a broader field, which is really good. It's been a long time since I've believed in the mainstream anymore. There's no such thing in a way as the mainstream, of course things may be placed within it, like the Marvel movies, but all things have their harmonies.

In every generation, there's a snobbery about what's popular. All want to have its secret art and its perfect secret music, that nobody else knows about. I don't understand that at all. The joy is sharing the joy. 'Exclusive' is often used positively, but as a word is definitionally negative. I think that some of the best work is mainstream, and there is a real danger in people over-intellectualizing, believing the greatest art must be tragic. Popular cinema, including those on the lists of greatest films of all time – Godfather, Taxi Driver, Citizen Kane – there is still the possibility of feeling the rapture of being alive.

