

Is now a good time?

ED CRIPPS

Mark Cousins

I AM BELFAST

Various cinemas

Mark Cousins is a rare filmmaker-critic in the *Cahiers du cinéma* spirit of Jean-Luc Godard and Eric Rohmer. After early prominence with the BBC series *Videodrome* and *Scene by Scene* in the late 1990s, he went on to author low-key films about films from a perspective of worldly innocence, such as *The First Movie* and *A Story of Children and Film*. His fifteen-hour *The Story of Film: An odyssey*, perhaps his masterpiece, dazzles with unexpected juxtapositions and never feels like a lesson: it is dextrous, witty, arranged to a dream-logic and, refreshingly, not in thrall to Hollywood.

Then there's his voice. Not his authorial voice, but the noise that comes out of his mouth. Some find his narration grating – all swerves, slopes and Northern Irish updraughts – but after a while it hypnotizes and his monthly *Sight & Sound* column is underwritten with the same rhythms. He expresses so much so densely that there is almost too much insight to take in at once. That slimness combines the technique of a poet with the erudition of a pathological watcher, defined by the traps and clichés he avoids; he is both a writer's filmmaker and a filmmaker's writer.

All Cousins's work is personal, but his latest film is the most explicitly first-person. *I Am Belfast* has two narrators: Cousins himself and the character-actor Helena Bereen, a guide to the city she represents and a “griot” or storyteller (Cousins cites Dani Kouyaté's film *Keita!: L'Héritage du griot*'s parallel depiction of the past as prose and poetry). Paddling in the tradition of city films such as Terence Davies's hymn to Liverpool *Of Time and the City*, it offers a gentler, more lateral interpretation of symbol-heavy urban life than, say, Ben Wheatley's recent *High-Rise*.

Cousins's filmic language is elliptical, meditative and imagistic. Bereen describes eighteenth-century Belfast as “brilliant, friendly, volcanic, inward, outward, homophobic, creative, loquacious, feminine, déclassé, romantic, sentimental, pious and edgy”. It is a city of sweet and salt where the river meets the sea, once upon a time its citizens *thought* (Bereen growls the word) and knew how to co-operate, before they fought each other.

The passage on the Troubles is one of Cousins's subtlest. “Is now a good time to talk about it? Is ever? . . . Over decades and days, for good reasons and bad, we peered over the top of things and down into the depths”. But since the Good Friday Agreement, glass buildings and a waterfront have blossomed: “that

old luminosity is still there”.

Humour dapples even the shadows. Rosie and Maud, two “lively women”, are the irreverent embodiment of Catholics and Protestants at peace. “I was very romantic, weren’t you?” “Course I fucking was”. “I say to God, ‘Please forgive me’, then I go to fucking sleep.” The Van Morrison-accompanied parable of Betty’s lost shopping is a single melody in the city as symphony.

Cousins’s unbordered sensibilities refracted through Christopher Doyle’s cinematography give the film a circular surrealism, the elegance of Wong Kar-wai (whose *Chungking Express* and *In the mood for love* Doyle shot) meshed with the deadpan dreaminess of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives*, 2010).

Inspired by Van Gogh, the film becomes a “colour study”; Bereen points out the yellow of a mother’s coat, another daub in an “autumn riot”. Often the darkest backcloths burn the most vividly. Buses are uprooted “skeletons”. In the final line, an old man reveals that Belfast lost its sight in the 1950s and only sees blurs now, “but what blurs!” Synaesthesia permeates the dreamscape; the walls have eyes. A boat is described as a man’s “inner Belfast”, or maybe it’s that of Cousins, who claims to see the *Titanic* everywhere.

Sometimes he gets carried away. “A crime scene, a rhyme scene, a time scene” sounds like the sort of thing actors might say to warm up before they go on stage. But for all Cousins’s influences he depends less on other authors than does Terence Davies, who quotes tombstone inscriptions via Joyce (“As you are now, so once were we”) and Chekhov (“The golden moments pass and leave no trace”). Come the climactic set piece, for which he hired a hundred extras and the biggest crane in Ireland, he could have reached for Seamus Heaney, but the poem read over the burial of “Belfast’s last bigot” in his “wooden overcoat” is pure Cousins.

How does this most lyrical of film journalists get away as both poacher and gamekeeper? Cinema shifts all the time and Cousins’s porous, cross-form sentences coalesce (to quote himself) into the clarity of a window. One could view Cousins’s career – like Belfast or the griot’s view of the past – as a happy cohabitation of poetry and prose. *I Am Belfast*, even more than his previous work, illuminates his mind and thought processes. To paraphrase the city’s coat of arms, what can we give in return for so much?