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Drifting with Cousins: Mark Cousins and the Psychogeographical Essay Film

Abstract: This article discusses a selection of works by filmmaker Mark Cousins, arguably an under-examined figure with regard to film studies. It is contended that Cousins has fashioned a distinctive approach to the essay film. Adopting a "psychogeographical" perspective, this article will analyse *What is this Film Called Love?* (2012), *Here Be Dragons* (2013), and *Life May Be* (co-directed by Mania Akbari, 2014), all of which feature Cousins as a central figure and active participant on screen. In essence, each film is a documented *dérive*, a practice pioneered and developed by the Situationist International that locates intersections between specific locations and their psychological impact on the "self". It is posited that Cousins "Do-It-Yourself" practices rupture many conventions of filmmaking, producing a singular body of work in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: Essay film, psychogeography, *dérive*, creative practice.

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Introduction

> [...] if we think of "nonfiction" as signifying a cancellation or negation of fiction, we can perhaps alter slightly our understanding of this history to include more experimental forms. (Waldron 8)

An ardent cinephile, filmmaker Mark Cousins has been active in revising much of Western cinema history throughout his work, championing global under-appreciated and overlooked filmmakers. However, his own extensive filmmaking career has been under examined within film studies. Cousins'

book, *A Story of Film* (first released in 2004, revised and updated in 2020) highlights filmmakers around the world who have been innovative and challenge the Western *status quo*. Later adapted into a fifteen-hour documentary, *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011), Cousins presents an alternative film history that is brimming with passion, revises our knowledge of cinema, and is imbued with his infectious cinephiliac personality. Predominately, Cousins is associated with the essay film as a provocative form of filmmaking that combines elements of documentary and fiction. Cousins himself states as much in an interview: "A fiction film is a bubble, an essay film bursts the bubble" (Ciezadlo 18). This article will explore a selection of Cousins' films from a psychogeographical perspective. Psychogeography is a practice where an individual actively reflects upon one's surroundings —perhaps in social, cultural, political contexts —as one traverses a particular location, where "the emotional and behavioural impact of urban space upon individual consciousness is to be carefully monitored and recorded" (Coverley 116). We place ourselves in unfamiliar surroundings and draw upon our own experiences, memories, thoughts as we navigate a chosen area to ambulate. Specifically, I will discuss the consistent intersection of theory (psychogeography) and filmmaking practice throughout Cousins' filmography, focusing on *What is this Film Called Love?* (2012) —arguably his most personal film —with further discussion of techniques found in *Here Be Dragons* (2013), and *Life May Be* (co-directed by Mania Akbari, 2014). These films feature Cousins as a central figure and active participant on screen to the extent that he may be *the* most self-exposing filmmaker —in both literal and figurative ways —which makes him a singular voice in contemporary cinema.

Each film contains elements of a *dérive*, a form of ambulation that suggests "a space and time of liquid movement, sometimes predictable but sometimes turbulent" (Wark 22). This is a fundamental aspect of psychogeography as Amy J. Elias succinctly summarises that, "emotional mappings [are] produced through *dérive*" (826). In his own book, *The Story of Looking* (2017), Cousins references the Situationist International, a significant social, cultural and political movement in post-World War II Europe, for their pioneering work in psychogeography. The *dérive* is central to their practices, with Cousins noting that "we should walk around one city with the street map of another in order deliberately to misread the signs a city has for directing us to its centre, its places to buy and desire" (262). Essentially, Cousins documents his drifting ambulatory experiences in his films. For instance, *What is this Film Called Love*? was filmed spontaneously in Mexico City as Cousins spent three days wandering its many streets, resulting in a poetic, psychogeographical exploration of the city. *Here Be Dragons* expands this approach and depicts Cousins' journey through Tirana, Albania, documenting various intersections of societal, cultural, and political issues facing the country, with a particular emphasis on their national cinema. *Life May Be* can, arguably, be considered a global psychogeographical essay film. It features a series of visual "letters" sent between two filmmakers, Scotland-based Cousins and Iranian-based Mania Akbari, each

depicting their daily lives, reflections, and explorations of their respective residences. I will claim that Cousins adopts specific "writerly" techniques that expand the essay film format. The purpose here is to highlight a practice adaptable for anyone venturing into filmmaking, noting the liberatory nature of blending essay techniques with psychogeography. First, I will discuss psychogeography; second, I will reflect on Cousins' work; and, finally, I will discuss where Cousins intersects his filmmaking with psychogeographical practices.

Psychogeography

Psychogeography developed from the Situationist International movement between 1957 and 1972. Predominately located in Paris, the Situationists reflected upon post-WWII malaise rife not just within France but throughout the world, and "positioned their practice as political and artistic" (Serafini 110). Most of the participants in the movement were influenced by far-left politics, Marxism, and anarchy. McKenzie Wark summarises:

> The Situationist International was a provisional micro-society founded on its own quite particular economy of donation and reputation. While some of its activities might be supported by selling art to collectors or other banal forms of compensated labour, there is a sense in which the Situationist International was a grand potlatch, consigning to the flames the thought and work of a whole little community, daring the world to match its extravagant consumption of its own time. (71)

This "micro-society" was attempting to draw attention to various intersections of the city in a variety of contexts, with an emphasis on the importance of art and social change. The Situationists were fascinated by the notion of the "self" within specific environments, particularly the modern urban city. Much of their psychogeographical reflections were inspired by aspects of the *flâneur,* a "distinctive figure in early nineteenth century Paris, portrayed as a disinterested, leisurely observer (invariably male) of the urban scene, taking pleasure in losing himself in the crowd and becoming a secret spectator of the changing spectacle of spaces and places in the city" (Bassett 398). This notion of the *flâneur* took inspiration from the revisionist approach by Walter Benjamin who drew upon the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Tina Richardson notes that the *flâneur* was seen as part of the bourgeoisie and a bit of a dandy (3), a far cry from urban globetrotter Cousins. In a contemporary sense, Cousins could be considered a *dériveur*, a figure who is interested and actively engaged in his surroundings which in turn have a substantial impact on thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

A prominent member of the Situationists, Guy Debord was an early promoter of psychogeography, defining it in his essay "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography"

as the "study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (8). In a later essay, "Theory of the *Dérive*", Debord states that the primary aspect of psychogeography is conducting a *dérive* which involves "playful, constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll" (62). This "drifting" was meant to inspire ambulators of cities to reflect on a specific location, its impact and effects on their sense of self. Psychogeography is a practice ideally suited for the essay filmmaker as its approaches can generate materials to be refashioned in numerous creative ways.

While seemingly aimless in its goal, a *dérive* functions as a mapping exercise, where you log and detail your surroundings through notes and visualisation (sketches, photographs, videos, etc.). Another practice is to take a map of a different city than the one you are in and use as a guide, noting similarities and discontinuities, for example utilising a map of the Scottish city of Stirling to navigate the streets of Kirikiriroa (otherwise known as Hamilton), Aotearoa (New Zealand). As each are of similar size and have comparable geographical layouts, you purposefully read the wrong street names (Stirling's instead of Kirikiriroa's), wandering according to the trajectory of the Stirling map through Kirikiriroa's avenues, reflecting upon your findings as you traverse the terrain. These surreal wanderings may not necessarily have a particular destination in mind, which defeats the purpose of a *dérive*. The intentions of a psychogeographer are to explore what has hitherto been unknown to them: "Displacement, errancy, lostness, searching —these are precisely the strategy of the *dérive*" (Elias 830). The drifting nature of a *dérive* pulls us out of our comfort zones, disrupting our daily routines, inspiring our creativity. As Merlin Coverley states, "the *dériveur* is conducting a psychogeographical investigation and is expected to return home having noted the ways in which the areas traversed resonate with particular moods and ambiences" (124). In a sense, conducting a *dérive* resembles the formation of an essay, whereby you continuously reflect on your surroundings as you ambulate, generating layers of thought that can be converted into a creative output. Upon returning home, or starting point of the *dérive*, psychogeographers must accommodate another key element: a period of reflection. The duration of a *dérive*, according to Debord in "Theory of a *Dérive*", is one day between two periods of sleep, where the "starting and ending times have no necessary relation to the solar day, but it should be noted that the last hours of the night are generally unsuitable for *dérives*" (64). Upon completion of a *dérive*, one would reflect on their experience, and, perhaps, produce creative artefacts or essays that demonstrate a city's interconnectedness through social, cultural and political contexts.

Filmmaking as Psychogeography

Before delving into Cousins' work, I will briefly discuss a few examples of what I consider to be psychogeographical filmmaking. Chantal Akerman utilizes aspects of psychogeography in numerous works, most prominently in *News from Home* (1977). The film details Akerman's daily experiences of living in New York, where over images of the city she reflects upon letters received from her mother who lives in Belgium. These essay-style letters are recounted through voiceover, covering everyday routines, ailments and concerns. However, these are her mother's "declarations of love and sadness at being separated from her daughter asking her to write back and return soon" (Pucill 85). While Akerman does not necessarily participate in a *dérive* or take on the role of a *flâneur* or *dériveur*, the film nevertheless maps the city through static long takes. The film's visuals are in many ways reminiscent of postcards: wide shots capturing commuters, barren avenues, alleyways and so on. These images then become Akerman's visual, rather than written, responses to her mother's letters. By recounting the content of these letters over images of the city, it arguably demonstrates the psychological effects of living in New York at a great distance from Akerman's mother.

In a similar, though perhaps slightly less personal fashion, Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) blend aspects of documentary, fiction, and psychogeography, where the faux *flâneur* Robinson (an unseen character) explores a post-Thatcher London. Utilising voiceover (actor Paul Scofield was the narrator for the first two instalments, Vanessa Redgrave for the third film), Keiller dissects the movement of commuters as they ambulate throughout London. The narrator engages in a one-way "dialogue" with Robinson, revealing much of the city's history over Keiller's images, which mirror many of Akerman's static wide shots. The film, as Adam Scovell describes in "Patrick Keiller on London", is an imaginative way of "capturing the city moving about its business, but with emphasis upon the quiet, historical undercurrents that ebb and flow under its many streets and buildings, it traces the modest flats of famous poets, views that inspired great painters, the fallout from the 1992 general election and even the shocking aftermath of an IRA bombing" (par.2). Keiller's distillation of London at a particular moment in time pontificates the intersections of the city in socio-cultural-political terms. Of course, the vast size of London is too much to capture in three feature works. Subsequently, Keiller adapted many of these elements further in his Tate exhibition "The Robinson Institute" in 2012, chronicling the fictional *flâneur*'s journeys since *Robinson in Ruins* and expanding the capacity of creative psychogeographical artifacts.

While Paris was the primary site for the Situationists, London has fascinated psychogeographers over the past few decades. Writers such as Iain Sinclair and Will Self have documented their *dérives* of the city and adoptions of *flâneur* personalities in volumes such as *London Overground* (2015) and *Psychogeography* (2007) respectively. Sinclair has

also collaborated with artist Andrew Kötting on several psychogeographical film projects, including the surreal *Swandown* (2012) and *The Whalebone Box* (2019). *Swandown* depicts a *dérive* of sorts as Sinclair and Kötting "drift" through the canals between Hastings and Hackney in a swan-shaped pedalo. The film captures their many conversations, reflections, and interactions with the public as they navigate the (mostly) calm waters. *The Whalebone Box* is an account of Sinclair and Kötting's journey to return the titular box back to its origins in the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland. Combining their various recorded conversations, archive footage, and mix of digital and analogue images, the film demonstrates that aesthetic practices "encourage different and creative ways of looking" (Arnold 13). It is the journeying aspect of this film where Sinclair and Kötting's conversations are central elements of the incredibly loose narrative. Companionship within this audio-visual *dérive* is a crucial element that I will discuss below in relation to Cousins' work.

Mark Cousins: The Psychogeographical Filmmaker

Cousins was born in Coventry, England, raised in the Northern Irish city of Belfast, and now lives and works in Edinburgh, Scotland (Rodger; Brankin). After studying film, television and art at the University of Stirling, where he met partner Gill Moreton, a psychologist, Cousins began his career at the BBC. In 1997, Cousins took over from fellow filmmaker Alex Cox in hosting *Moviedrome* (1988–2000), a series which screened cult films from around the world. At the same time, Cousins devised and directed the innovative in-depth interview series *Scene by Scene* (1996–2003) wherein he would discuss with actors and filmmakers key techniques in specific scenes of their work. Prior to his work at the BBC, Cousins' filmmaking career began in 1993 with the television documentary *The Psychology of Neo-Nazism: Another Journey by Train to Auschwitz* (co-directed by Mark Forrest). The film depicts Cousins travelling with self-identifying neo-Nazis who have been invited to Auschwitz by a Holocaust survivor. Even at this early stage in his career, Cousins was journeying —or wandering —and documenting these experiences. While his films would subsequently be somewhat lighter in tone, this was a crucial first step in the method of constructing his approach to filmmaking. Subsequently, Cousins would direct the television documentary *Cinema Iran* (2005), an in-depth examination of influential Iranian filmmakers and their impact on world cinema. *The First Movie* (2009), Cousins' first feature-length documentary, finds the filmmaker travelling to the Kurdish village of Goptapa in Northern Iran. There, Cousins introduces local children to cinema and filmmaking, where they make their own shorts based on their lives in the village. *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, as noted above, revises cinema history through Cousins' global lens. Despite taking five

years to complete, Cousins continued to make films right after that, albeit smaller and more intimate. *What is this Film Called Love*? finds Cousins in Mexico for three days with only a laminated image of Sergei Eisenstein for companionship. Shot on a miniscule budget, this "off-the-cuff doodle" (Lodge) finds the filmmaker in a solitary rumination about the nature of art, creativity, space, and impact of specific locations on the self. Similar approaches were utilised for *Here Be Dragons*, *Life May Be* and *6 Desires: DH Lawrence and Sardinia* (2014). Cousins then directed *A Story of Children and Film* (2013) which discussed children's performances in films from around the world. In contrast, he then crafted an ode to the city symphony film in *I Am Belfast* (2015), a fascinating exploration of the location that has had the most significant influence on his life. Cousins dabbled in fiction, directing *Stockholm, My Love* (2016), starring musician Neneh Cherry as a character recovering from a traumatic experience. In many ways, this bookends the city symphony *I Am Belfast*. *The Eyes of Orson Welles* (2018) finds Cousins at his most playful, examining the drawings and sketches of the titular filmmaker as well as their legendary cinematic works. Another epic, the fourteen-hour *Women Make Film: A New Road Movie Through Cinema* (2018), a companion piece of sorts to *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, delves into the rich history of female filmmakers and their innovations with style, tone, genre, and practice. Finally, in 2021 alone, Cousins has premiered three new works, *The Story of Looking*, *The Story of Cinema: A New Generation* and *The Storms of Jeremy Thomas*.

This brief overview of Cousins' extensive career highlights recurring themes and characteristics, even from the titles alone. We see that "story" is an important element to much of his work and "odyssey" also supports Cousins' nature as a continuous wanderer. "Road movie" continues this theme, a central aspect to much of Cousins' films, including *Women Make Film* and *The Storms of Jeremy Thomas.* The former has several actors, including Tilda Swinton, Andjoa Andohh, Jane Fonda, Sharmila Tagore, Kerry Fox, Thandiwe Newton, and Debra Winger driving through "cinema" providing voiceover narration to clips selected by Cousins; the latter film features the filmmaker driving with producer Jeremy Thomas on the way to the Cannes Film Festival, delving into the risqué producer's diverse career. These projects contain several degrees of intimacy with Cousins, who shares his ideas about life and cinema but does not necessarily prescribe them. In the opening of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, Cousins espouses that it is not money that fuels cinema but ideas. Indeed, ideas, even in fragmented forms, are central to his filmography. Max Bense once wrote:

> He who writes essayistically; who composes something experimentally; who turns his subject this way and that, questions, touches, inspects, and reflects upon it thoroughly; who approaches it from different angles, and collects what he sees in his mind's eye, and formulates in words what his topic reveals under the conditions established by writing. (52)

Reflecting literary essay practices, Cousins' films have an elastic structure where images, often shot by the filmmaker himself, may spark several ideas and thoughts at once before moving on to another theme or topic. Here, Cousins is constructing an experimental, unorthodox organisation of images within his films where arguments or reflections may not unravel in a linear fashion. Effectively, a fundamental element to his storytelling is the looseness of the audio-visual journey. The films detailed below are often devised spontaneously. This correlates with a *dérive* and its improvisatory nature.

Cousins' Psychogeographical Essay Films

Cousins utilises a "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) approach to filmmaking. Unencumbered by traditional processes, the filmmaker is free to navigate and produce images in an improvisatory fashion. Cousins observes in an interview with Declan McGrath: "No plan, no script, no producer, no budget, no schedule" (33). Cousins finds affordable digital cameras essential to his practice. Their small, compact structures allow for easy carrying and transport, and are readily available to capture spontaneous events or actions at any given moment. By circumventing the traditional conventions of film production, this freedom is liberating. However, Cousins eschews much of documentary filmmaking practices. While archival footage in the form of film clips is utilised in most (if not all) of his work, they are an extension of his thoughts and often used as audio-visual examples of the subject(s) he is discussing. Very rarely are talking-head interviews filmed; even the mammoth fifteen-hour *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* restricted this practice. Instead, Cousins is the focal point, the storyteller and central presence within each of his films.

What is this Film Called Love? is presented via its opening text as an "ad-lib", meaning it was created spontaneously, largely grown out of exhaustion upon completion of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*. This improvisational approach was not hindered by a budget or schedule in the traditional sense. Announced by a female voice-over, the film is a story "about a guy who's always doing something, doing nothing". As it unfolds, *What is this Film Called Love?* becomes both a first and third person narrative as well as an observational depiction of Cousins' time in Mexico City. However, it transcends a mere capturing of a specific time and place: it depicts a *dérive* in action. Though some of the locations are unavoidably predetermined, for instance the hotel room in which the filmmaker sleeps, the other areas are freely explored and captured as Cousins drifts, ambulating through many streets. The filmmaker casts himself as a *dériveur,* the "wanderer in the modern city, both immersed in the crowd and isolated by it; an outsider, even a criminal, a man impossible to fathom and one whose motives must remain unclear" (Coverley 71). While certainly not a criminal, the first thirty minutes of the film depict Cousins as somewhat at a distance, perhaps due to the

fatigue from his previous 5-year filmmaking effort. He immerses himself in Mexico City but contrasts this with shots of his home, Scotland. Later, Cousins is recorded fully naked in the Valley of the Gods (North of Monument Valley), a complete physical immersion in the location where walking is "not just what a body does; it is what a body is" (Ingold and Vergunst 2). It depicts the liberation the filmmaker feels, rather than for sexual objectification. However, John Marmysz claims that there is no way to completely avoid making ourselves into objects, especially on screen, stating:

> In order even to form a consciousness of one's 'self', a person must solidify, and thus objectify, an identity that acts as a focus of awareness. As a self, I am both one and multiple at the same time. To have a sense of 'myself' I must recognise an inner part of 'me' as it is mirrored in another inner part of 'me'. (58)

Here, Cousins does solidify himself. The *dérive* pauses in this scene to focus entirely on the psychogeographical elements the journey has had on the filmmaker, specifically the sense of freedom he wishes to express by being free of clothing. This immersion within the environment is a literal interpretation on Cousins' part of the specific effects of a location on his emotions and behaviour.

Throughout much of his *oeuvre*, Cousins' companions —often deceased filmmakers, artists, writers —are a sounding board for his reflections. Less formal than Scofield's narration in *London* and *Robinson in Space*, Cousins creates a dialogue that eschews the traditional informative narration in documentary. Though he has used explanatory voice-over in a variety of his works, here Cousins' narration is playful and loose. These discussions, or rather thoughts spoken aloud, generate ruminations that form the central essay or spine of the film. In many regards, these continue the literary techniques that influence his filmmaking practice. Cousins himself has noted that Virginia Woolf has been a substantial influence on how he structures his films, writing in an article for *Frieze* magazine:

> Her charting of the motions of her own mind (a mind very different from mine) fascinated me. She was like a great weather forecaster making poetry out of isobars. I thought I could be a punk Virginia, and so I made a film, *What Is this Film Called Love?* (2012), about three days I spent in Mexico City, wandering around with my camera, trying to film what she might have filmed.

In contrast to Akerman and Keiller's visualisation, Cousins' camera is constantly mobile. Though wide shots are utilised at various moments (particularly the aforementioned sequence in the Valley of the Gods), the shaky handheld images capture the *dérive* in motion, where even the filmmaker's feet are in frame as he carries the portrait of Soviet filmmaking pioneer Sergei Eisenstein. While the crassness of some images —at times blurry and out of focus, with muted

colours, and shifting lighting contrasts —may not be aesthetically pleasing, the roughness has a quality in its own right and is a true representation of the spontaneous journey as it unfolds.

Cousins improvises and riffs with the image of Eisenstein as he travels around Mexico City. The laminated portrait of the Soviet pioneer is clutched by Cousins as he navigates the streets. In fact, the entire budget was generated and spent on this image: "The only cost was getting a picture of Sergei Eisenstein laminated for $5.80. I had complete freedom" (McGrath 33). Cousins and Eisenstein "discuss" the latter's time in Mexico, where he developed and filmed certain scenes for *¡Que viva México!* (1932) which, ultimately, was abandoned. *What is this Film Called Love?* may not draw definitive conclusions about Eisenstein's ventures in Mexico but that is not Cousins' intention. The presence of Eisenstein provides the filmmaker a companion for his journey, an aspect that is crucial in terms of psychogeography. In "Theory of the *Dérive*" Debord notes:

> One can *dérive* alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since crosschecking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions. (63)

Of course, Eisenstein is long deceased and it is an imaginary conversation. In complete contrast to Kötting and Sinclair's *dérives*, Cousins is sharing his impressions with a still portrait of Eisenstein, a ghost of cinema's past distilled in a plastic frame. This presents a hauntological element to Cousins' approach, where the "spectre is not of the here-and-now, yet is capable of exercising a spectral causality over the living" (Shaw 2). The still image of the deceased Eisenstein is, somewhat, reanimated as Cousins drifts with the portrait, acting as the late filmmaker's legs and eyes. Cousins does not compare himself to Eisenstein but instead shares a bond with him as a fellow director. Here, Eisenstein has numerous in-between physical and non-corporeal forms. For instance, he is between life and death (the still image that moves); there are transnational elements to his own identity, specifically when he was in Mexico. To clarify, he was a Soviet filmmaker in Mexico, bringing his identity, practices, thoughts and feelings to the country before returning back home.

Détournement and Dragons: An Albanian *dérive*

Here Be Dragons finds the filmmaker travelling to Tirana, Albania, to attend the country's thirteenth Film Festival. Seeing this as an opportunity to create another improvised film, Cousins conducts and captures numerous *dérives*. As these unfold, Cousins reflects on his time in the capital, sharing his enthusiasm for Albanian cinema. This is interlaced with clips

from some of the country's best films. It is this element I wish to highlight. As noted above, Cousins has used clips throughout his films as an audio-visual illustration. By utilizing these pre-existing images, it reflects the Situationist practice of a *détournement*. Debord, in the essay "Détournement as Negation and Prelude", states that *détournement* is the "re-use of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble" (67). However, rather than merely re-use film clips in place of original footage, Cousins employs *détournement* in the manner in which McKenzie Wark illustrates as an "opposite of quotation" (40). In essence, *détournement* is a method of utilising pre-existing still or moving images, re-edited and reshaped within a new context to generate an original idea or variation from their previous incarnation. A contemporary example of this are Internet Memes, where users can take a still image from a film, television series, advert, newspaper and so on, and add text to the image to subvert its original meaning for, predominately, comedic effect.

If we consider *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* through *détournement*, Cousins shares cinemas little discussed in Western discourses. He views his selection of clips as a "tasting menu", and claims that the problem today is that "there is already a smorgasbord of choice and people don't know what to eat. So what we need are tasting menus and signposts" (McGrath 31). Indeed, Cousins primary concern is not to simply reiterate images from these films but to re-organise and reshape our thinking about underseen —and underrepresented —cinemas from a variety of countries. Further to this, the archive-footage documentary *Atomic: Living in Dread and Promise* (2015) extends the practice of contemporary *détournement* as a "method of interpretation and reinterpretation: reordering preexisting materials in order to [...] creatively [reconstruct] them in the service of authenticity" (Elias 825). The film, through historical audio-visual images, charts the development of nuclear weapons, and the growing fear within society of impending doom. Cousins utilises footage of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters. Supported by a powerful musical soundtrack by Scottish band Mogwai, the film is an unnerving montage that demonstrates the capacity of human destruction. Here, *détournement* shares many characteristics of the "supercut" method where filmmakers mine "existing film and video footage, searching for particular elements and tropes in order to reveal something about cinematic and televisual discourse" (Baron 24). Cousins draws upon our fascination and perpetual fear of a nuclear attack. By re-examining the information conveyed by these archival films and footage of protests against the proliferation of global nuclear armament, this *détournement* is, arguably, the filmmaker's most politically overt film.

To return to *Here Be Dragons*, the blend of *détournement* and *dérive* that forms the spine of the film presents a paean to cinema in general. As the film unfolds, Cousins delves into the Albanian film archives, a space which is in rapid deterioration. Many old Albanian films have been lost or destroyed due to improper storage. While a devastating loss to the country, and to cinephiles, Cousins remains hopeful, highlighting contemporary Albanian

cinema as exciting and exuberating. Though in some respects a slightly less personal film than *What is this Film Called Love?* it nonetheless brings Cousins' cinephilia —a core aspect of his personality —to the foreground. The film illustrates the journeying aspects of Cousins' approach. While the goal was to attend the film festival, the focus shifts to the importance of cinema preservation. We witness Cousins transform as the location impacts his emotions and behaviour. The genuine regret and fear of losing the films in the archives prompts further excavating of Albania's rich cinema history. Though not entirely without hope, Cousins projects enthusiasm for the country's cinematic future.

Global Psychogeography Filmmaking

Life May Be is the most "writerly" of Cousins' essay films. The letters take the form of fragments as each filmmaker describes their daily routines, expressing their concerns of isolation. Akbari discusses Iranian conservatism, and her loss of hope for significant socio-cultural-political progress for an equal future. The film opens on a static wide shot of foggy Scottish hills. Cousins announces through voice-over that instead of writing a formal essay to Akbari, he has written a personal letter (while sitting in a bar in Edinburgh). He reveals its contents, noting Akbari as a striking presence in Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002). Continuing, Cousins then imagines a scenario where they venture to the Swedish film archives and unearth materials on Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966). Cousins asks that Akbari look at the images of close-ups, as they remind him of the shots in her work. This imagined scenario sets the tone for the remainder of the film. Within the first few moments, we have been in Scotland, in an imagined Sweden, and then in Meygun, a province in Tehran, when Akbari responds.

We first see the hills near Akbari's home —matching Cousins' opening shot. Akbari continues with still images of her garden, family (including her many dogs), and areas of her home which feed her creativity. The still image collage continues and moves from Meygun to Dubai, where the filmmaker highlights her worries about inequality, conflict, and absence of a true democracy in the country. In return, Cousins responds through another letter, a wide shot of him sitting on a couch, typing away. What these scenes demonstrate is another example of performativity, at least on Cousins' part. As the wide shot continues, it becomes fractured: there is a jump cut from Cousins sitting with his laptop, to sometime later, with him on the couch but now in his underwear. A final jump cut then reveals a further lapse in time and he is now completely naked. He relates the liberation of wandering naked in Mexico City —intercutting scenes from *What is this Film Called Love?* —after writing about the confinement of clothing to Akbari. Links to *Persona* are pertinent as these jump cuts have a fragmentary impact on the visualisation. Famously, the film depicts the breakdown of personal identity, and the many fragments that create the "self" and how these overlap and collide with other people's psyches. *Life May Be* is structured to represent a duality, with

both filmmakers building on the last visual letter, sharing aspects of their current situations; by extension, their identities, their own psyches, begin to overlap.

Following this sequence is a montage of moving and static shots of various cities around the world, perhaps unused footage from Cousins' previous globetrotting *dérives*. Scenes such as this are a nexus for thinking, an "intersection" or sorts, where the roads connect as they would on a map. *Life May Be* unfolds as a global *dérive*, and for the first time Cousins' companion is a living person, Akbari, who is concurrently on their own drifting journey. Ultimately, the structure of the film and its various fragments are presented as paragraphs, and to a certain extent page breaks. There are numerous black screens throughout as the film shifts between filmmakers. In a way, it is arguably the most structured film Cousins' has made, perhaps in response to Akbari's co-direction. Finally, despite the film's visual minimalism, meaning its low-budget, DIY aesthetic and use of affordable digital cameras, its ambitions are grand, exploring global issues from remote locations. In the COVID-19 era, viewing the film from a contemporary perspective, it is aptly pertinent. *Life May Be* is in many respects a "lockdown" film, predominately shot in each filmmaker's home or hotel room. Since 2020, there have been numerous projects from directors around the world sharing their experiences of isolation during the pandemic but here, the film being made pre-COVID-19, depicts a self-imposed lockdown of sorts, where by staying still, both filmmakers can have a deeper reflection on themselves and each other. *Life May Be* indeed.

Conclusion

Alisa Lebow states that "first person films" are predominately about the mode of address where "films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position" (1). This article has highlighted Cousins as a filmmaker who has continuously placed himself at the centre of much of his work. However, these are not necessarily self-portraits. They do document and capture Cousins in candid, personal moments but they incorporate much of the locations and surroundings to illustrate their impact on his sense of being. Cousins often changes throughout these films as a consequence of these journeys. For instance, the exhaustion from *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* was utilised to create *What is this Film Called Love?* where the liberation of the filmmaking process is embodied physically through his wanderings in Mexico City. To a certain extent, the film imbues Cousins with a new lease on life. *Here Be Dragons* also takes this transformative aspect further, where the original intention of attending the Albanian Film Festival becomes an exploration of the country's rich cinema history, and Cousins champions the importance of film preservation. *Life May Be* shows identify becoming blurred with another filmmaker. In this instance, Cousins and Akbari share their lives through audio-visual letters that merge and overlap in numerous was, paying homage to Bergman's *Persona*.

In terms of practice, the various elements Cousins combines, including psychogeography, *détournement*, and *dérive* illustrate the mechanics employed to burst the cinematic bubble. In many respects, Cousins is a lone filmmaker who captures images consistently wherever he travels. However, as part of the psychogeographical process, he is accompanied by deceased artistic figures (often laminated portraits) to foster dialogues as a method to articulate his thoughts and reflections. Another figure that should be highlighted within this body of work is editor Timo Langer, who has steadily collaborated with Cousins, for his role in shaping these (often) improvised essay films into their final incarnations for public exhibition. Cousins' love of cinema may be the most significant constant throughout his work, where he has "consistently roamed both the globe and the history of cinema in order to uncover and celebrate the remarkable cultural power, diversity, and emotional reach of the moving image" (Murray 28). These psychogeographical essay films are a nurturing of sorts to continue innovation in a young art form. The grandiosity of epic projects such as *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, its sequel, and *Women Make Film* are balanced with these smaller, intimate films. They encapsulate what Debord and his fellow Situationists tried to achieve through their artistic endeavours and are an inspiration through their DIY approach. This liberatory practice is therefore available for anyone to adopt. As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19, and as Cousins' outputs over the last decade have demonstrated, there is nothing that can stop a creative treatment of reality. It is time to get the camera out.

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