## **Letting the brush lead: Mark Cousins, film-maker of the floating world**

**Abstract**

A hill of salt in the Belfast docklands shimmers like an iceberg at sea. A laminated photograph of Sergei Eisenstein drifts in front of a camera as it moves amongst the streets of Mexico City. A grey mist hovers across Stockholm, obscuring the city behind it. These three images are from a sequence of essay films directed by Mark Cousins. In this paper, I discuss the work of Cousins in terms of its floating aesthetics and mobile methodologies. Throughout his films, Cousins’s camera drifts through urban spaces, tracing the images and sounds of cityscapes that typically escape us. The films are attentive to the colours infused and refracted through their urban environments, prompting an understanding of cities as studies in fleeting colour, light and luminosity. I engage with Japanese aesthetic theories in order to draw out resonances between the historical art of urbanising Japan and the city scenes of Cousins’s films. This paper offers a reflection on the capacity of Cousins’s films to evoke an understanding of cities as lively, sensuous and evanescent harbours of a floating world.

Keywords: Mark Cousins; essay films; affect; embodiment; atmosphere; zuihitsu.

**Introduction**

A hill of salt in the Belfast docklands shimmers like an iceberg floating at sea. A laminated photograph of Sergei Eisenstein drifts in front of a camera as it moves amongst the streets of Mexico City. A grey mist hovers across Stockholm, obscuring the contours of the city behind it. These three images are from a sequence of impressionistic city symphonies directed by Mark Cousins: respectively, *I am Belfast* (2015), *What is this Film Called… Love?* (2012), and *Stockholm My Love* (2016), all ‘shot like documentaries, but written like letters or poems’ (Cousins, in Ciezadlo 2019: 18). Cousins’s camera drifts through these separate cityscapes, capturing the luminosity of their streets and the lyricism of their sonic geographies. Empirically, his films reveal the mobilities of each city, recording the quotidian movements of their human and non-human elements. Affectively, these films take one of the most representational of arts – cinema – and reconfigure it in a graceful, more-than-representational mode.

In this paper, I will discuss the work of Cousins in terms of its floating aesthetics and mobile methodologies. The protagonists in Cousins’s films walk – a lot, and leisurely. Their observations meander, conforming to the qualities of modern essay writing, which has been described as a ‘peripatetic genre’ (Forsdick 2006: 46; in Phillips 2018: 178). Cousins’s films are essay films, according to Rascaroli’s definition of the essay film as a genre in which fiction, nonfiction, and experimental traditions intersect and are blurred (2008: 43). Originating from the deeply subjective position of the director whose opinions are often expressed through voice-overs (as in Cousins’s films), and with a typically floating organisational structure (as Cousins’s mostly do), the essay film combines documentary approaches and art film sensibilities (Arthur 2003: 58). After a brief overview of Cousins and his work within the early 20th century city symphony genre, I borrow the idea of floating by engaging with aesthetic theories associated with the Japanese art tradition of *ukiyo-e* (literally translated as the ‘floating world pictures’ (Lane 1978: 11)), in order to draw out resonances between this historical art of urbanising Japan and the city scenes of Cousins’s films. To do so, this article continues with separate sections on, respectively, *I Am Belfast*, *What is this Film Called… Love?* and *Stockholm My Love*, in which questions of ordinary affects, embodied practices and urban atmospheres in these films are broached. Other writers will be drawn on to illustrate the themes in Cousins’s films; these include authors such as Kathleen Stewart (on affect), Tim Ingold (on walking as embodied practice) and Gernot Böhme (on the understanding of atmospheres). The article will continue with a discussion of Cousins’s films as essays that follow Japanese aesthetic principles (Richie 2007) and that keep open a ‘space for curiosity’ in how we understand the city in everyday ways (Phillips 2014).

**Mark Cousins: Film-maker of the floating world**

Mark Cousins is a film historian, writer and documentary maker who is known for his advocacy of film traditions marginalized in conventional histories of cinema. His major television series *The Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011), based on an earlier book (2004) with the same title, was notable for its thorough representation of non-Western traditions. His work has also included film histories of, and documentaries told through, children’s perspectives in *The Story of Children and Film* (2013), and *The First Movie* (2009), which used participatory approaches alongside traditional documentary methods by giving video recorders to children in Iraqi Kurdistan, allowing them to make their own films. Most recently, at the time of writing, his *Women Make Film* (2020) documentary series offers an alternative history of cinema through its exclusive focus on the films of female directors.

Alongside these projects, Cousins has assembled a portfolio of urban essay-films –completed with modest and sometimes miniscule budgets, with small casts and crew - that comprise the analytical core of this article[[1]](#footnote-1). His films about Belfast, Mexico City and Stockholm consciously update the city symphony tradition from the early years of European cinema. Through their montage techniques, films such as *Paris Qui Dort* (1923), *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) were integral in the positioning of cinema as a modern art form (Graf 2007). Although the city symphony genre declined in significance within the cinematic mainstream, Christie (2016) has identified Cousins’s work as part of a resurgent interest in the genre, alongside films such as Julien Temple’s *London: The Modern Babylon* (2012) and Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary on Rome, *Sacra GRA* (2013). With their contemplation on the relations between biography and place, Cousins’s essay-films share similarities with Guy Madding’s *My Winnipeg* (2007), Terence Davies’s film on Liverpool, *Of Time and the City* (2008), and the Finnish critic Peter Von Bagh’s *Helsinki, Forever* (2008) and *Remembrance: a small movie about Oulu in the 1950s* (2013).

Cousins has clearly and deliberately situated his urban films within the dormant tradition of the city symphony; indeed, the full title of his film on his childhood home is *I Am Belfast: A City Symphony*. In this article, however, I want to sketch out another argument about his approach to narrative and image-making that moves beyond European and North American cinematic traditions. Instead, I wish to situate his films about cities within a longer and non-Western art tradition of visual culture. Specifically, I want to invoke the Japanese tradition of *ukiyo-e* art as a heuristic that can sensitise us to the affective potencies, embodied practices and atmospheric qualities of Cousins’s contemporary city symphonies. The *ukiyo-e* art of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century documents the urban spaces and sensibilities that followed the move of Japan’s capital from Kyoto to Edo (Lane 1978). This move saw a splintering of social classes and an emergence of groups such as merchants with economic power but limited social status; it also saw an attendant development of new kinds of spaces – such as entertainment and pleasure zones - that represented a form of urban modernity quite distinct from European cities at the time. The *ukiyo-e* artists held a mirror to these new urban scenes; their portraits of actors, courtesans and merchants are redolent of the fleshy practices, cultural expressions and social norms of that particular time and place (Screech 2009).

Artists of the later *ukiyo-e* landscape tradition, such as Hokusai and Hiroshige, developed a way of representing natural and built environments in radically de-centred ways. For example, Hokusai’s *36 views of Mount Fuji* (c.1831) organised pictorial elements of foreground and background in ways that influenced much later developments in visual culture, both Japanese and European. Similarly, Hiroshige’s series of *100 Famous Views of Edo* (1856-9) offers intricate images of the urban world in all its physical materiality, social complexity and cultural vitality. By bringing such artistic exemplars into a discussion of Cousins’s work, the intention is not to argue that Cousins’s film of Belfast, for example, should be viewed as a contemporary document along the lines of Hiroshige’s Edo. Rather, and with the knowledge of his existing understanding and enthusiasm for Japanese aesthetics (e.g., 2017a: 382), it is to suggest that Cousins shares with such artists their ways of evoking affects, embodiment and atmospheres in his urban portraits. Between Cousins and the *ukiyo-e* artists is a shared understanding that the city, in all its immersive detail, can become a medium for different practices of seeing the everyday.

Moreover, there are a wider set of Japanese aesthetics that I wish to locate Cousin’s work within. Cousins’s films share the slow pace and contemplative tone that Donald Richie suggests as emblematic of Japanese cinema (2011: 183); indeed, Cousins has recently attempted to revise conventional thinking in cinema studies by arguing that the work of the celebrated Japanese film-maker whose films embody such qualities of contemplation – Yasujiro Ozu – should be considered as ‘a conceptual centre of film aesthetics’, more so than the films of the classic age of Hollywood (2011: 129). The characteristics of Japanese cinema derive from older indigenous literary traditions, and Cousins demonstrates a similar approach to story-telling within his work to these much older narrative traditions (Richie 2011). Cousins has himself recorded how its theatrical roots influenced the pronounced role of the narrator in Japanese cinema (2011: 40-41), and it is tempting to view his own uses of voiceover as a contemporary updating of the *benshi* tradition of pedagogical narrators in early Japanese cinema; certainly, his films switch narrators within scenes, provide commentary on the *mise en scène* and encourage the films to float seemingly free from dramatic arcs. This approach to story-telling is consistent with his preference for de-dramatised film and his argument that narrative in film should be able ‘to drift in, engage the protagonist, create its own world or micro-story, then sashay out again. As in life’ (Cousins 2008: 152). This distinction between drama and narrative is a trope within Japanese literature and cinema, with Richie arguing that structure in Japanese art tends to be ‘nominally ignored’ (2011: 141). Richie continues to associate this sense of flow in Japanese writing with the idea of *zuihitsu*, a term translated as ‘following the brush’, and letting it lead the story (ibid.: 142). Elsewhere, Richie discusses *zuihitsu* as an approach that counters the totalising organising structures of Western art and literature; Japanese aesthetics are inherently looser and essayistic in their sensibilities. Hence, he suggests we think of Japanese aesthetics as ‘a net of associations composed of listings or jottings, connected intuitively, that fills in a background and renders a subject visible’ (2007: 11). This is an almost perfect description of Cousin’s narrative style and aesthetic, and so I move now to discuss his city films, beginning with *I Am Belfast*.

**‘A riot of colour’: Belfast and its ordinary affects**

*I Am Belfast* is a beguiling film, full of contrasting affects. The film opens with brief footage of a night storm, bristling and crackling with thunder claps, before cutting to an extended sequence of the brightest sunlight, seen from an airplane window. Sound-tracked by the gentle song, *Softly, Softly*, by the Belfast born singer Ruby Murray, this is a dreamlike dialectic, shifting registers between the tense rasp of the storm and the serenity of the floating clouds. From this point on, the film takes the form of an act of urban exploration (Pinder 2005) around the city between the off-screen narrator (voiced by Cousins) and an older woman, played by Helena Bereen. Measured by the conventional expectations of action-driven cinema, not much happens in this film; in another sense, though, listening into their conversation opens up a rich and impressionistic history of the city, from the nineteenth century to the present day. Bereen’s character is called Belfast, she informs us that she is 10,000 years old and is, indeed, the city made manifest; “I am the place, I am the landscape”, she says, early within the film. Cousins’s decision to cast a woman in this central role is pointed, given the typical tendency in film to use Belfast as a backdrop to heavy-handed stories about paramilitary violence and toxic masculinity. Indeed, the place of women, and women’s bodies, in cultural narratives of the sectarian city has been muted to such an extent that reversing this feels like a politically significant gesture (Reid 2005). For much of the film, the camera dwells on close up images of Bereen as she walks through the city in her long black coat, which often sets her in vivid contrast to the tones and colours of the background. As outlined in an earlier review (XXXX 2016), *I Am Belfast* is notable for the way in which colour is staged in this film. Thus, the white mountain of salt at the city’s docks is counterpointed by Belfast’s black coat at the beginning of her urban drift (figure 1). We have the stark contrast between the paleness of her skin and the dark tones of her nail polish (figure 2). And we have the gold-sprayed wall against which Belfast stands at various points in the film to listen into the city, with the shifting sunlight behind the close-ups of her face (figure 3). Through such images, we glimpse Roland Barthes’s understanding of colour as ‘a kind of bliss… like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell’ (in Batchelor 2000: 32).

Cousins uses extended shots of very ordinary buildings and environments to reveal the ways in which film-makers use colour to document everyday affects and urban practices. As argued elsewhere (xxxx 2016), Cousins’s film is reminiscent of the art practice and theories of Josef Albers. In his pedagogical writings for students, Albers argued that colour afforded the greatest opportunity for intimate and emotionally charged ways of seeing. A focus on viewing colours in their own right and in interaction with each other – rather than as illustrative or decorative elements within an artwork – leads to what Albers terms a practice of ‘thinking in situations’ (2013: 68); that is, an embodied and haptic mode of observation that resonates with non-representational modes of analysis (Thrift 2008). As an example, Cousins’s camera is positioned in an everyday street scene at the brow of a hill, framing a shot from a low angle at a crossroads where pedestrians share the space with car traffic. The sky is full of intensely dark clouds, and this ordinary scene is punctuated visually by the effervescent greens and reds of several trees on the street. ‘And look at these colours: an autumn riot!’, Belfast intones. ‘You only need a touch of yellow’, she continues, to complete the tone of a classic autumnal scene. At this point, two young women, one pushing a child’s stroller, glide into view on the right-hand side of the screen. Loaded onto the stroller are bags of shopping, including a bulging bright yellow one. ‘That’s better’, Belfast says, contentedly.

The next sequence of images moves us to the famous yellow gantry cranes of the Harland and Wolff shipyard, which Belfast describes as ‘a proscenium’. We understand the city here as a stage, set not for the high drama of sectarian violence, as is the tendency in most films in the last half century set in Belfast, but for everyday affects, and what might be called the urban ‘infra-ordinary’ (Perec 1999: 210). In *I Am Belfast* Cousins avoids the frontstage architecture of the city in order to illuminate its backstage spaces, which are full of ‘little unexpected moments, street dramas, visual things such as a silvery snail’s trail, or a beautiful bird’s wing’ (Cousins 2016: 2). His film is reminiscent of George Perec’s project to meticulously document the street furniture, traffic signs and unremarkable public space of Paris (2010). In his aspiration to comprehensively itemise ‘what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds’ (2010: 3), Perec offered a model of anthropological observation which is endotic rather than exotic (xxxx 2019) and a discipline of ‘seeing flatly, which involves attending to that which usually goes unnoticed’ in our rush for drama, novelty and the iconic (Phillips 2018: 182). In its focus on the everyday scenes, encounters and relations within the city, Cousins’s film observes the messy richness of life as it is lived, albeit not in the conventional dramatic narratives of mainstream cinema. It is, then, closer to a careful and committed ethnographic account of the city, in all its ordinary affects.

Such a description, of course, is a reference to Kathleen Stewart’s call for an immersive sensitivity to the ‘tangle of trajectories, connections, and disjunctures’ that together comprise the affective fecundity of ordinary life (2007: 5). As with Stewart’s writing, Cousins’s Belfast film offers an ‘idiosyncratic map’ of everyday experience, and its emotional undercurrents (Stewart 2007: 4). Cousins’s Belfast is a de-familiarised place, made strange by the careful detail of his record. Referring to Agnes Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Cousins approvingly notes her method of film-making as ‘gleaning, finding things, picking them up’ (in Ciezadlo 2019: 20), and there are affinities between Varda’s films, Cousins’ essay films and Stewart’s writings. Stewart has characterised her *Ordinary Affects* book as a ‘space where objects are oblique, noted in passing out of the corner of the eye, barely sensed but oddly compelling too, like punctums or punctures in the hum of the ordinary’ (in Fannin et al. 2010: 929); much like the bobbing of a bag of groceries against the side of a child’s stroller, or the tip of a salt hill just visible from the side of an urban motorway. Ben Highmore has written of Stewart’s work that as you read it, ‘you become more and more alert to your surroundings’ (2010: 5); the same is true of Cousins’s film too, which effects consideration of not just Belfast, but the everyday urban more generally. Its ability to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange is a trait held in common in Cousins’s film about Mexico City, to which I now turn.

**Urban knowing through the feet: Mexico City and the ecstasies of place**

Cousins’s essay film on Mexico City, *What is this film called… love?* (2012) prefigured some of *I Am Belfast*’s themes. It is a document of Cousins walking throughout the city over three days using a cheap hand-held camera to record the very ordinary places he went to (cafes, bars, churches, traffic intersections and flyovers). There is continuous narration, mostly by Cousins himself, although with several twists, such as the sudden switch to a female narrator and the perspective of a deer at the end of the film. There is oscillation between genders too, from male to female and back again, likely in homage to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (Woolf is cited by Cousins as a major influence (2017b)). On the first of his three days in Mexico City, Cousins hits upon the idea of making a very different film in tone to the previously ‘serious’ films he is known for. To use his own words, the instinct of *What is this film called… love?* was to create an ‘amateur’ film. Cousins’s characterisation of his film as an ‘amateur’ project anticipates Andy Merrifield’s call for thinking about cities to be refreshed by the enthusiasms of the amateur urbanist (2015: 761). In this, Merrifield argues that amateur urbanists hold greater moral authority than professional planners and academic researchers because of their ‘more expansive, more eclectic’ visions of cities as places of conviviality (2015: 755).

Amateurs are, perhaps, more willing than academics or corporate film-makers to follow their instincts when composing their portraits of place. For a city symphony about Mexico City in particular, *What is this film called… love?* is often punctuated by drifting images of other cities (Berlin, Edinburgh) and non-urban landscapes (Monument Valley, the Isle of Skye), with Cousins clearly letting the brush lead, in the *zuihitsu* style. Cousins’s decision to take us on a Situationist dérive of Mexico City initially derives from his dream about another city, Moscow. Cousins links the two cities via the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein’s unfinished film *Que Viva Mexico*. He carries a laminated photo of Eisenstein throughout his urban drift, as muse (figure 4). Cousins recounts that Eisenstein was besotted with Mexico, describing it in his writings as ‘an ecstatic place’. Cousins takes this term as an opportunity to explore the ecstatic properties of film-making in what we might call a more-than-representational mode (Lorimer 2005). Film-making in such a mode involves challenging the ocular-centric logics of representation and, instead, sketching out a more haptic awareness of place, its affects and affecting qualities. It shares with Stewart’s approach to ethnography a commitment to ‘a sensing out of what’s happening’ in the ordinary spaces of the city (in Fannin et al. 2010: 930). There is something of that aspiration in how Cousins frames the ordinary buildings, insects and botanical life of the city. Thinking Eisenstein alongside Husserl, Cousins argues for an embodied, pre-logical and sensory approach to film-making. He shares explicit and intimate images of his body at different points in the film, whether walking naked as homage to Eisenstein’s theories of ecstasy whilst in Monument Valley, peeling off the plaster that covers his new tattoo of Eisenstein’s surname on his forearm on-screen, or revealing the pains prompted by knowing the city through the feet. By bringing these facets of ecstatic experience together, Cousins’s film gives us a way of imaging the city as reverie, as animated, and as embodied.

The idea of embodiment is central to *What is this film called… love?*, with Cousins musing on the importance of walking as a way of engaging with the everyday spaces of the city. For O’Neill and Hubbard (2010), walking methods are empathic, imaginative and engaging approaches to sharing the perspective of others. Ingold and Vergunst state that ‘the movement of walking is itself a way of knowing’ (2008: 5), in contrast to the tendency in Western thought to subjugate the practice of walking to the process of thinking. Elsewhere, Ingold argues that ‘cognition should not be *set off* from locomotion… since walking is itself a form of circumambulatory knowing’ (2004: 331). For Rebecca Solnit, the ‘rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking’ (2001: 5), and this insight brings us closer to understanding Cousins’s analysis of Mexico City as a kind of rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004), with Cousins observing the city in embodied and *multi*-sensory ways, using a primarily ocular-centric artform to do so.

Cousins’s documenting of Mexico City resonates with Roland Barthes’s observations on Tokyo as a place that ‘can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience… by memory of the trace it has left in you’ (1983: 36). In its modest way, Cousins’s film acts as a document of his movement within the streets of Mexico City, with frequent hand-held camera shots tracing his walking through his silhouette on the ground (figure 5). There are yet more frequent shots of his feet as they walk, walk and walk even more. It seems as if such images are marking out the embodied effort of Cousins as he comes to know the city through his feet and, moreover, comes to find ways of telling the city through the practice of walking. Walking becomes a mode of story-telling (de Certeau 1984), narrated through the body, whereby ‘landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape’ (Ingold 2004: 333). Tim Edensor argues that, ordinarily, walking in overly regulated urban environments can lead to an ocular-centric understanding of space. Indeed, he suggests that ‘narrative cannot effectively capture the momentary impressions confronted, the peculiar effervescent atmospheres, the rhythms, immanent sensations and physical effects of walking’ (2008: 137). Drawing on his own experience of walking in ruined buildings, Edensor prefers story-telling practices through space that are ‘fragmented, non-linear, impressionistic and contingent’ (ibid.: 137). To this end, the improvisational sensibilities of Cousins offers narratives that are light, aphorsitic and open-ended enough to empathically evoke the lives half-glimpsed in street scenes, stuck traffic and the political protests captured by his camera.

Amongst the consequences of Cousins using film, one of the most representational of all art forms, in an ecstatic and more than representational way is that his camera prompts ‘a way of looking that *feels* its way round that place it finds rather than fixing that place with a distancing look’ (Latham 1999: 463, emphasis added). Cousins uses a visual medium to convey a haptic appreciation of place, with its ephemeral qualities beheld at a walking pace, somewhat in the manner of Walter Benjamin. It is as if he elides the ocular-centric character of this technology in favour of a different set of affordances, using the camera almost as a partially sighted person uses a cane to sense the city’s streets[[2]](#footnote-2). Through its careful attention to the ordinary spaces of the city, *What is this film called… love?* is successful in communicating the effervescence of Mexico City’s street cultures. The connection between walking as an embodied practice and an appreciation of the everyday is elegantly rendered by Vergunst where he writes that

To understand walking as an everyday activity is … to argue that a particular sensuousness and a tactile way of knowing are central to everydayness. In walking this sensuousness allows the environment to be known through a textural relationship between the walker and the ground. The small skills of walking… do as much to constitute the experience and meaning of the walk as do the grand vistas along the main street of the city or from the top of the mountain. They are also perhaps closer to the heart of the everyday. (2008: 120)

He continues to raise the place of emotion within these questions. ‘If walking is understood to be a relational and textural activity’ he asks, ‘then *where*, in experiential terms, is the emotion?’ (ibid.: 120). It is to the site of Cousins’s most recent city symphony that I turn for some answers to this question.

**Urban emotions: Stockholm, and the atmospherics of loss**

An understanding of the urban in emotional terms is central to Cousins’s most recent urban film *Stockholm My Love* (2016), which figures the city as the site of trauma. The film is set over two days in the life of an architect, Alva Achebe, played by Neneh Cherry. The first of the film’s three acts begins with a quiet monologue in English between its central character and an imagined other, her father, in which a painful event that haunts her is alluded to, but not quite addressed fully, as she walks Stockholm’s streets. The muted tones of Alva’s speech are mirrored by the muted colours of the imagery; we see close-ups of grey bridges, grey mist, grey feathered pigeons, grey concrete buildings, grey asphalt, Alva’s grey bag and a public square in various shades of grey (figure 6). In *The Luminous and the Grey*, Batchelor argues that ‘grey is the colour of the dying’ (2014: 63). There is a feeling of inertia or flatness pervading the film in its early stages, and the feel of this film is downbeat by comparison with those Belfast and Mexico City, at least in its first act. Here splashes of colour are fleeting, such as in the bright hi-vis jackets of children in a school party walking across a suburban public square, or in the deep greens and red velvet of the Gunnar Asplund designed Skandia cinema which offers a brief refuge from the pained memories of the central character, and the greyness of the surrounding city (figure 7).

The absence of bright colour is echoed in the play of muted light on brickwork and tree branches as the architect walks slowly through the quiet atmospherics of Sigurd Lewerentz’s St Mark’s Church, which is situated within the second act of the film. In this act, the architect speaks in Swedish, when she addresses another older man, Gunnar, who was killed when knocked over by her car on the same date the previous year. Her imagined conversation with Gunnar is the emotional pivot of the film, and this point of provisional recovery is accompanied by a fuller range of vivid colour emerging slowly through the afternoon (figure 8). From this point on, the luminosity of the sunlight fills the cinema screen, and the soundtrack feels less apprehensive. The architect’s body moves somewhat differently – less hesitantly, as she finds her way back home for the evening. The third act begins with the dawn of a new day, in which the architect emerges less ponderously out of her apartment building, and where the sun shines brightly. Many similar scenes are offered to those glimpsed earlier in the film, but with marked differences. So, where we have a close-up of tree branches, these are covered with deep-green mosses in contrast to the bare branches of the previous day; where we have perspectives of trawlers in the harbour, these are gently rocking in a blue river now, in contrast to the grey boats in grey sea of the first act. And, in the latter part of the film, we can see the skyline of Stockholm vividly in contrast to the foggy haze, or *sfumato* lighting, of the long shots earlier in the film. In the last third of the film, the architect’s words in Swedish are addressed to the city itself, her speech moving from tentative articulations of remorse to expressions of gratitude. The camera catches the red of her hair, and the heart lifts at the sight of her excited laughter on a rollercoaster ride. She sings at the site of a light-bulb factory; her face is open and ecstatic, expressing ‘a kind of bliss’, to use Barthes’s phrase once again (in Batchelor 2000: 32). Stockholm has finally afforded Alva a ‘walking cure, perhaps, rather than a talking one’ for her grief (Christie 2017: 1).

The above synopsis of the film suggests a straightforward dichotomy between a portrait of life half lived in the grey wash of grief in the first part of the film and a fuller affective experience in the later forgiving colours of the city. But there is a subtler message at work here that is less dichotomous and more dialectical at root. Cousins’s Stockholm and its grey washes shares something of Batchelor’s assessment of colour in urban environments, where he writes that:

colour is usually accompanied by the less than colourful. It is supported by the contingencies of the street: it is literally bolted onto the sides of buildings, propped up on ledges and secured to roofs, and its reflections form in the potholes and gutters on the ground… In the city the luminous is almost always accompanied by the grey: they cohabit and sustain one another in an often unacknowledged relationship of interdependence. (2014: 60)

Batchelor continues to suggest that the ‘city is at the intersection of the luminous and the grey, or is itself that intersection. And this is not just a fact of the colour space of the city but one of its defining qualities’ (2014: 61). Such qualities speak of the atmospheric qualities of place.

The question of atmosphere in the built environment has been the subject of recent debates informed by the theories of Gernot Böhme, for whom atmosphere is ‘something that is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character’ (1993: 114). Emanating from the affective encounters that arise from the intersection between people, places and objects, for Böhme atmospheres ‘seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze’ (ibid.). Floating between an ‘objective and subjective’ awareness of place (Edensor 2017: 40), and arising from the colours, sounds and materialities of the built environment, urban atmospheres hold an ambient power (Allen 2006). Atmosphere can be considered, as BIlle and colleagues suggest, ‘a vague yet anything but weak phenomenon’ (2015: 36). In this film, Cousins conjures up mood through lighting, colour, camera-work and words, but perhaps most significantly from the interaction between Alva’s body, her movement and the wider environment.

Writing in general terms, Richie has characterised the difference between American and European cinema in the following way: in the US, movies are often driven by action, whereas in the European tradition, there is a firmer focus on character (2011: 182). In *Stockholm My Love*, there is less emphasis on action (the main event having happened a year beforehand) than on character, making the film feel part of the European tradition. However, Richie continues to argue that Japanese film is about the combination of action and character: he calls this combination ‘atmosphere’, which the film director creates ‘by limiting his locale’ (2011: 184). Following on from this thesis, we see Cousins’s film as being driven and shaped by the atmospheric qualities of the city. Whether foiled by the grey mist and diffuse light of day one, or washed in the brilliant sunshine of day two, the physical fabric of Stockholm shapes the film’s atmospheres, and its affective potencies. Böhme has written of the ecstatic nature of things, and the capacity for their affective qualities and colours to exceed their physical form (1993); here again, in spite of the tonal and climatic differences between Mexico City and Stockholm, we glimpse a portrait of the city as an ecstatic place.

Now, as will be apparent in the above discussion, *Stockholm My Love* differs from *I Am Belfast* and *What is this Film Called… Love?* in a number of ways. Most obviously, it can be defined as a work of fiction, with less ambiguity than the blurred genre boundaries of the Belfast and Mexico City films. The shift to a fictional film prompts a more linear narrative, bringing it closer to the character of drama than the looser narrative tradition Richie uses as a marker of Japanese cinema (2011). Notwithstanding this, there is still the strong sense of the provisional and atmospheric qualities of place that pervade Cousins’s earlier essay films. There is still a different manner of telling, traced through affect, embodiment and what might be termed an ‘ethos of animation’ in *Stockholm My Love* than we might expect from a character-driven story (Vannini 2015: 319). There is still an emphasis in this film on ‘the fleeting, viscous, lively, embodied, material, more-than-human, precognitive, non-discursive dimensions of spatially and temporally complex lifeworlds’ (Vannini 2015: 317) that signposts its non-representational sensibilities. And finally, in its attention to the ‘oblique events and background noises that be barely sensed and yet are compelling’ (Stewart 2011: 445), *Stockholm My Love* commits to an examination of the urban, in all its affective complexity and emotional richness, that marks it out as sharing the observational qualities of the most careful ethnographies of the ordinary city.

**Towards the tentative: the trace of Japanese aesthetics**

As has been noted throughout the article, Cousins’s films demonstrate the qualities of essayistic writing, not least in their tentative affects. This is not to claim that the organizational structures are the same in all films – as just noted, *Stockholm My Love* has a more defined structure than the Belfast and Mexico City films. Neither is it to indicate a lack of structural thought on Cousins’s part – he has distinguished between two stages of his method, namely the ‘hard’ design stage where decisions about structure occur, and then the ‘soft’ planning where he considers the emotional and observational aspects of the films (in Ciezadlo 2019: 20). But claiming these as essay films is to recognise the ways in which all three movies treat affect, emotion and embodiment by highlighting the ephemeral, the tentative and the atmospheric in their city portraits. The themes of these films float by, hovering in the air as their protagonists move through the city. As I have argued above, Cousins’s films display a strong affinity with the principles of Japanese aesthetics. To suggest that his approaches align with Japanese aesthetics is not to underestimate the deep influence of other traditions – since his earliest days of film writing, he has been a strong advocate of global film cultures (2008), not least Iranian, South American and North African films. He has also written enthusiastically about North American and European traditions, with a particular fondness for road movies (Ciezadlo 2019: 20). But when thinking about their narrative techniques, structural approaches and framing of spatial scenes, to my mind his films evoke the emotional resonances and story-telling norms of Japanese cinema, and Japanese literary aesthetics more generally.

With the partial exception of *Stockholm My Love*, Cousins’s abeyance of pronounced structure in his city films gives them a shared sensibility with the Japanese *zuihitsu* tradition of writing, a famous example of which is Tanizaki’s essay on aesthetics (2001). In a *zuihitsu*, the structure of a work becomes ‘the multiplicity of strokes that make up the aesthetic quality, one which they imply and which we infer’ (Richie 2007: 12). Extending this argument, Richie demonstrates fundamental distinctions between Japanese film and Western cinema in their tendencies towards, respectively, narrative and drama. He explains that the ‘former is told, recounted by narrator; the latter is shown, enacted by characters in the narrative itself’ (2011: 136). His point is not so much about the presence of narrators such as those traditionally found in Japanese films (Cousins 2011: 40-41), against a more straight-forward focus on live action that speaks for itself in Western cinema (although it is true that one of the most striking features of Cousins’s films are their intervening narrators, even in *Stockholm My Love*). Rather, the point is broader, and touches upon the extent to which Japanese film attempts to engage its audience, more so than simply seeking to entertain it. This goes further than which words are said in dialogue, and who said them; the story-telling happens through the film’s visual grammar too.

The filmmaker presents his spectator with a picture. If it is a series of close-ups, tightly edited to form a message, that is one thing. If it is a single shot, taken from far away and lasting a long time, that is another. In the first, instructions have been given; in the second, they must be discovered. (Richie 2011: 141)

This contrast, Richie admits, may be stretched and challenged, as there are European film-makers who also specialise in slow cinema. But my argument is that Cousins’s films, with their extended takes of ordinary urban scenes, share strong affinities with the Japanese tradition, most obviously the work of Yasujiro Ozu, about whom Cousins has written at length (2011: 125-133).

Cousins shares with a filmmaker such as Ozu a distinct spatial sensibility and de-dramatised approach to narrative. Cousins has written of Ozu that he departed from cinematic narrative conventions by editing his films ‘not for action but for visual balance’ (2008: 159). Elsewhere, Cousins draws out the affective implications of Ozu’s preference for low angles to frame his characters interactions, in contrast to the conventional approach of filming at adult shoulder height or eye level: such low angles in Ozu’s films lend their actors ‘a weightlessness absent from more grounded cinema traditions’ (2011: 128), as they glide above, and look down towards, the camera. Ozu’s framing shots can be understood best with reference to the concepts of *mu*, stressing the importance of emptiness or nothingness in Japanese aesthetics, and of *ma*, which recognizes the importance of the interval in time, and the interstitial in space, to our lived experience. Richie writes that

[Ozu’s] world is created of very little… Often his scenes are empty. People have not yet entered, or have already left. The camera gazes, in a sleeping, half-dark room, at a common vase holding nothing. And we fill this vessel with the emotions we have been holding, emotions generated by the film itself. (2011; 47-8)

Similarly, Cousins fills his city symphonies with images – of buildings, trees, storms and sunlight – that float free of narrative drive and evoke atmospheres of emptiness. Looked at another way, these images are not empty so much as deliberate in their opening of space for the viewer to engage with. In this, Cousins’s films pulls its audience in, as participants in the emotional meanings of these films, and the urban cultures they conjure.

**Conclusion: Mark Cousins, film-maker of the curious and floating world**

In this article, I have gathered together three of Mark Cousins’s city symphony films, and demonstrated their shared affinities with Japanese aesthetic traditions. I have discussed these films together in order to trace the connecting themes and approaches that mark them as significant contributions to the essay film genre. Cousins has characterised the essay film genre as nurturing ‘the most stylistically and thematically free films’ in the whole cinematic tradition (in Ciezadlo 2019: 19), and so it is with his own work, which hovers over the dramatic conventions of mainstream cinema, and glides away from the narrative expectations of documentary film-making. Cousins’s aspiration that his films remain ‘open, moving, playful, tentative, uncertain, or ecstatic’ (in Ciezadlo 2019: 21) can be seen in his city symphonies, and so I have drawn out some of these qualities when describing how they prompt attention to the ordinary affects that animate our everyday environments (Stewart 2007) and the atmospheres they evoke (Böhme 1993). Moreover, I have considered the walking methods which Cousins uses to understand these different cities, the ways of knowing they allow (Ingold 2004), the ways of telling they afford (Solnit 2001) and the kinds of critical speculation they encourage (Edensor 2008). His work is speculative and free-floating because Cousins is curious about the world and, through his films, creates a ‘space for curiosity’ that remains open to others (Phillips 2014).

Urban researchers driven by curiosity are often committed to the ordinary and everyday as a source of infinite interest (Phillips 2018). Indeed, Cousins’s films question the idea of banality itself; their extended takes of tree-bark, weeds and ordinary factory buildings offer case studies in the fecundity of apparently unremarkable places. They take us to the types of place where Cousins claims to be happiest: ‘near the bus terminus on the outside of town, where power isn’t but where life is’ (in Ciezaldo 2019: 23). In this, these films offer a contemporary articulation of the examination of the everyday urban, in all its rich detail and transience, that resonates with the paintings and prints of the *ukiyo-e* art tradition. Cousins shares with the floating world artists an attentiveness to the overlooked colours, affects and experiences in our everyday environments and habits; Cousins also shares with these earlier artists a sensibility attuned to the embodied and emotional aspects of the urban experience. Cousins suggests that the contemporary city is a place of fleeting encounter and floating life, and that rendering such ordinary affects requires an affective re-calibration of the representational logics and methods that characterise academic accounts of the urban (Stewart 2007). Underlying these films is an argument about how our imaginations can sometimes fall short of our empirical observations of our surroundings, their materialities and affective qualities. Cousins’s camera drifts through urban spaces, tracing the images and sounds of cityscapes that typically escape us. Just as the ‘floating world’ artists understood several centuries earlier (Lane 1978), these new films suggest that the city can be our medium for different, more immersive ways of seeing. Be it Stockholm, Mexico City or Belfast, Cousins finds different practices of seeing because of them and, through breathing new life into the old city symphony tradition, these films help to reanimate our contemporary urban imaginaries.

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Figures



Figure 1: A mountain of salt, with Belfast in the foreground (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 2: Belfast’s hands (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 3: ‘a kind of bliss… like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell’ (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 4: Eisenstein in Mexico City (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 5: The embodied film-maker (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 6: Stockholm in the grey morning light (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 7: Alva in Asplund’s Skandia cinema (Source: Mark Cousins)



Figure 8: Alva in Stockholm’s Skogskyrkogården (Source: Mark Cousins)

1. In addition to these films, Cousins includes *Here Be Dragons* (2013), which is located in Tirana, as part of his ‘listening to the city’ series (in Ciezadlo 2019: 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to XX for this insight. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)