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# Cinema paradiso

**Mark Cousins' epic television series based on his book about the history of world film is impassioned, intellectually stimulating and truly global, writes Clarence Tsui**

This time last year, Mark Cousins broke a routine he had followed for most of his career as a filmmaker, festival programmer and critic. Rather than head to Cannes to check out the latest fare at its annual film festival – an event he had attended since 1987 – he stayed home in Edinburgh to work. "I thought I would miss it," says Cousins, recalling the moment he decided to pass on the chance to view the unveiling of the best in international cinema. "But, surprisingly, I didn't."

That Cousins so easily did without his Cannes fix probably stemmed from the wealth of film-related material he was trawling through on his home computer. So, he didn't witness Bernardo Bertolucci being presented with an honorary Palme d'Or, but he was busy editing his own clips of the Italian director talking about his work anyway. As the festival celebrated its special night for Egyptian films, Cousins could delve into footage he had amassed of past Egyptian classics and recordings of his candid conversations with late filmmaker Youssef Chahine.

All this represents a very small part of the incredible vault of material Cousins has accumulated since 2005 for his documentary series *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, which is now available on DVD. A mammoth, 15-hour work, it is based on his 2004 book of the same title, about the evolution of the medium across the world, from its beginnings in the late 19th century to the present day.

What the filmmaker didn't envision was how epic his odyssey would become. When his producer, John Archer, suggested making the film, Cousins told him a three-hour documentary was needed to do his "story" justice. Six years later, it is released as a cultural juggernaut.

It traces the development of cinema across time (from Louis Le Prince's 1888 piece, *Traffic Crossing Leeds Bridge*, to Christopher Nolan's *Inception* of 2010) and geographical space (from the Hollywood studios to rural Iran, and from Parisian boulevards to Tiananmen Square in Beijing, via congested roundabouts in Dakar) – complete with snippets of more than 1,000 films and rarely seen footage of filmmakers in action as well as of the social turmoil from which their work emerged.

Through its 15 hour-long segments, the film places the US and Europe as the first cradles of institutionalised filmmaking, before the narrative shifts to Asia, South America and Africa from the 1950s onwards, as Cousins traces his story with thoughtful juxtaposition of examples from around the world.

Cousins manages to show how filmmakers take cues from their predecessors. Carol Reed's use of a character imagining a face out of the froth in his coffee (in *Odd Man Out*) is appropriated by Jean-Luc Godard (in the famous cosmos-in-a-cup shot in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*), and Martin Scorsese (in *Taxi Driver*) channels Travis Bickle's volatile inner self through a close-up of an Alka-Seltzer dissolving in a glass of water).

**Critic and filmmaker Mark Cousins with Maggie Cheung on the Great Wall (above) during the making of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, for which he travelled the world. Cousins in Hong Kong (top).** Photo: K.Y. Cheng

Chinese-language cinema features prominently in Cousins' film as he goes beyond the usual landmarks of Bruce Lee and directors John Woo Yu-sum, Wong Kar-wai and Zhang Yimou.

"I must say one of the memorable things was meeting Xie Jin," he says, referring to the late director who was persecuted by the Red Guards in the 1960s because of the "reactionary elements" in his 1965 film, *Two Stage Sisters* (a clip is shown in *The Story of Film*, screened earlier at this year's Hong Kong International Film Festival). "[He bears] all that trauma and the scars of the Cultural Revolution. It was astonishing he didn't compromise under all that … he had lost his memory somewhat when I met him, but he represented Chinese cinema and the extraordinary times before the Cultural Revolution. And it was fascinating to me to meet a man who went that far back, who saw the Ruan Lingyu films when they first came out," Cousins says.

He has devoted considerable screen time to the 1930s Chinese film icon too. Apart from visiting Ruan's grave and the Chinese Film Archive to do research on her work, he also went to the Great Wall of China with Maggie Cheung Man-yuk – who played Ruan in Stanley Kwan Kam-pang's Ruan biopic, *Centre Stage*.

Because his book cited examples from around the world, Cousins flew around the world to visit the places where those films were made and to talk to filmmakers about the significance of the classics mentioned in his compendium.

"I was writing a book for my 15-year-old self – that was when I read *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich," says Cousins. "And what I liked about it was that it didn't have that much jargon, and it had certain narratives [in its charting of the history of art]. It was like a tasting menu, as it gave you flavours of different things.

"But it wasn't great on Eastern art. So I thought, wouldn't it be great if there was such a book for cinema, a single volume which is accessible and passionately international, a history of cinema which doesn't make the same mistakes as many other 'histories' had, written by white people in the West who don't know too much about African or Asian cinema? And when I was writing the book I kept thinking, if only I could show people this clip of *Casablanca* or *A Touch of Zen* instead of just writing about it. So the film is a dream come true."

Born and raised in Northern Ireland, Cousins says his engagement with left-field cinema came quite late in life. "I came from a very working-class background, so there was no idea of cultural or artistic cinema then – it was not available to me in my world," he recalls. He says he didn't discover so-called "world cinema" until he was 19, when he was preparing to

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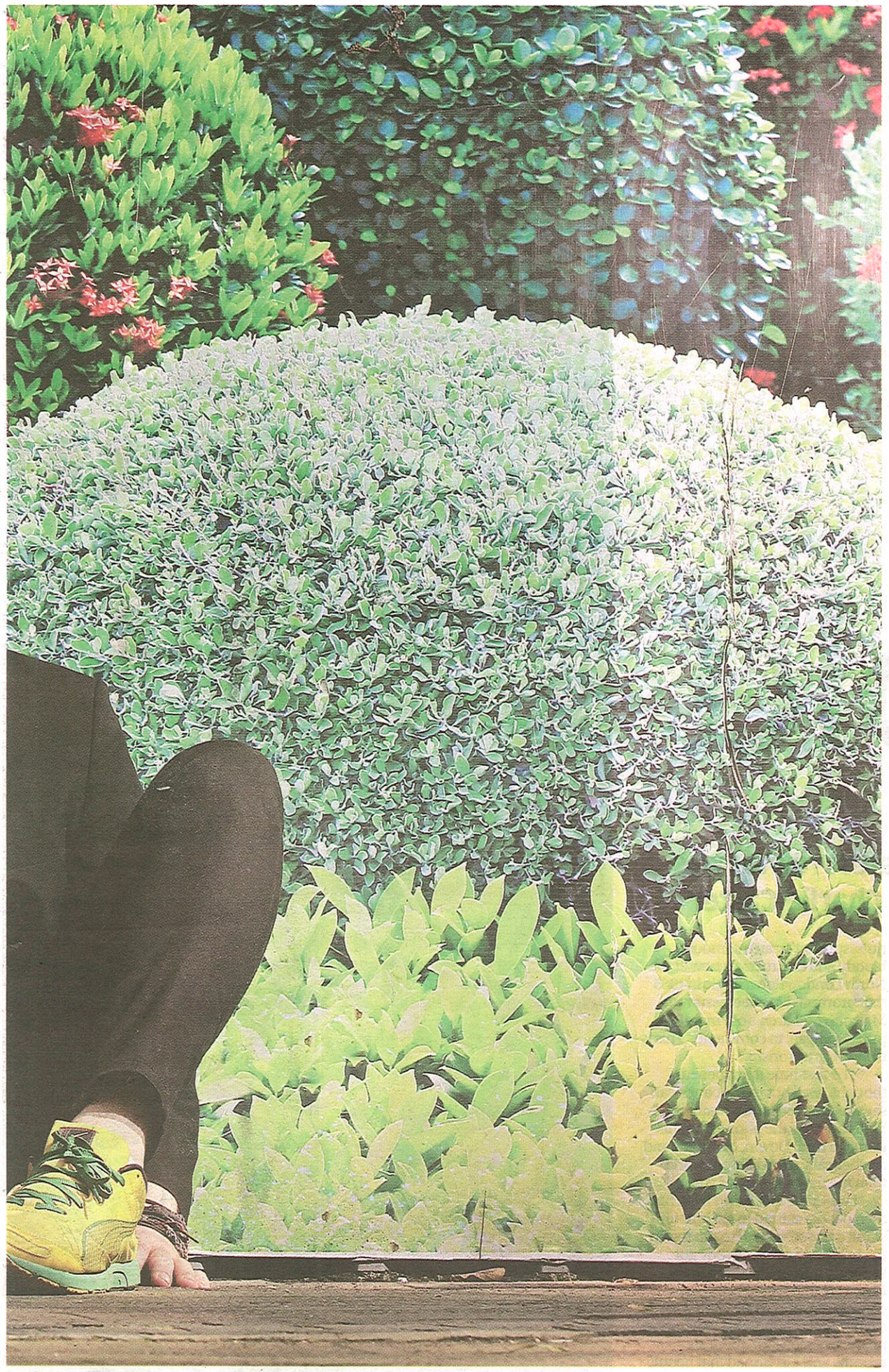

study film, media studies and fine art at the University of Stirling in Scotland. The experience of "seeing everything" informed his budding career as a filmmaker, and in 1991 he joined the Edinburgh Film Festival as a programmer before becoming its director.

Leaving the festival five years later, he divided his time between presenting film programmes on television, writing books, teaching cinema courses, directing documentaries, running other festivals (such as Cinema China, a showcase which toured 20 British cities in 2007), and running a charity called Scottish Kids Are Making Movies, which aims to encourage teenagers to "think creatively about film".

It's an initiative that reflects Cousins' efforts to bring films, complete with their visceral magic and their intellectual contexts, closer to the audience. In 2008, he and actress Tilda Swinton organised a film festival in the small town of Nairn, where audiences watched movies while seated on bean-bags. The next year, they put together a travelling festival in which a truck carrying a portable film screen was hauled, by the pair plus a team of fellow cinephiles, across the Scottish Highlands to bring films to audiences living in the more remote parts of the region.

"Tilda and I have a word which we often use: 're-enchant'. Some multiplexes might be good, but they are basic architectural voids with no sense of humanity. We'd like to make something more magical of the film-going experience, so what we'd like to do is to take the idea of a festival and mash it up with other ideas, like a children's party or rave culture [Cousins recorded a drum'n'bass track inspired by Jean Eustache's *La Maman et la Putain* in 2004]," Cousins says. "We made a real physical effort to show our love of films, which is our religion."

His latest project is another pilgrimage. *What is This Film Called Love?* – with a soundtrack by P.J. Harvey and Simon Fisher Turner – is a road movie-style documentary about walking, a process which allows people to "remember things more and think more".

And so he's working at home rather than attending premieres at Cannes. Contemplation of cinema now takes precedent over joining the media scrum on the Croisette, as his *Story of Film* has proved.

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## POSTCARD CANNES

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Given the Festival de Cannes' ardent support of progressive social change in Egypt – it showcased socially aware films from the country last year – the decision to unveil *After the Battle* on the festival's very first day this year is hardly a surprise.

Yousry Nasrallah's latest film – which premiered at the Palais des Festivals on Thursday – takes a what-now approach in looking at Egypt's 18-day revolution which ended Hosni Mubarak's 30-year reign in February last year.

While many filmmakers have documented the events that unfolded around Tahrir Square during the uprising, Nasrallah examines the complex faultlines which led to one of the most disturbing episodes of the revolution – the so-called Battle of the Camels.

In *After the Battle* Nasrallah, who was in Tahrir Square during the demonstrations against Mubarak's authoritarian rule, upsets the black-and-white reading of the pro-democracy movement: for example, its main character, Mahmoud, can be seen as a villain because he is one of the horsemen who charges into the activists on February 2, 2011, but the film gradually reveals he is also a victim of the oppressive system rather than part of it.

Having lost his livelihood when a wall is built to separate his town from the neighbouring pyramids, Mahmoud joined the horsemen to feed his family and his mare. *After the Battle*, therefore, deconstructs the simple image of young idealists risking their all to overthrow the hardline authorities and its violent henchmen.

The film uses imagery to frame its message: we see wall murals, the most traditional picture of one's perception of the world; hands trawling through photographs; online video footage being watched, rewatched and paused for contemplation of the small details within it; people recording their daily lives and major events with digital cameras. Pictures are so powerful Mahmoud says they "have already done me enough damage".

These reflections on the technicalities of the creation, distribution and consumption of images seem to run counter to the perception of Egypt's social movement as a "Facebook revolution" – as if the uprising wouldn't have succeeded without the social networking site. It's timely that the film has stirred debate about the role of image-making in times of social turmoil at the Cannes Film Festival.

French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard might be right, after all: it's not just about making an image, it's about making a just image.

**A scene from Egyptian director Yousry Nasrallah's *After the Battle***

## SECOND SIGHT

### Homecoming

It would be hard to find a 1980s release that bucked more mainstream trends in as unflashy a fashion as *Homecoming*. During an era when male-oriented action and comedy pictures ruled the roost, director and co-screenwriter Yim Ho put the focus on two women and had the audacity, borne out of necessity, of casting leads with little name value to local audiences. Even more unusual was the scenario's unfolding not in Hong Kong but in a quiet backwater of Guangdong province.

The result was a hybrid of cross-border sensibilities that captured the similarities and differences between two related but vastly different societies while avoiding facile culture-clash banalities.

That in and of itself would be reason enough to make *Homecoming* a "must-see" as it returns to the screen this month as part of the Hong Kong Film Archive's 100 Must-See Hong Kong Movies series. But the movie's classic reputation rests just as much on its nuanced delineation of the love-hate relationship between two old friends.

In accomplishing this, Yim and co-scenarist Kong Liang displayed a degree of subtlety rarely found in Cantonese cinema, then or now. As a result, *Homecoming* avoids "chicklit" cliches in depicting the reunion of childhood chums Pearl (Siqin Gaowa) and Coral (Josephine Koo Mei-wah), long resident in Hong Kong, when the latter attempts to flee her emotional turmoil by returning to the village she had long ago left behind.

That Coral and Pearl come across with more depth than typical 1980s heroines is due in no small part to the casting of two thirty-something actresses outside the standard starlet mode. The duo complemented one another and each won a Hong Kong Film Award alongside *Homecoming*'s nods for best film, director, screenplay and art direction (the first of many such accolades for William Chang Suk-ping).

Though not the first Hong Kong feature to be lensed on mainland soil, it was a trailblazer in terms of its contemporary setting and subject matter. Almost three decades later, co-productions are the norm, albeit without a corresponding increase in script quality. Revisiting Yim's masterwork feels less a coming-home than a manifestation of the Chinese title's idiomatic reference to the fleeting nature of time.

*Paul Fonoroff*

Homecoming, *May 27, 2pm, Broadway Cinematheque*

**Josephine Koo (background) and Xie Weixiang in *Homecoming***