

He Wrote Me

Mark Cousins

King's Cross Station, London, 7th January 2020, 9.51 am

Dear Chris Marker,

You don't know me, but I'm on a train and thought of you and wanted to write. It's raining outside. In 4 hours and 45 minutes I'll be back home in Scotland. Between me and that lie 400 miles, misty fields, an England trying to work out how to deal with what it thinks is foreign, and a Scotland wondering whether it should cede from the UK. Motion, emotion, attachment and its opposite.

Once before, when you were still alive, when I was director of the Edinburgh International Film Festival, I wrote to you. I was doing a season of films called *Great Moments in Documentary History*. I asked you for suggestions of great documentaries. You replied gnomically, as I recall, and suggested that I show your film *Slon Tango*, in which an elephant dances. We did so.



A scene from Mark Cousins' film *What is this film called Love?*

I thought of you this morning because of Mexico. I made a film there, *What is this Film Called Love?*, which was influenced by you. The film is narrated by a woman who, we discover in the end, is me. I had the idea of writing as a woman because of your film *Sans*



Soleil: In particular, the commentary in that film, in which a female voice, referring to you, regularly says “He wrote me.” I loved that you imagined a woman who had received letters from you. And so, because of your three words “he wrote me”, I am writing to you.

I’d love to know how you decided to use the “he wrote me” frame.

Yours

Mark Cousins

Cher Monsieur Cousins,

Thank you for writing about *He Wrote Me*. If your train is on the move, look out the window. What you will see is why I wrote those words. Are London’s suburbs drifting by like clouds? Are fields whizzing past your window so quickly that, in the foreground, they blur? If so, that’s all you need to know about the commentaries in my films, especially the one in *Sans Soleil*. As I travelled around the world, filming, I always felt an immediate blur and detachment between the image and what it recorded. A relative velocity. A moment after I’d filmed the boat, the cat, the face, the cityscape, the bullet train, the beach, the cemetery; it had changed, moved on, so my image of it was an image of what it once was, even if that once was just a moment ago.



Two train travel scenes from *Sans Soleil*

To accept this, that all images are the light from a star which might no longer exist, is to realise that the words that accompany such images (if indeed they are combined with words, a commentary) must acknowledge such a detachment. Do you remember the TV and film footage of rockets blasting into space? After a certain ascent, their fuel cylinders and boosters detach and begin to fall from the sky, leaving the smaller rocket to continue into space (and time). An image is like those fuel cylinders and boosters. It detaches and is left behind. So, *Sans Soleil* is what’s left behind from my filming in Japan and elsewhere. It falls from the sky like the burning magnesium from a firework. My commentary takes the form of “He Wrote Me” to capture the past-tenseness of this, its elegy, its threnody, its beautiful decay.



There is a multiple detachment in the commentary of *Sans Soleil*. I did not write any letters; therefore no woman exists who received them; therefore she could not be reading them now, in some present tense, after she received them, because they don't exist and neither does she... A Mobius strip of sorts. I made the strip not just for fun, for the game, but because its contours, its distance, allowed me to take (and invoke and depict) the distance I feel whilst sitting in an edit, a place out of the world, looking at images of the world. *He wrote me* allowed me to put sadness into my film, and metaphor, and doubt, and hope, and thought and a numinous quality. It allowed me to question films and filming, and to worship, fetishize filming. In the edit suite, looking at my footage, I was like James Stewart looking at Kim Novak in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* – not sure if the footage is alive or dead, aware of me or insensate, awake or dreaming, acting or being, eros or thanatos.

He wrote me are three words against flatness, affectlessness, inertia, silence, thinness, meaninglessness. They are, I hope, a singing, ringing tree. Make of them what you will. Take your distance from them. They are already a threnody, a prayer for the dead. Me.

Yours,

Chris Marker

Photo Source: Variety, Kanopy



Mark Cousins is a documentary filmmaker, author, curator and wanderer. The creator of *The Story of Film: An Odyssey*, *The Story of Film and Children* which premiered at Cannes in 2013, he has directed documentaries on subjects ranging from Neo-Nazism to Iranian cinema. He has also co-directed four innovative film events, and the 8½ Foundation with Tilda Swinton. Mark is an Honorary Doctor of Letters at the University of Edinburgh.

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