

A LETTER TO MY EIGHT AND A HALF YEAR OLD SELF

By Mark Cousins

You are in Belfast. It is 1974. The city is a war zone, dead and locked up at night. You are living in that house on the Crumlin Road. You do not know it yet but in two years time, a bomb in that street will destroy it. Don't worry, you will all be evacuated and, as a result, you will start a new life on a housing estate in a town called Antrim.

There will be lots of Belfast people there – tens of thousands, in fact, but Antrim will have no cinema. You will see movies on TV – BBC2. You are about to fall in love with two directors – Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. In Belfast in three years time you will see a film called *Jaws*, but it is one by Welles - *Touch of Evil* - that will change your life. It will make you fall in love with the drug of cinema, the feeling it gives you.

How will cinema change your life? It will stop the world feeling scary. You will discover a quietude in cinemas, in the dark, before the lights go down. In a letter to her son, who is the same age as you are, an actress named Tilda Swinton called this feeling “ecstatic removal”. My friend Tony McKibbin says that in life people should protect their nervous systems. Looking back, I can see that you were a nervy wee boy in the 70s so maybe you went into the Odeon on Great Victoria Street to protect yourself in the way Tony describes. But protect isn't quite the right word. You will find, as you grow up and become a man, that *release* is what you will feel in cinemas, the sense that your nervous system, which is usually defended, in the ready position, stops shrinking and opens out like a flower.

To what will it open out in the coming years of your life? Tilda tells her son that he will discover “the promised land of freedom”, and that's what you will find too. You will feel imaginative fireworks explode in your head, so unfettered is cinema. You will feel the rush to tears at the beauty of Claudia Cardinale in *Once Upon a Time in the West* but then, later, you will realise, with life changing consequences, that it was only partially her that brought those tears. It was also, inconceivably, impossibly, ridiculously, the exalted sweep of the film's image up into the air, over the railway station and further still to reveal a frontier town being born.

You will run like a sprinter with this realisation that form, camera moves, what Daniel Frampton romantically calls the thinking of the film, moves you and sustains you. You will come to find, as a teenager and in your early twenties, that you need cinema, the way you need to dance, to remind you of the bodily and mental liberties that existence affords you.

VERTIGO'S LAST ISSUE LED WITH A LETTER WRITTEN BY THE RENOWNED ACTRESS, TILDA SWINTON, TO HER EIGHT AND A HALF YEAR OLD SON. IT WAS PROMPTED BY HIS QUESTION: WHAT DID PEOPLE DREAM BEFORE CINEMA WAS INVENTED? INSPIRED TO REPLY, BUT WITH NO SON TO ADDRESS, MARK COUSINS WRITES TO HIS EIGHT AND A HALF YEAR OLD SELF.

This sprint, this dance, this love will become your life. And here's something you could never guess, living where you are, in working class Belfast, a planet away from Hollywood: you will earn your living in cinema, close to its contours. Are you shocked? I'd expect so. You'll discover that documentary films – in which the director is really co-director, with life itself - suit your sense of not wanting to be in full control, and you'll make some daring ones. You'll write and talk about films in newspapers and on TV but, soon, you'll find that you have made a vow to yourself not to be part of the marketing of mainstream cinema, so you will sprint some more and find that suddenly you are amongst the films of people with names like Weeresethakul, Tsuchimoto, Kiarostami, Sokurov, Dumont, Almodovar, Chahine, Farrokhzad, Mambety, Imamura, Kotting, Bill Douglas, Jarman and Malick. By the time you realise this, you will be miles from anywhere. You will feel lonely there – so letters like Tilda's will mean a lot – but dead happy too, alert, paying attention, as John Sayles would say, astonished, as Jean Cocteau exhorted.

Then something else will happen. You will notice that most of the world is talking about a James Bond film called *Casino Banal*. You will go and see it and find it cheesy and boring. You will get angry at such things. You will start to write about the fact that invigorating movies get squashed, or outrun, by steroid-boostered cookie cutter ones. Tilda talked about her work as being an act of resistance. Your work will feel like that. As a passionate, decentred, curious critic, you will try to articulate an opposition to the dead contrivance of dominant cinema, in the way Terry Eagleton suggests in *The Function of Criticism*.

So movies will do something to you and, eventually, you will begin to do something back to them. But what, for now, at the age you are



now, do I wish for you? I wish you had more film books at hand than *Halliwel's*. I wish the world of cinema would open up faster for you. You found your way to Iran and its cinema, the work of Ghatak and Dutt, Gerima and Muratova, all on your own. But, tying Tilda's thoughts and mine together, I wish for this: something called the 8 1/2 Foundation. A trust, based in Scotland perhaps, where Tilda and I live, which would make 20 films available for free on DVD to children around the world, on their 8 1/2 th birthday, their movie day. These films would be the best, most imaginative, movies of all time – directed by Miyazaki, Norman McLaren, Buster Keaton and Michael Powell, films with titles like *Pelle Alone in the World*, *The Red Balloon* and *The Singing Ringing Tree*. They would be available subtitled in 50 languages. The foundation would be funded by film studios around the world, to enrich the culture in which they operate, a gesture of optimism about their medium.

8 1/2 is the perfect age to fall in love with cinema. It was the name of a great film. I found out only last year, in the dark, when someone recognised my voice at a firework display, that the Indian family who ran the Curzon cinema in Belfast in 1974 – which is now, for you – ran spectacular Indian movies in the morning back then, before the doors opened. They are running them now, as I write. Isn't that remarkable? The 8 1/2 Foundation could be remarkable.

You lucky thing. You are about to discover your passion.

Mark