Human mixed with trumpet

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

MILES AHEAD
Various cinemas

"Be wrong strong or get the fuck out", Miles Davis tells his band during a recording session, halfway through *Miles Ahead*. We watch him (the engagingly sleek Don Cheadle, who also directed and co-wrote the film) instruct each player on the sound they make. Davis is an undisputed legend; and he knows it. But in most of the rest of the film, we see him broken. In the late 1970s, fifteen years or so after his "old shit", as he calls it – *Kind of Blue*, *Someday My Prince Will Come*, *Sketches of Spain* – and some time before his funk fusion *The Man with the Horn*, Davis went silent. He produced nothing. It seems he took his own advice and got out, disappointing his fans and annoying his record label, Columbia, who, in *Miles Ahead*, are pressurizing him to give them new material, similar to his old stuff.

This is the tragic note that thrums throughout; Davis's past haunts him, even gives him pain. Hobbling in a silk dressing gown around his opulent Manhattan apartment (made squalid by left-over takeaway boxes, discarded scores and drawn curtains), Davis is a tired, ill (he suffers from sickle cell anaemia), reclusive, cocaine-addled shadow, obsessively relistening to a tape of his new music and hallucinating about his ex-wife, Frances (played by Emayatzy Corinealdi), who has left him. When a radio show in the background broadcasts "So What", followed by the host's lament that "the world misses you, Miles", Davis phones in live on air, orders the host to "stop talking so goddamn much" and, poignantly, ends up requesting his "Solea" – another old one – to be played.

Then Dave Braden (Ewan McGregor), a (fictional) journalist from *Rolling Stone* magazine, knocks at the door, angling for a comeback story after hearing a rumour about the unreleased tape. He, too, is met by Davis's derision and anger: there is a lot of anger – directed at racist America (one flashback shows a clean-cut Davis being beaten up and arrested outside his own gig by a white policeman); his fans (he shouts at a German-accented one "get off me, Hitler"); a vampiric producer at Columbia, who sends an armed bodyguard to steal the much-anticipated tape, resulting in an elaborately staged car chase (Davis's numberplate is "Trumpet1") and shoot-out, all of which lacks real drama because it is totally unconvincing; and Frances, whom he abused (she is credited as a co-executive producer, along with several members of Davis's family).

One of the film's most arresting moments occurs directly after Davis asks Frances to marry him. The camera documents his memories of this phase in his life by panning across a series of candid Polaroid photographs strewn on his bed, in which two naked women are asleep. Davis is pictured in an orgy with them; in the next he's smoking, then snorting drugs, eyes befuddled; then it's the wedding day and after-party, followed by close-ups of Frances's face that turn back into moving images – of arguments, without dialogue, and violence. The soundtrack, meanwhile, gets more frantic, peaking at a high-pitched wail, human mixed with trumpet, that suddenly cuts to Davis in his present-day slump. Every shift in time is edited superbly – economic, urgent and energetic, like Davis's improvisational music, which we hear constantly, spanning from the 1950s to the early 80s, along with original compositions by Robert Glasper. Cheadle's body movements and voice pulsate in the same way.

Don Cheadle as Miles Davis

A good proportion of what we hear and see comes from, or is inspired by, Davis's own words in *Miles: The autobiography* (1989). At the beginning of the book, he describes the first time he heard Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker play together when he was eighteen years old: "the greatest feeling I ever had in my life – with my clothes on". In the film, Davis effectively meets his younger self in the form of Junior (Keith Stanfield), an up-and-coming, baby-faced trumpet talent who trembles in the presence of his idol. (We find out later, as things get darker – though they never feel dark enough – that those knocking knees are actually a sign of heroin withdrawal.) But by now it has become obvious that it's Davis's music we love, not the contemptible narcissist behind it, however hard Cheadle tries to elicit our sympathy for him. Pushing the boundaries of acceptability is both the way to make music and the way to live, Davis seems to say. Towards the end of his autobiography, he explains that he fired his nephew, a drummer, because he kept losing the beat: "It hurt me to tell him that because I really love him, but I had to do it for the music . . . . Music don't have friends like that".

Is now a good time?

ED CRIPPS

I AM BELFAST
Various cinemas

Mark Cousins is a rare filmmaker-critic in the *Cahiers du cinéma* spirit of Jean-Luc Godard and Eric Rohmer. After early prominence with the BBC series *Videodrome* and *Scene by Scene* in the late 1990s, he went on to author low-key films about films from a perspective of worldly innocence, such as *The First Movie* and *A Story of Children and Film*. His fifteen-hour *The Story of Film: An odyssey*, perhaps his masterpiece, dazzles with unexpected juxtapositions and never feels like a lesson: it is dextrous, witty, arranged to a dream-logic and, refreshingly, not in thrall to Hollywood.

Then there's his voice. Not his authorial voice, but the noise that comes out of his mouth. Some find his narration grating – all swerves, slopes and Northern Irish updraughts – but after a while it hypnotizes and his monthly *Sight & Sound* column is underwritten with the same rhythms. He expresses so much so densely that there is almost too much insight to take in at once. That slimness combines the technique of a poet with the erudition of a pathological watcher, defined by the traps and clichés he avoids; he is both a writer's filmmaker and a filmmaker's writer.

All Cousins's work is personal, but his latest film is the most explicitly first-person. *I Am Belfast* has two narrators: Cousins himself and the character-actor Helena Bereen, a guide to the city she represents and a "griot" or storyteller (Cousins cites Dani Kouyaté's film *Keita!: L'Héritage du griot*'s parallel depiction of the past as prose and poetry). Paddling in the tradition of city films such as Terence Davies's hymn to Liverpool *Of Time and the City*, it offers a gentler, more lateral interpretation of symbol-heavy urban life than, say, Ben Wheatley's recent *High-Rise*.

Cousins's filmic language is elliptical, meditative and imagistic. Bereen describes eighteenth-century Belfast as "brilliant, friendly, volcanic, inward, outward, homophobic, creative, loquacious, feminine, déclassé, romantic, sentimental, pious and edgy". It is a city of sweet and salt where the river meets the sea, once upon a time its citizens *thought* (Bereen growls the word) and knew how to co-operate, before they fought each other.

The passage on the Troubles is one of Cousins's subtlest. "Is now a good time to talk about it? Is ever? . . . Over decades and days, for good reasons and bad, we peered over the top of things and down into the depths". But since the Good Friday Agreement, glass buildings and a waterfront have blossomed: "that old luminosity is still there".

Humour dapples even the shadows. Rosie and Maud, two "lively women", are the irreverent embodiment of Catholics and Protestants at peace. "I was very romantic, weren't you?" "Course I fucking was". "I say to God, 'Please forgive me', then I go to fucking sleep." The Van Morrison-accompanied parable of Betty's lost shopping is a single melody in the city as symphony.

Cousins's unbordered sensibilities refracted through Christopher Doyle's cinematography give the film a circular surrealism, the elegance of Wong Kar-wai (whose *Chungking Express* and *In the mood for love* Doyle shot) meshed with the deadpan dreaminess of Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives*, 2010).

Inspired by Van Gogh, the film becomes a "colour study"; Bereen points out the yellow of a mother's coat, another daub in an "autumn riot". Often the darkest backcloths burn the most vividly. Buses are uprooted "skeletons". In the final line, an old man reveals that Belfast lost its sight in the 1950s and only sees blurs now, "but what blurs!" Synaesthesia permeates the dreamscape; the walls have eyes. A boat is described as a man's "inner Belfast", or maybe it's that of Cousins, who claims to see the *Titanic* everywhere.

Sometimes he gets carried away. "A crime scene, a rhyme scene, a time scene" sounds like the sort of thing actors might say to warm up before they go on stage. But for all Cousins's influences he depends less on other authors than does Terence Davies, who quotes tombstone inscriptions via Joyce ("As you are now, so once were we") and Chekhov ("The golden moments pass and leave no trace"). Come the climactic set piece, for which he hired a hundred extras and the biggest crane in Ireland, he could have reached for Seamus Heaney, but the poem read over the burial of "Belfast's last bigot" in his "wooden overcoat" is pure Cousins.

How does this most lyrical of film journalists get away as both poacher and gamekeeper? Cinema shifts all the time and Cousins's porous, cross-form sentences coalesce (to quote himself) into the clarity of a window. One could view Cousins's career – like Belfast or the griot's view of the past – as a happy cohabitation of poetry and prose. *I Am Belfast,* even more than his previous work, illuminates his mind and thought processes. To paraphrase the city's coat of arms, what can we give in return for so much?