

LIFE MAY BE

Directed by Mania Akbari, Mark Cousins, United Kingdom, Iran, 2014

UK/ IRAN

80 minutes

Directed by:

MANIA AKBARI
Mark Cousin

Producer:

Don Boyed

Identity and physicality are among the subjects explored in this unusual film by Mania Akbari and Mark Cousins, two filmmakers who share a lively intellect, refreshing spontaneity, and a love of cinema. The two directors communicate via "filmed letters," a complex audiovisual testimony of extraordinary intensity. "The film is an old-fashioned letter piece – like *Les liaisons dangereuses* or *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson, radically updated to the digital age and with modern themes – Iran, exiles, nudity, etc.," says Cousins. Mania Akbari adds: "It's a 'happening film' resulting from an encounter between two individual approaches to form, story, rhythm, sound and movement." *Life May Be* offers an experience of pure enjoyment when watching an inspirational encounter of intellect with intuition that is enriched by the straightforward honesty involved in the sharing of deeply intimate experiences and ideas. The film also makes room – between the lines and between the shots – for the excitement of waiting for an answer.



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A unifying presence between these two filmmakers is the beautiful poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, heard spoken by the poet herself. It is a fitting connection for two artists who see the world as poets do, exploring the riches of the everyday and the universal with wit and insight. The cinematic dialogue is refreshingly open, honest, and humane.

Review by Mike O'Brien

In a recent video essay for the British Film Institute, documentary film maker Robert Greene stated that "The art of non-fiction lies in the tension between chaos and structure." Chaos and structure. Two polarised creations linked by the tender wisp of fragility itself. This alone could be a sentiment applied to Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari in their latest foray into film – Life May Be

Full review here -
www.kosovotwopointzero.com/en/article/1354/life-may-be



A couple of years ago, at a different film festival in a different country, I had a terrific time with Mark Cousins' engagingly/exhaustingly self-indulgent doodle, "What Is This Film Called Love?" and a tough time trying to marshal my scattered and immensely, consciously subjective impressions into the semblance of a coherent review. So at the Göteborg International Film Festival, I was looking forward to "Life May Be," a similarly personal, intimate, lo-fi filmic essay that Cousins co-directed with Iranian director Mania Akbari, perhaps hoping it would have the same pleasantly discombobulating effect. But "Life May Be," here benefitting from the added interest of a new point of view from Akbari, while just as erudite and idiosyncratic as we might expect from Cousins (seriously, if you are not already a fan, this will not be the film to convince you), felt cooler, less generous with its sensation of wrapping the audience up in galumphing intellectual curiosity. It is just as unapologetically self-centered as his previous films (even if there are two centers here), but in the end it's less joyously wonky, mostly because, as a viewer, I felt like I was perched on the outside of an interchange that is a closed loop.

***Göteborg Review: Mark Cousins & Mania Akbari's
Epistolary Essay 'Life May Be'***



The latest essay from irrepressible cineaste Mark Cousins takes the form of an epistolary exchange with Iranian filmmaker Mania Akbari. What begins as a tentative exploration of her influences and methods eventually blossoms into a lofty, wide-ranging discussion of freedom, democracy, the solitude of exile and the urge to break the mental and physical boundaries that might restrict creative expression.

Life May Be may sound didactic and dry but Akbari's scrapbook of memories and photos is charming and Cousins can be playful in both his provocations and self-awareness.

The result is a heady combination of intellectual discourse and seductive images that should readily secure further Festival exposure following its world premiere at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. It also provides some invaluable context and insight into Akbari's career.

Cousins was asked to contribute to the extras in a dvd release of Akbari's 2011 feature One. Two. One (Yek. Do. Yek). He wrote her a letter that he now reads over footage of forest scenes in Scotland. It provides a succinct reminder of Akbari's place in Iranian cinema as a performer in Kiarostami's Ten and the director of 20 Fingers and others. An effusive Cousins compares her to Scorsese, Bergman and a renaissance artist, also claiming " you are to Iran what Virginia Woolf was to England." She responds with personal reflections on her life in exile in London, what she left behind in Tehran and how difficult it is to escape the pain of the past

Tired and emotional in Lithuania, Cousins responds by writing in praise of nakedness as a source of joy and liberation. " I remember more when I'm naked," he confides before stripping off. It is the start of a much more complex and personal dialogue in which Akbari asserts " " in my country the body is not seen, it must be imagined".

Differing levels of comfort with nakedness, differing attitudes to the unclothed human form have an immensely personal impact on Akbari. Cousins almost offers himself as a spiritual healer or guide as he encourages Akbari towards acts of liberation all the more poignant in the light of the breast cancer that she has addressed and confronted as a vital part of her work.

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The expectation of a film that might seek to emulate the long-takes and meditative style of Akbari's own work is misplaced. In the end, Life May Me is intensely personal and revealing in the manner of something Derek Jarman might once have made. The fact that frequent Jarman collaborator Don Boyd produced seems entirely fitting.

Production company/sales contact: Hibrow Productions, www.hibrow.tv

Producer: Don Boyd

Cinematography: Mark Cousins, Mania

Akbari Editor: Timo Langer

With: Mark Cousins, Mania Akbari

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BY ALLAN HUNTER 21 JUNE 2014



Epistolary cinema, in which directors communicate via digital video, has quietly emerged as a distinct sub-genre over the past half-decade or so – and now a pair of very different UK-based directors join illustrious ‘pen-pal’ predecessors such as Jonas Mekas, José Luis Guerín, Lisandro Alonso, Albert Serra and Abbas Kiarostami. A five-part correspondence between Edinburgh-based polymath Mark Cousins and London-resident Iranian writer-director Mania Akbari, *Life May Be* is a wistfully poetic exchange between close friends that successfully straddles the tricky line between private communication and public consumption. Cousins and Akbari’s international profiles will ensure plentiful festival exposure for this

exquisitely rarefied but surprisingly accessible example of unapologetically personal film-making.

***‘Life May Be’: Edinburgh Review
Scotland's Mark Cousins and Iran's Mania Akbari collaborate on
an epistolary documentary examining
issues of identity, memory and self-exposure.***

Neil Young



Dear Mania Akbari

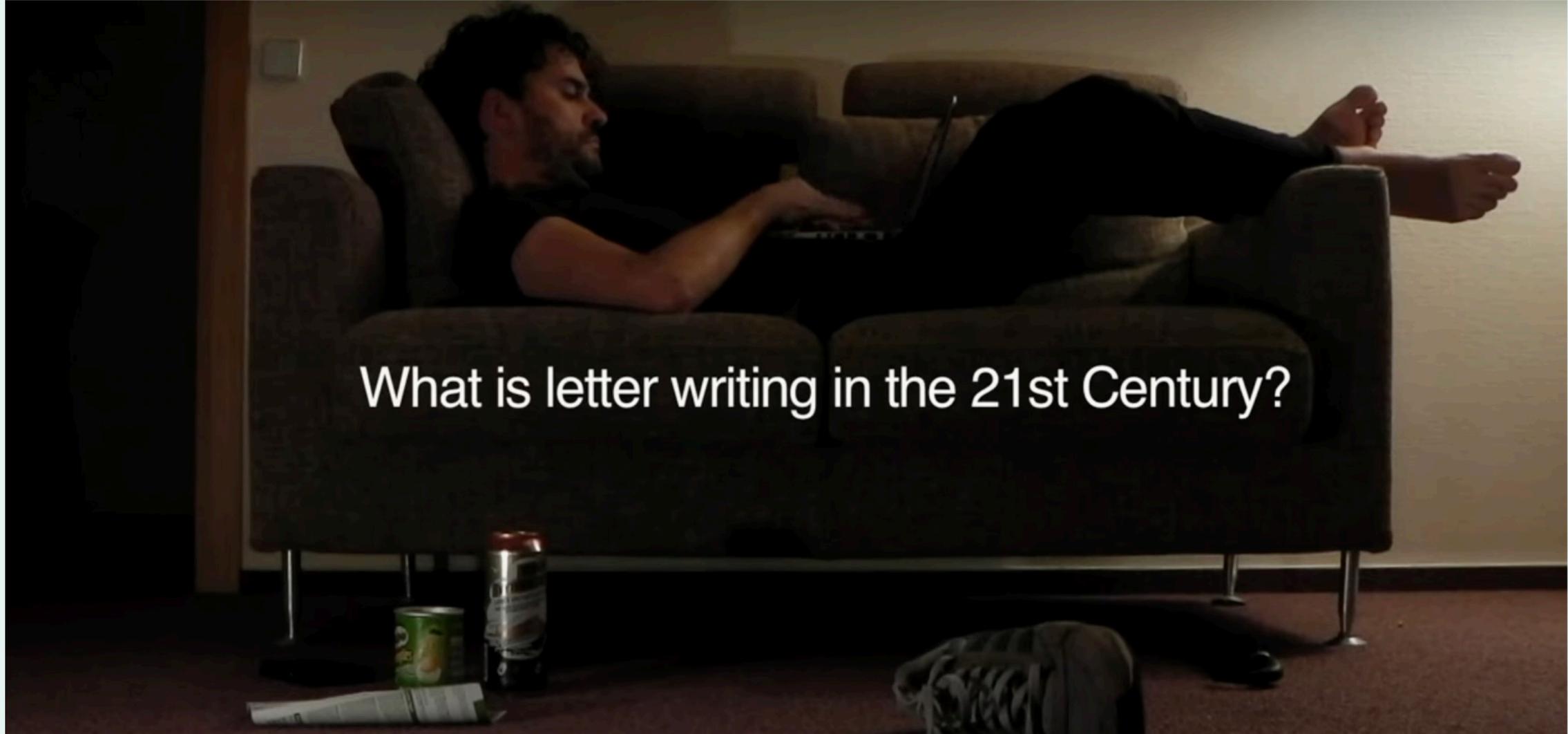
I'm sitting in a pub in Edinburgh, Scotland. It's a cold May day. The Smiths' *There is a Light that Never Goes Out* is playing in the background, and I'm waiting for my lunch to arrive, so I thought I'd write to you. I don't know whether or not to have a glass of wine. If I do, what I write in this letter will be more intense but less coherent. Even without the wine, intensity would be unavoidable, because to think of your work is to get locked in to emotions and forms of rigour. I saw your film *One-2-One* in the Cameo cinema at the Edinburgh film festival. Like many non-Iranians, I first saw you driving that car in Abbas Kiarostami's extraordinary film *Ten*. You were Travis Bickle in the film, Mania, arguing, raging, looking out at the movable feast of Tehran seen through your windscreen. Then Rose Issa sent me the first feature film that you directed, *20 Fingers*. I was making a season on Iranian film for Channel 4 and needed to see new movies from Iran that weren't being well distributed outside the country. *20 Fingers* was a revelation. Some of its long takes were as complex as the Copacabana scene in *GoodFellas*. You, a young Iranian female filmmaker, had already reminded me twice of the movies of Martin Scorsese. What was going on, Mania? Why was your work taking me aback? As I sit here, can I imagine that we set off to travel together, to work out why your films are so good, and how? Can we go, in our heads, to five places that reveal something about you and your work? Can we imagine that each of the five trips is one long shot, like those in *One-2-One*, *20 Fingers* and *Ten*? Lots of numbers are cropping up in this letter, Mania: 1, 2, 10, 20 and now my 5. When I was growing up, Paul Weller wrote "Away from numbers, that's where I wanna be, that's reality." Despite all the numbers in the titles of your films, the people in them always seem to be trying to get away from the numbers. They drive cars or motorbikes and ride cable cars to escape the pitiless, shapeless real world. Let's go Mania. Hey Mr Tambourine man has just started playing in the pub. Imagine we're in Stockholm, in February. Let's say that our whole trip takes place in February. The sea is beginning to defrost and crack. The fragments click against each other. Let's go to the Ingmar Bergman archive at the Swedish Film Institute. Let's put on the white gloves they give us there and start to leaf through Bergman's screenplays and the stills from his films. Here are the folders for *Winter's Light*, Mania, which I think *One-2-One* so resembles - not in its style or even setting, but its themes. A storyline in your film is about a man throwing acid on a woman's face - a real life event which was the germ of your movie, I believe. It is an event of such viciousness. As I watched, I wondered where, before, in the movies I'd encountered an incident of such violence. Then I remembered the scene in *Winter's Light*, where the pastor spits verbal contempt at the young woman who loves him. He tells her how awful she is, a situation based on something Bergman said to his own then wife. Bergman was unflinching about how people speak the unspeakable, and love talking about the death of love, and so are you, Mania, in your films. And it's not just your lack of pretence about love that reminds me of Bergman. Step along to the next bay in this archive and we find the folders on Bergman's *Persona*. Look and these pictures of the close-ups of women's faces and what do we think of? Surely the faces in your film. Your first shot, of a woman in a skincare clinic, is so like a shot from *Persona* and, even more so, your amazing twelfth shot in the cable car, in which the woman and man are framed facing each other in close up, and which seems to last over eleven minutes, is so Bergman. These sequence shots are so long and complex that I assumed they were improvised (as Kiarostami's *Ten* seemed to be, in part), but in your question and answer session at the Cameo cinema you said that everything is planned, rehearsed, for months. There's a moment in your film where one actor picks a hair from the face of another actor - a tiny thing, an almost unconscious gesture, the sort of thing an actor does when they are in the zone. And yet you planned the moment, I think. You planted the hair there. Talk about rigour, realism, exactitude. It astonishes me that you have the energy, patience, and will to form to make scenes of such detail, such Mughal miniatures. The second scene in your film, the locked-off shot in the bank, is another long take (ten minutes) with, if anything, has an even more engineered *mise-en-scene*. By the magic of this letter I'd like, now, still in February, to fly from Stockholm to Rome, because that scene reminds me of Italian Renaissance art. As you know, in your scene we are in a waiting area in a bank. We're staring at three chairs, behind which is an automatic door which opens and closes as people come and go. Your camera doesn't move but the actors do, our eyes do, our minds do. People leave the seats and others come along. The woman on the left talks about alligators and snakes. The guy on the right thinks she's a bit odd and makes phone calls. There are constant references to the spaces behind and beside and beyond the camera. Conversations and people slalom around each other and, as they do, they set up story points and characters that will recur. The scene is like a chess game, but the reason that I've taken you here, to Rome, Mania, is because it most resembles a Christian triptych altarpiece. Your shot is divided rigorously in three. People look ahead, as they do in Catholic art, but they also sometimes glance at each other, engage for a moment, or gesture inwards, as in the tradition of the *sacra conversazione*. Your film is a *sacra conversazione*, Mania: interaction within a formal grid. What a grid. After Rome, on the wings of poesy, let's swoop back to Tehran, where I first met you when I was making my Channel 4 film. I wanted to talk about *20 Fingers* and *Ten*, and especially about the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad who, as you know, made one of the first great Iranian films, *The House is Black*, in 1962. We went to Forough's grave. You told me that she inspired you. In which ways? It was her courage to write about sexuality and gender, I think, which you do so boldly in your work. Is it too much to say that she modernised 20th Century Iranian thought, Mania? It's certainly right to point out that she helped introduce into the public space in Iran, the fact that female subjectivity is complex, polyvalent, desirous, embodied, isn't it? Female agency in Forough's poems is central and here, not veiled and there. It's hard not to think of her work without thinking of the eleventh shot in *One-2-One*, the restaurant scene, in which the power, the presence, the poise lies on the left of the scene, with the woman. There was snow on Forough's grave when we were there, Mania, so let's stay in February as we head, now, to our fourth location, our fourth long take, the home of the long take, Hungary. Shots of five to ten minutes are central to your filmmaking, it seems. I know this could change, but for the moment you are using them to make us hold our breath, enact that hypnosis which comes from the camera still running, give your actors the distance to get lost and scared, and give yourself a chance to show how complex even a small corner of the world can be. I know Abbas Kiarostami does these things but we're here in Hungary, of course, because of Miklos Jancso, Bela Tarr and Gyorgy Feher. Each in their way felt that not to cut was binding, winding, finding. As seconds turn into minutes and then more minutes in the films of Jancso, Tarr and Feher, we start to feel dread, fear, power, as if a balloon is being blown bigger and bigger and will, at any moment, burst. I feel this tension in your films, Mania, a sense that anything could happen at any moment, that good times are respite, especially for women. Am I wrong to see this, Mania? I see it in my own life. I am usually happy but always aware that joy is an ongoing moment, not a guarantee, not the rule, not a right. Has living in Iran, where everything is an ongoing moment, given you a sense that, at any time, the beasts could come out of the forest? Has having cancer added to that sense? Let's leave Hungary, Mania, and go to one final place, London, where you live now. Have you started to call it home yet, or do you believe, as Abbas Kiarostami does, that a tree goes best where it's planted? We're here because of how personal your art is, Mania, an honesty which reminds me of England's Forough, Virginia Woolf. Again and again, as she sat in Bloomsbury, Richmond or Sussex, Woolf would force herself to articulate the motions of her own mind in their detail, complexity, obduracy or fleetingness. She did this as much as James Joyce did, I think, and helped unveil human nature in the modern age. The word unveil, of course, has a double dip in Iran, but you are to that country what Woolf was to England, I believe. So let's end our journey together outside Virginia's old home at 26 Gordon Square Bloomsbury. Let's take a picture of you and it on our cameraphones and see in that picture a great artist and a Light that Never Goes Out. I loved travelling with you, Mania.

Mark Cousins

For 400 years, people wrote letters -
of love, of protest, or ideas.

What if two people sent movies to each other?

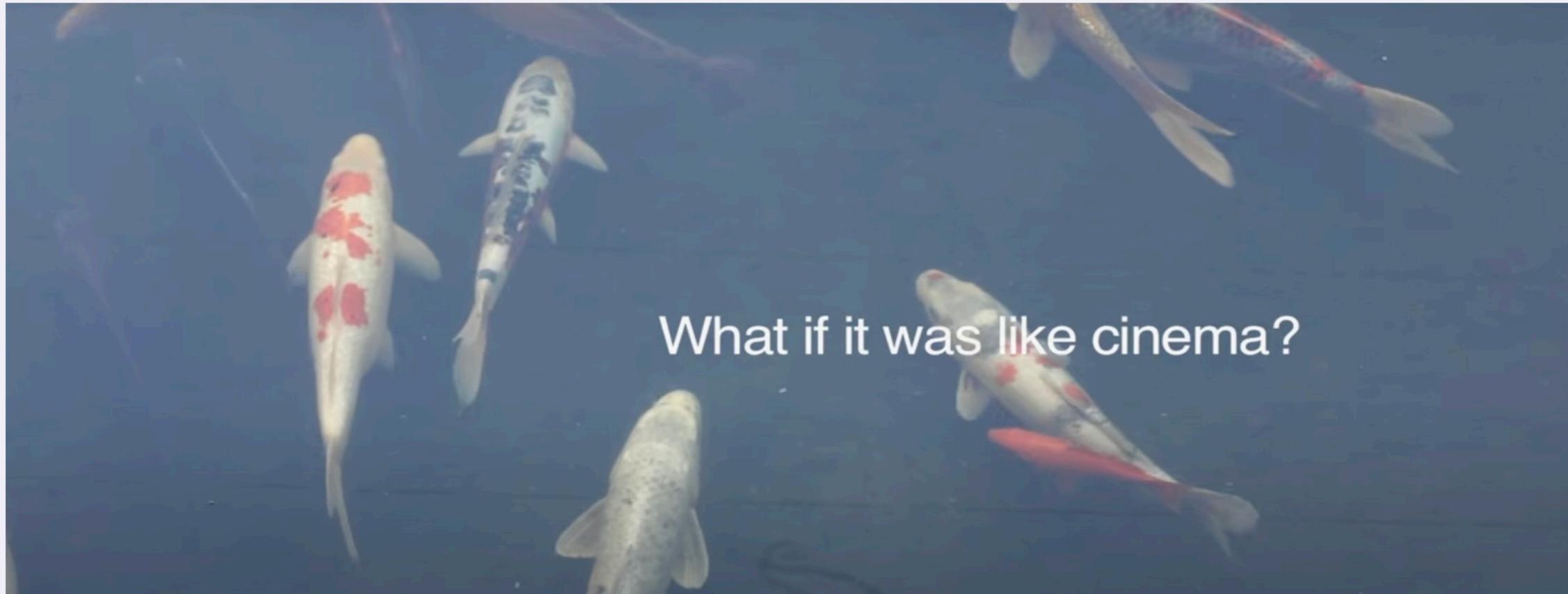




What is letter writing in the 21st Century?



Movies about exile,



What if it was like cinema?



Movies about exile,
and their own bodies?



