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Affective Rhythms: Experience of Trauma in Alan Clarke's Films from the 1980s

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Abstract

Alan Clarke's films from the 1980s are usually characterized as radical tests of the boundaries of social realism and narrative minimalism. As such, they have been described as highly political, although their political potential relates primarily to form rather than content (plot or story). Clarke's critical approach to current affairs in Britain leads not only to a stark and pessimistic diagnosis of the state of the nation and the country but also to an analysis of the national and social traumas of the 1980s. Specific formal and narrative strategies employed by the director are highly affective – he uses intersecting patterns of different, persistent, and repetitive rhythms, visual, aural, and temporal, not to convey an intellectual meaning but rather to affect the viewer, to immerse them in a kind of trance-like experience. The author uses Jill Bennett's reflections on trauma and affect in art to analyse the rhythmic designs of two of Clarke's films: *Road* (1987) and *Contact* (1985).

Alan Clarke's films, especially those from his later period, are usually perceived as examples of radical experimentation with narrative within the paradigm of social realism. As raw, minimalist, aggressive, and uncompromising as they were, they pushed the boundaries of acceptable – and therefore readable or communicable – narrative forms and structures. As Clarke directed primarily for television (mainly for official channels such as the BBC), his films seemed to test the limits of what could and could not be shown to the British public at large. By tackling the most sensitive or controversial issues of 1970s and 1980s Britain – such as institutional violence, neo-fascist tendencies, the damaging social consequences of Thatcherism, or the conflict in Northern Ireland – he constantly provoked both audiences and broadcasters, pushing conventional TV film structures to their limits.

Clarke is, therefore, usually regarded as a director who, in the last years of his activity, daringly incorporated almost avant-garde narratives into television formulas that are assumed to need to be accessible and formally transparent. That is why his late films share a notable consistency and 'in-your-face' tone. Fascinated by the possibilities of the Steadicam, Clarke employed this technique for his ongoing interest in the analysis of violence – imposed by institutions on individuals, but also between characters, and, not least, exercised on the viewers of his films. By using circular, repetitive, non-causal, open structures, by rejecting the psychology of the characters and denying access to their motivations, emotions, and thoughts, by relying on the expression of the meanings he wanted to convey through behaviourism or even the sheer kineticism of the human figures,¹ by demanding absolute and constant closeness to the characters (Steadicam) while at the same time blocking any possibility of identification, Clarke brutally shattered the perceptual habits of the audience, forcing them to engage through a kind of negative, violent, involuntary immersion in the fabric of his films.

Interestingly, if not surprisingly, it is narrative, experimental and radical as it is, that is the main focus of scholars studying Clarke's work; this and the issue of violence, so often addressed by the director. Rarely, however, have researchers considered the effect of the combination of narrative experimentation and the context of violence, which results in the strong affectivity of these films, curiously aligned with the constant distancing of the viewer (in a Brechtian mode, since Bertolt Brecht was one of Clarke's main inspirations).

What interests me in this paper is the usefulness of this strategy – the ambiguous affectivity that results from experimenting with narrative and the problem of violence – to express the experience of trauma. Two of Clarke's films that I would like to focus on are *Road* (1987) and *Contact* (1985), both of which are representative of the director's method and yet remain in the shadow of his most renowned film, *Elephant* (1989), studied as an example of the ultimate radicalisation of Clarke's strategy. *Road* and *Contact* can be described as 'walking films,' in line with Clarke's trademark style in the 1980s. The act of walking, the persistent, incessant, compulsive march, is so prevalent in these productions that it serves as a metaphor or sign of an intrusive, immensely existential authorial philosophy encoded in the text of the films.

Both films use rhythm, repetition, and a very tightly organized sequentiality as fundamental and guiding principles of narrative structure. These traits can

also be observed in Clarke's other films, such as *Made in Britain* (1982), *Christine* (1987), and, most famously, *Elephant*, in which the narrative is reduced to repetition and rhythm itself, with no trace of conventional plot. I would argue that these elements have a peculiar affective power. In turn, this affective power allows for the expression of trauma, which I believe is a fundamental theme of both films in question. In *Road*, it is the social damage caused by the ruthless policies of Thatcherism in the North-East England. *Contact* takes on the Troubles, the bloody sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted for 30 years. It is worth noting that these two traumas refer neither to a specific, singular event that suddenly shatters a particular order and represents a rupture in the continuity of existence nor to an experience of an individual. Instead, they relate to a long-term experience: a sustained condition in an oppressive environment. As such, they refer to the community or even society, transcending the private, intimate dimension of the trauma mechanism.

In short, what will be of particular interest to me in this article is the relationship between rhythm (the visual one present within the frame, but also the rhythm created by the editing or sequencing of the film), affect, and the experience of trauma. A suitable theoretical framework will be provided by the reflections and concepts of Jill Bennett, who applies the traumatic-affective perspective to various audiovisual artworks that problematize violence and conflict. Bennett is not interested in the (re)presentation of trauma itself (the traumatic event/situation/object) but rather in the manner in which art works to convey it affectively.² She looks at processes, mechanisms, and dynamics to see how things work.

Road and *Contact* follow two different paths, distinguished by Clarke's uses of rhythmicity. One, represented by the former, relies on the organisation of rhythmic patterns within the frame – the pulse and the visual composition, enhanced by the fluent work of the Steadicam. The long takes used here emphasize rhythmic flows, movements (but also soundscapes) within the shots, not between them. In the latter, we find the other mode of rhythmicity, which is more related to editing and alternation of sequences. I would associate it with a circular or repetitive order of certain types of sequences. Before examining the relationship between rhythm, affect, and trauma that emerges in these two films, however, it is necessary to outline Bennett's concept of empathic vision, the search for a new, radical language to express the inexpressible, and the primacy of affectivity over signification.

Affect

A film does not have to be visually extreme, violent, or visceral to have a strong affective impact. This kind of effect is not limited to the reception of so-called affective genres, such as horror, melodrama, musical, or pornographic films, nor to certain phenomena in art-house cinema (such as French extremity cinema or slow cinema, to take the opposite example). Affectivity is an inherent feature of the reception of any film since the spectator's contact with the audiovisual work is always physical and bodily, and the film itself has an effect on the spectator's body. This kind of statement seems quite obvious today – the affective

turn in the humanities has provided theorists with a set of different tools to study this specific relationship between the film and the person watching or experiencing it. Thus, affectivity is somehow built into the reception of audiovisual texts and expressed in both the emotional and physical reactions of the viewer.

Theoretical concepts of affectivity, together with the sensuous theory, are essentially based on the assumption that physical reception precedes intellectual reception (but at the same time is inextricably linked to it) – we feel before we think, therefore sensation precedes thought, although, for obvious reasons, we do not mentally perceive it as such. The concepts formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi³, philosophical and speculative as they may be, offer a framework, or rather, propose a way of thinking that allows the individual's relations with the outside world, especially with art and the media, to be framed in terms of the corporeal and the pre-conscious. Closer to the senses and corporeality, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener⁴ have proposed a new approach to film theory, one that would take as its organizing element the relationship between cinema, perception, and the human body. Their proposal is not intended as a completely new attempt at theorizing but rather as a shift in focus: the question that in various theoretical perspectives has been posed as a somewhat secondary or complementary one becomes, in Elsaesser and Hagener's approach, the key question.

These two approaches – one almost abstract, the other relating to very tangible and specific cinematic phenomena – emphasize the body as a kind of independent surface on which the reaction is imprinted, sending impulses to the mind. But neither of them really considers the way the cinematic image is organized or the way in which it is the rhythm of the objects on the screen, not the objects themselves with the meaning and connotations they mobilize, that affects the spectator's body. Elsaesser and Hagener refer to the concepts of Vivian Sobchack, who, in her two books on the affective power of cinema, very thoroughly considers the communication between the body of the film and the spectator and the concept of embodiment in film reception.⁵ But Elsaesser and Hagener direct these questions towards the paradigm of the film's content, not its form: they reflect on how viewers react to the object shown, not on the way the image is organized. Elsaesser mentions, following Sobchack, the *intersubjective communication in the cinema between spectator, film, and filmmaker [which] is predicated upon and enabled by shared structures of embodied experience that permits the perception of experience and the experience of perception in the first place. We take in films somatically, with our whole body, and we are affected by images even before cognitive information processing or unconscious identification addresses and envelops us on another level.*⁶ But these shared structures of embodied experience seem to lead through the mind; the crucial stake is still understanding the image, as if the feeling were only a tool.

An approach that links these two bodies – that of the film and that of the viewer – more directly was proposed by Jennifer Barker. Her vision of the relationship between these entities is one of tactility and intimate contact. As she argues: *Cinematic tactility, then, is a general attitude toward the cinema that the human body enacts in particular ways: haptically, at the tender surface of the body; kinaesthetically and muscularly, in the middle dimension of muscles, tendons, and bones that reach toward and through cinematic space; and viscerally, in the murky recesses of the body,*

where heart, lungs, pulsing fluids, and fixing synapses receive, respond to, and reenact the rhythms of cinema.⁷ Barker not only emphasizes the crucial importance of the contact between these two bodily surfaces,⁸ but goes deeper, under the skin, to the inner, organic rhythms of these bodies. It is one of the few standpoints that underlines the immense impact that the rhythmic organisation of the audiovisual work can have on its spectator. In her view, the interaction and connection between the body of the film and the body of the spectator depends, among other things, on the relationship between their rhythms, since each of these two bodies depends on and is determined by rhythmic flows, paces, and intervals. To take this line of thinking further, it could be argued that the body of the film is shaped and governed by the rhythm of the editing, the visual patterns in the frame, the organized sequence and its tempo. The human body and its basic activities also have a rhythmic nature; heartbeat, breathing, sleeping/waking, following daily routines, and walking are all repetitive in nature. The relationship between film and viewer is based on the interaction of all these physical and temporal rhythms. It may be harmonious or dissonant, but in the light of affective and sensuous theories, it precedes and is crucial to the construction of any meaning of the film being watched.

Although Bennet mentions circularity and repetition, she does not relate them to the characteristics of artworks but to the nature of trauma itself. Her reflections, however, focus on film form (rather than content, or what she calls, after Dominick LaCapra, "aboutness"⁹) as the field in which affective processes take place. As noted above, Bennett is interested in works that do not so much narrate trauma as reveal the mechanisms and practices of representing how trauma works, its process and dynamics. She chose the artworks that would best serve as examples against which to test her insights, describing them as works that *eluded classification as trauma works largely because they in some way evoked the processes of post-traumatic memory without declaring themselves to be about trauma ... The trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work.*¹⁰ Bennett explores *the affective operations of art and of the ways in which these situate art in a certain relation to trauma and to the kind of conflict that may engender trauma.*¹¹ For this reason, her reflections can serve as an adequate conceptual framework for the analysis of cinematic rhythms. If we add Barker's assumption that human bodily flows and sensations somehow react with those of the body of the film, the rhythm of the latter would appear as a purely affective flow that generates the physical experience of the spectator's body and leads to mental work (even if that process is imperceptible to the mind).

Bennett's analyses lead to the formulation of a specific mode of empathy that cannot be confused with emotional identification with the characters (as presented in an artwork or audiovisual text as a whole). The kind of empathy that she argues is *the most appropriate form of engagement with trauma imagery*¹² involves feeling for another combined with a constant recognition of their otherness. For Bennett, this concept of empathy should be treated *as a mode of seeing*¹³ – arguably the crucial notion for the viewer's perception, determined by the deliberate form the artist consciously uses to communicate something related to trauma, which is,

in a sense, non-representational. The artists (or filmmakers) who use this mode do not rely on representing or narrating a specific (traumatic) experience but on mobilizing or triggering a specific mode of perception and experience of the artwork.

This experience, Bennett argues, referring to both Deleuze and Massumi, is pre-intellectual, although it must be treated as an indispensable impulse for the (equally indispensable) mental, or rather, intellectual evaluation, the subsequent (and more conscious), inevitable stage of perceiving the artwork. Following Deleuze, she sees *feeling as a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought*, much more powerful than thought itself, *because of the way it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily*.¹⁴ Bennett recalls the Deleuzian concept of “encountered sign” *to describe the sign that is felt rather than recognized or perceived through cognition*¹⁵ and, as such, has to be distinguished from a recognized, intellectually processed object.¹⁶ The researcher mentions that *such work might be understood as staging the body undergoing sensation, but also as inciting an affective response in the viewer; to engage with it is always in some sense to feel it viscerally*.¹⁷ This viscosity does not erase intellectual recognition; the approach I am trying to establish here assumes that two modes of processing an artwork (corporeal and mental) are interrelated and that the bodily one, often neglected, is crucial. It would, however, be useful to translate this logic into not only an experience of the representation encoded in the image (the staged body) but also the rhythmic patterns that organize it.

| *Road*

There is no plot as such in *Road*. There are characters, but access to their psychology or lives is minimal or non-existent. There are situations, but it would be difficult to place them in any causal order. What Clarke does is position the human figures in a metaphorically half-dead world, epitomized by a desolate working-class housing estate as the setting for the ‘events’ (for lack of a better word). The director either traps his protagonists in dilapidated, uninhabitable interiors or has them walk, traversing the empty streets of the estate in a compulsive march with no point of departure or arrival. It is the incessant, unrelenting, nervous rhythm of the footsteps and the visual flow of images of identical houses that determine the dynamics and the narrative of the film. If we had to construct a kind of skeleton of the story or indicate its centre, it would be the meeting of four young people: Carole, Louise, Brink, and Eddie, who meet in a strange, grotesque, pan-social disco, leave, and finally stop in a deserted house to go through a cathartic, almost ritualistic process of spitting out their broken expectations, frustrations, and despairs. But such a summary of the ‘plot’ does not convey the most essential element of the film: the march that dominates, fills, and stretches the time between events. There are other people too: Valerie, a distressed, anonymous housewife who frantically wanders the streets in a ragged, homespun robe and coat, delivering a violent monologue blaming her unemployed and useless husband for the hopelessness of her life; a man reminiscing about his glorious past that can no longer be revived; another frustrated woman desperately trying to pick up a young soldier, drunk to the point of unconsciousness, and convince him (and herself) that he cannot resist her. They are all walking, and their walking narra-

tively suppresses any other action. The clatter of their footsteps and the visual pattern of the passing scenery against which they walk form rhythmic flows, sensual and trance-like. This sensuality affects the physical perception of the whole film.

So what kind of rhythmic currents are set against each other here, or rather intertwined (or perhaps even orchestrated)? Some of them are visual – Clarke, using the Steadicam, which became his standard equipment in the 1980s and an essential tool for conveying his authorial strategy, follows the characters, showing the rippling, vibrating, and shaking of their walking bodies. It is important to stress that what we have here are moving bodies, not characters with clear psychological traits. As in many of Clarke's late films, behaviourism, or even kineticism, replaces psychology; the moving figures are carriers of meaning, not psychologically developed characters. This does not mean, however, that psychology is completely absent from the construction of characters and from the reception itself. It seems that psychologisation is a feature that cannot be ignored, as if the audience were somehow mentally incapable of resisting it – the traits of psychological identification are always present, even if it means an unwanted, uncomfortable, negative, or forced identification.¹⁸

These human figures in *Road* march through the streets, and the architectural sequence of this setting creates another visual rhythm. It was filmed in a semi-deserted housing estate, Easington Colliery, built in the early 20th century for the miners working in the nearby pit. The rows of terraced houses, identical and attached to each other, run along perpendicular streets in the grid-like structure of the estate. Motionless, passed by on the way, they arrange themselves in a regular pattern, like notes with specific values. Street corners are like the end of the bar, and then the same rhythm comes back. It is a uniform and circular system with no beginning and no end (because we do not see the boundaries of the estate).

It is worth recalling the theatricality of *Road*, which was originally created by Jim Cartwright as a stage play. This makes the abundance of words here understandable. Initially, Clarke, who was preparing it as a play for television, was supposed to do it in the studio, and that would probably mean adhering to a more or less theatrical formula. By a rather fortunate coincidence (there was a strike of technical staff at the BBC), the filmmakers were, in a sense, forced to take the play out into the streets and use the possibilities offered by the locations (and, not least, the Steadicam). This spatial opening triggered the movement and rhythmic flows that further emphasized the rhythmic nature of the characters' utterances and added another layer to the fabric of the film's pulsating flows. As Dave Rolinson puts it, *Clarke does not simply film a performance, but allies technique to its rhythms and underlying themes*.¹⁹ The visual mobility is to his credit.

This visuality is supported by the audiality of the film. The first layer is the sound of the footsteps, the clatter of the heels, the most obvious rhythmic sonic element. The steps of each character have their own telling expression – they are nervous or confident, regular or accelerated and decelerated. This soundscape rhymes with the sliding images of the houses and pulsating shapes of windows, doors, and walls. But there is another layer of sound: the words uttered in angry monologues and lamentations of the walking human figures. In Clarke's film it is the monologues, not the dialogues, that form the 'literary' layer – the dialogues

are scarce and forcedly delivered, not 'organically' carried, which clearly reveals the theatrical pedigree of Cartwright's text as a drama intended for the stage. The unnaturalness of the speaking mode (even more unnatural given that we are dealing with the broadly understood convention of social realism) pushes the viewer away, distances them, and, inevitably, draws attention to itself.

This can be considered part of Clarkean strategy as it is interpreted by the viewer. This strategy would consist in impacting the viewer with the very form (surface?) of the film and impacting affectively (before it impacts intellectually) – the sight, the hearing, the body. The words spoken by the characters of *Road* can be treated as the carriers of meaning (content), as can the sounds with their rhythm and melody. Cartwright and Clarke use repetition, alliteration; the monologues seem to have been carefully thought out in terms of their sound, the rustling of voices and prolonged vowels, the beats of syllables and the clatter of words. *Work, work, work, small wages, small wages, the death with a big D* – says one of the young men; *I say thank you, thank you, thank you, a thousand times till we all feel sick* – says a desperate woman. The pace of the words is juxtaposed with other rhythms, creating a multi-layered sensual design that is translated into the physical experience of the viewer in the process of perception – trance-like, hypnotic, though in a rather uncomfortable way. The scene that can be seen as the embodiment and fulfilment of this strategy is Valerie's monologue, which lasts several minutes (and is also a tour de force for the actress Lesley Sharp). Here, all the rhythmic patterns come together: the visual pulse of the marching figure's steps, their clatter, the brick grid of the houses moving across the frame, the intervals of the streets, and the aggressive sound of the words spoken, or rather spat out, thrown from the throat. The woman speaks of exhaustion, humiliation, hopelessness, hatred, and disgust. She is angry and desperate at the same time. But we know this not only from her words: the whole audiovisual form introduced here conveys this to us in a pre-intellectual, purely affective way.

If this strategy is to be coherent and serve a purpose, one has to ask what that purpose is, what the stakes are, and what Clarke is really trying to tell us through his completely non-theatrical adaptation of Cartwright's drama. Rolinson has described *Road* and Clarke's other films from the 1980s (and this particular experiment with the narrative) as the films that *dissected the political climate of the 1980s, particularly the discourses of Thatcherism*.²⁰ "Dissection" is a key term, as it directs reflection towards something highly analytical, even laboratory, which cuts through the body / surface to show not only what is hidden underneath but also how it functions and what mechanisms are at work. Another key word is "discourse," as Clarke seems particularly interested in the way meaning is constructed, structured, and translated to the viewer through film form. The dissecting of discourse thus involves the deconstruction of the latter, revealing its arbitrary 'nature.' Step by step, by emphasizing form and imposing it uncomfortably on the viewer, Clarke forces them, in a Brechtian way, to disengage from the 'plot,' to stumble, and to redirect attention to the construction of things that seemed smooth and 'natural,' that is, to discourse itself.

For Rolinson, *crucial themes in Clarke's films – including the gap between personal narrative and state discourses, repetition and the restriction of movement – are em-*



Road, dir. Alan Clarke (1987)



Road, dir. Alan Clarke (1987)

*ployed in his questioning of Thatcherite values*²¹. It is worth asking what Thatcherite values are being challenged here and how we can understand Clarkean film form as an adequate tool for this challenge. The inescapable concept that encompasses the (social) experience problematized in *Road* is trauma, the sensation of which is inscribed in the narrative structure, visuality, and audiality of the film and also imposed on the viewer. This trauma, as Rolinson argues, is generally related to the social and political climate of the time and Thatcherite discourses and values. However, some more specific events and experiences need to be identified here, going back to the post-war social history of Britain: the failure, or rather the abandonment of post-war left-wing welfare state policies, the Thatcherite politics of 'two nations' (or, more precisely, the use of class and geographical social divisions for populist purposes), the demolition of council housing, increasing gentrification, and, above all, the 1984 miners' strike and its crushing defeat, which led to the ultimate denigration and degradation of the working class and its culture. *Road* is then much more of a 'landscape film' than a 'plot film,' where meaning is revealed in the affective relationship between the viewer and the formal (visual, auditory, rhythmic) aspect of the film. The intellectual 'processing' of this meaning comes later or seems to result from sensory experience.

In the landscape depicted in *Road*, the question of a specific location is crucial. Easington Colliery was half abandoned after the failure of the 1984 miners' strike. Before its final closure in 1991, the site had slowly fallen into decay.²² The estate filmed by Clarke's team was a typical working-class settlement – tightly packed rows of terraced houses, perpendicular streets, the church, and no greenery except for ramshackle domestic gardens. The post-apocalyptic appearance of the Easington settlements was not an invented set design. At the time *Road* was filmed, it was, in fact, a half-dead place, the result of new gentrification plans typical of Thatcherite economic policy. As William Armstrong, one of the actors, recalls, *there were these rows of back-to-backs, and what was gonna happen was that every other row was going to be demolished. The ones that were left were going to be remodelled with nice big gardens and stuff.*²³ So, the landscape found in Easington was both real and very metaphorical. Clarke's team was free to do whatever they wanted in the houses earmarked for demolition – and they did, painting surfaces or knocking down walls to accommodate the cameras, lights, and other equipment. But the dilapidated state of the place was authentic, with its boarded-up windows, peeling paint and wallpaper, crumbling facades, and deserted streets. Like the layers of old paint on the walls, it recalls the successive phases of the whole valiant project of rebuilding post-war Britain according to the modernist plans of urbanists and architects, the slum clearance that began in the mid-1950s, the ambivalence of social engineering, the lack of participation of the working class in the decisions that determined their daily existence, etc.

The landscape depicted in *Road* thus refers to the entire legacy of post-war housing policy, triggering sentiments and resentments. But, as Clarke himself indicates, *the actuality of the real environment ... in its semi-derelict form was an expression of how they [the characters] felt internally.*²⁴ In this sense, if we adopt a political interpretation, these figures can be treated as simply embodying the working-class community as such. The state of Easington Colliery in the mid-1980s can

function as a metaphorical landscape of the state of the nation (or rather half of it) in the same way that the highly aestheticized landscape of social and urban decay in Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987) did. But to bring the architectural or urban aspect to the fore, for there is no doubt that the townscape depicted in *Road* has the primary role here, means referring to the question of the relationship between housing and community, the discussions, decisions, and manipulations about how the working class is to live and who has control over it.

Clarke chose to set his film in the very traditional buildings of a proletarian township from the pre-war era when slum clearance plans were already in place, but modernisation had not yet begun on the scale of the post-war period.²⁵ Although this is directly related to the privatisation of council housing in the Thatcher era rather than the nationwide post-war regeneration of social housing (the New Towns being the epitome or model of the ethos associated with these plans), this background is important here. The unprecedented boom in mass housing in Britain that began in the 1940s, the rather brutal, sometimes brutalist, transition from horizontal to vertical development (always frowned upon by average residents, even if admired by progressive architects), the sham involvement of the future residents of these estates in decisions about the shape of their everyday environment, and, finally, the Thatcherite abandonment of the idea of welfare state social housing – all this contributed to the total disillusionment of the working class and the feeling that it had been excluded from the reality it was supposed to shape.²⁶ This feeling of overwhelming alienation is conveyed thoroughly in *Road*. To sum up, the use of location in this film, as Rolinson points out, serves *various functions simultaneously: a documentary reporting of conditions, a metaphoric representation of socio-political discourse, an expressionistic and surrealistic reflection of the feelings of its protagonists, and a theatrical site for drama.*²⁷ What is left out in this statement is the visual and rhythmic role played by these places, as a space for the movement of the characters, but also as a movement itself, mobilized by the camera passing by.

Road and another of Clarke's films, *Christine*, were shot in *overlapping filming sessions*.²⁸ Indeed, they can be seen as parallel stories, even if the subject matter and settings are different. *Christine* shows a teenage girl making the rounds of her friends' and colleagues' homes – and here we see not a working-class estate but a middle-class one – to sell them drugs and sometimes to help them inject. The word "rounds" is very apt here because the narrative structure of the film consists of almost identical sequences: the girl walks, enters the house, makes small talk, sells heroin, fixes and injects it, and then moves on to another place. The structural pattern here is circular, not linear. All the rhythmic 'devices' employed in *Road* are used here: the beat, both visual and aural, of the footsteps, the flow of the Steadicam movement following Christine, the architectural similarity of the buildings, but also the alternation of monotonous movement and dull immobility (accentuated by drug-induced apathy and inertia) at rhythmic intervals. However, despite its enormous affectivity, *Christine* has a much narrower metaphorical potential than *Road*. If one takes both films as commentaries on the state of the nation, the latter is much more multidimensional and less literal. Both convey the feelings of the characters and the perceptual, physical experience of the film itself



Contact, dir. Alan Clarke (1985)

as a metonymy for the particular condition of society and the country, but in *Road* the dissection of that condition is deeper and the conclusions more universal. The illusion of movement, the inertia mistaken for energy, the sense of urgency with no tangible perspective ahead – all these elements are part of the presentation of the mechanisms of dealing with long-term trauma. It is now time to consider another, slightly different model of the affective representation of political and social trauma.

Contact

If we had to name the most narratively radical film concerning the Troubles in Northern Ireland, *Elephant* would definitely be in the lead. It is by far Clarke's most famous (or notorious) film, with its narrative structure reduced to the repetition of the same situation: an executioner (a member of a Northern Ireland paramilitary organisation, most likely a Republican one) walks the streets, the corridors, the parks to find his victim and shoot him. After several such sequences, Clarke builds up to a very specific climax or twist – the last of the executions is an ambiguous one, as the viewer cannot be sure where the separation between victim and killer lies, or if it exists at all. If *Road* or *Christine* can be seen as a cinema of behaviourism (in an almost Bressonian way), where any psychology of the characters is suppressed, and the only way to read them is through their behaviour, *Elephant* seems to be an example of a cinema of pure kineticism, where the only readable signs are the bodies in motion and the rhythmic, repetitive patterns of movement.

Contact, one of Clarke's two other films concerning the Troubles,²⁹ is formally less radical than *Elephant*, but structurally remains in dialogue with it, as do *Road* and *Christine*. In *Contact*, Clarke also explores the impossibility of distinguishing between victim and executioner or the inseparability of these concepts in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. Based on the autobiographical book *Contact* by A. F. N. Clarke (a coincidence of names), a former officer in the British Parachute Regiment in South Armagh, a county on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the film tells the story of the paratrooper commander (Sean Chapman) who patrols the area with his platoon of mostly very young, even teenage British soldiers.

The narrative structure of the film relies on the alternation (or juxtaposition?) of repetitive sequences of movement and stasis: the soldiers patrol the area and then return to the base, and this pattern repeats several times. The camera focuses on the commander, and it is his body that functions as a medium for accessing the affectivity of the situation presented. He leads the platoon and the audience through the fields, woods, and countryside, his sense of responsibility is almost palpable in the scenes at the base. Movement is associated with the warlike community of the soldiers, stasis – with loneliness. It is clear, however, that there is no energy but tension in this movement, the men creeping rather than walking, searching for their enigmatic enemies (here called "gunrunners") as well as hiding from them. There are moments when the density of the action suddenly increases, and this happens a few times: when someone is shot, when the bomb

explodes, when there is real, face-to-face contact between soldiers and paramilitaries or just local Irish people. But this intensification is not synonymous with an energetic eruption, climax, or release; it is rather the violent increase in tension. What is important is that Clarke never builds up suspense – or, on the contrary, the whole film can be seen as sustained suspense. The gunshot or explosion comes suddenly, with no discernible narrative warning, because the impossible tension is maintained from the start. These moments are singled out, shown as dramatic incongruities, like punctures in the fabric of the film's narrative. The events are not linked causally, although a specific interdependence is implicit. They have consequences, but on a different level: they do not lead to other events, they do not develop the plot so much as they affect the mental state of the character(s). Clarke is not interested in the military mission or the narrative potential of the conflict but the damage it does to the psyche of the people involved (whichever side they are on).

The scenes of patrol alternate with scenes in the base, which seem to serve as an opportunity to relieve this tension. The confinement of the narrow, bare rooms is supposed to convey a sense of security and separation from the pressures of the outside world. However, as the camera focuses on the commander's expressionless face and taut body, the reassuring stillness of this tranquillity reveals its apparent and superficial nature. The isolation of the 'boss,' also expressed in the tightness of the frame, is a way of showing his unbearable inner tension. The processing of the traumatic experience he is undoubtedly going through is trapped in his mind and body. Whether we see him as a ruthless oppressor or a victim of circumstance, the ambiguity of his position only makes the interpretation of the film more complex or terrifyingly universal.

This ambiguity also makes *Contact* one of the most politically radical films about the Troubles. Clarke never gives the viewer any information as to why the British forces are there, what their mission and objective are, who they are looking for, and what this 'contact' is about. Of course, the political and historical contexts of the film's 'plot' were clearly understandable in the 1980s, when the conflict was covered daily in the Northern Irish and British media. As Rolinson points out, the media discourse of the time is fundamental to reading and interpreting *Contact*, as well as Clarke's other films about the Troubles: "*Psy-Warriors*" places terrorism in the context of the state, while "*Contact*" and "*Elephant*" employ various strategies to reflect the gaps and silences in broadcasting and state discourses. Furthermore, all three utilise form to question the discursive strategies imbued in media representations. If much of Clarke's work portrays characters trying to escape the political imposition of narratives at the level of content, his Northern Irish productions explore the imposition of narrative at the level of form. Stripping away the narrative to create minimalist and alienating forms which reject context, he addresses the failure of fictional and non-fictional forms to directly confront the role of the British in Ulster.³⁰ These gaps and silences refer both to the official way in which the Troubles were dealt with in the contemporary news (which contributed to the lack of a thorough understanding of this complex situation and reinforced superficial explanations) and, although Clarke claims never to have mentioned it, to the government restrictions that prohibited broadcasting the voices of members of paramilitary groups in the media, even if these laws

did not prohibit showing their faces.³¹ Both in *Contact* and in *Elephant*, the Irish and the Republicans are almost always voiceless. Obviously, this must be part of the strategy of narrative minimalism, but it also seems like a half-mocking, half-desperate gesture.

Contact is therefore structured by contrasts: there is silence and voice (shouting, orders), movement and stillness, the rhythm of their alternation broken by sudden moments of hyper-violence, never elaborated, but rather fast and raw. It gives the spectator a feeling of reversed proportions: the film about violence focuses on the tension, not on the action, on the expectation of something that will happen, not on the happening itself. The waiting lasts much longer than the happening, and the unbearable tension is never rewarded with an elaborate climax. If there are any climaxes at all (within the sequences), they are too sharp to be properly experienced and absorbed. These moments are like punches, flashes, or slashes in the fabric of the film. In this way, Clarke manages to show that violence is not only about violent events but also, perhaps primarily, about living in fear, in constant anxiety, under permanent threat, sometimes known and visible, sometimes just phantom, enigmatic, present but undefinable. In *Contact*, this threat is embodied by the “gun-runners” and by the silent, motionless, impenetrable figures of the Others (locals – the old couple who appear in the entrance of the house being observed, or the children sleeping in the tent, one of whom stares with wide-open eyes at the commander watching him).

This brings us to one of the most important motifs or characteristics of *Contact*, crucial not only to the film’s narrative but also to its political significance. Clarke’s film is about watching, looking, observing and being observed. Unlike *Elephant*, where the Steadicam mostly followed the characters from behind, not allowing the viewer to look into their faces and read their emotions, in *Contact*, the gaze is both a sign of being dangerous and of being in danger – the commander and his soldiers are looking for and watching their enemies, and at the same time are anxiously aware that they, too, are being watched. This double-edged mode of observation has much more to do with the questions of surveillance and being watched as modes of existence and a source of inescapable, ongoing existential tension. Clarke uses a specific device – a night vision device that produces greenish images, very suggestive of the question of observation. It adds another layer: not only is the observation reciprocal, there is also a third party, a viewer watching. Brian McIlroy combines this specific technique, or rather aesthetic, with access to an image of the character’s inner world: *Clarke’s major technical innovation to convey this weird mental and physical landscape is the choice to observe the soldiers through greenish-hued ‘night glasses.’ It gives the impression that the soldiers are being observed by the ‘enemy,’ and yet also illustrates how their ‘night world’ is both dangerous and beautiful.*³² *Contact*, however, seems much too stark and minimalist to be associated with the notion of beauty. On the other hand, the implication that the night vision mode suggests that the platoon is being watched by paramilitary (i.e., enemy) forces seems exaggerated. McIlroy adds: *All this is captured in the greenish tint of the night glasses, suggesting that Clarke’s camera and the audience have access to voyeuristic equipment, as well as its accompanying danger. It is the society predicated upon clandestine surveillance.*³³ This seems more accurate: it is the apparatus

itself, the mechanism of surveillance, which is omnipresent and determines existence in this world rather than the distribution of forces between opponents.

However close the observation, it does not allow access to the characters' inner selves; the close-ups of the faces are, in a way, mute: they contradict the conventional function of this mode, which is to reveal emotions. We watch these people experiencing something, but the nature of these experiences is never revealed. Just as there is no specific information about the soldiers' mission, no named locations (apart from the general reference to South Armagh, a "bandit country"), no named enemies, and no visible character psychology, the viewer is left with the mechanisms themselves. Again, this does not mean that the psychologisation of the characters is absent here – although it can be considered invisible or hidden. The focus on the commander's face, stiff and motionless as it is, ironically (or paradoxically) forces the viewer to construct a psychological process for the character. Clarke's film can be seen as an experiment in dissecting this viewing habit or perhaps as an exploration of the mechanisms that push any recognisable or readable psychological response beneath the cinematic surface in a defensive gesture against the reality of constant threat. And it is the cinematic analysis of these mechanisms that determines the political potential of *Contact*.

While *Elephant* repeats (sic!) the repetitive narrative formula of *Road* and *Christine*, radicalizing it to the extreme, *Contact* operates with different rhythmic patterns. The circular structure here concerns larger wholes and has a different affective effect: it strains the viewer's endurance, puts them in an unbearable standby mode, waiting for the worst to happen, and at the same time, by means of violent ruptures, anaesthetises, puts them in a state of panic, attacks the nerves – no places, no names, no specific information, only mechanisms. Just as the commander, struggling to withstand the immense pressure in the last part of the film, seems to more or less consciously desire death (which would free him from this excruciating state of tension), the audience also expects something final, a closure that, as we reasonably know and as Clarke suggests, cannot happen.

Trauma

As the notions of affect and trauma recur in the above analyses, it becomes clear that the formal, narrative aspects of *Road* and *Contact* – much more than their thematic content, character dialogue, or statements – are seen here as crucial in conveying the traumatic experiences that these films are about. It would now be important to consider Bennett's concepts and outline their usefulness in reading works such as Clarke's films. Interestingly, as Bennett reflects on a few art projects that problematize the Troubles, her insights may be applicable to the reading of *Contact*.³⁴

Above all, both films undeniably relate to and emerge from trauma. In *Road*, it is the trauma of the prolonged demolition of the working class ethos of the 1980s, resulting in the degradation of social structures, the breakdown of family and social ties, a depressing and paralysing sense of lack of elementary prospects. The scene in which this desperate inertia is reflected as if through a lens is Valerie's compulsive, aimless, desperate march through the deserted streets of

a dying town. Mossie Smith, one of the main actors in *Road*, remembers: *When Lesley Sharp was doing her scene, we made the usual noises about "We're filming" and so on, but people didn't seem to think anything of this girl wandering around the streets talking to herself. One woman said, "Oh, we're used to it, everybody was like that during the strike".*³⁵ The scene, which appears to be entirely rhetorical and designed to be purely affective, therefore seems immensely realistic.

The traumatic origins of *Contact* are even more direct. As has already been mentioned, the film is loosely based on the book by Anthony F. N. Clarke, a British commander serving in Ulster. Sean Chapman, who plays this role, recalls: *Tony has served in Northern Ireland and all of this got to him to the extent that he had to leave after his last tour of duty ... And two or three years later he was sitting in his parents' garden somewhere in the Home Counties and suddenly had this complete and massive breakdown. He had to write about it to get it in focus. He doesn't talk about the breakdown in the book, but I knew through meeting him that the man on whom this story was based had gone through this nightmarish "Heart of Darkness" experience as a young officer in charge of much younger men in South Armagh.*³⁶ What is crucial here is that the nervous breakdown is not described or even mentioned (neither in the book nor in the film), but the past traumatic time is. The other key element is the lack of a story (in the film) – it is not important where the soldiers come from, where they are going, or what the exact goal of their mission is. What matters is the feeling – of constant fear, of course, but also of time, as an endless succession of similar situations. The tension comes from the repetition as a looped, never-released tension. Chapman also mentioned that the director insisted on reducing the acting style – research and intellectual (or mental) preparation were of no importance. Clarke explained to him: *I don't want this to be a film about the army, alright? ... No, I'm not fookin' interested in the army, it's full of idiots. I want y o u to be this officer in this situation, Seany. If you were leading the Paras in South Armagh, how would you handle it? You've got the kit on, it's a real river you're wading through, it's really night-time. Don't do anything. Just let me find how you're feeling.*³⁷

In both films, then, the traumatic experience, prolonged in time, is conveyed through the inertia of repetition and movement, with progress only illusory. There is also the urge to escape. In *Contact*, this is conveyed through a subtly expressed but quite obvious desire to end the nightmare through death. McIlroy points out the *apparent death-wish mentality* of the commander, *methodically opening the doors to an abandoned car, while we watch, unsure if it [will] blow up*³⁸ ... *when an arms cache is found, he decides to handle and search the ammunition himself.*³⁹ In *Road*, however, there is a glimmer of hope, as the final scene – Louise, Carole, Brink, and Eddie drinking, listening to an Otis Redding song, and sharing their intimate, repressed longings – can be interpreted as a desperate yet hopeful cry for another life, for a break from the world they live in. In her climactic speech, Louise says: *If I keep shouting, somehow, somehow, somehow I might escape*, and this phrase becomes a chant all of them are crying out.

It is obvious that *Road* should be treated as an expression of communal, social trauma. This is also true of *Contact*, notwithstanding the fact that it is based on the memories of one particular soldier whose perspective as a British officer is external to the Northern Irish community; both films reflect the state of a particular



Contact, dir. Alan Clarke (1985)



Contact, dir. Alan Clarke (1985)

environment defined by oppressive political forces and the ways in which living in that environment is physically felt by people. The paradoxical inertia of mobility is a key to understanding these feelings, conveyed very aptly by the rhythmic flows in these films. Rolinson writes that *by the juxtaposition between movement and stasis ... Clarke captures the wasted energy of unemployment by portraying working-class characters walking nowhere through deserted communities – reflecting the paradoxically static 'road' of Cartwright's title.*⁴⁰ He adds, recalling Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling," that *Steadicam places us within the characters' lived experience, as they walk 'their' streets, demonstrating a fragmented but, in Williams's terms, 'knowable community.'* However, as Williams accepted, experience cannot emerge in a text untainted by ideology. In his late 1980s work, Clarke acknowledges the mediation of ideology in the formality of the sequential and episodic structure which acts to give the 'feeling' a 'structure' rooted in political process. These walks often fall back on themselves through Clarke's use of repetition and circularity, which act as a structural denial of progress, a lack of forward movement which is juxtaposed with the progressive rhetoric of Thatcherism captured in the camera's relentless motion.⁴¹

In *Contact*, this is an inertia of a different kind – it seems associated with the impossibility of delineating the oppressor from the victim and comprehending a plausible purpose of one's action. The outcome is *psychic numbing*, a term taken by Bennett from Hal Foster,⁴² a paradoxical state induced by *both direct, unmediated affective experience and an absence of affect.*⁴³ It is connected to the "antiphonic structure" (one might argue that the narrative alternation of movement and stasis as observed in *Contact* is precisely this type of structure) *that might also be understood to play off the simultaneous absence and surfeit of affect, characterizing traumatic experience: the oscillation between feeling and nonfeeling, psychic shock and numbing: "pure affect, no affect: it hurts, I can't feel anything."*⁴⁴ As trauma is verbally inexplicable and non-representative, the commander's visible numbness, as well as his relentless death drive, are of this kind.

This brings us back to the question of the affective impact of the films on the viewers: how do they feel while watching these films? What is the other, receptive end of this affective communication? It could be argued that the double effect of "it hurts, I can't feel anything" is at work here. *Road* and *Contact* are both poignant and numbing. The repetition, the endless beating or pulsing (of images and sounds), can be experienced, as I mentioned, as both trance-like and nauseating. The rhythms of the film, concerted or not, are linked to the rhythms of the viewer's body; the narrative (in its conventional sense) pointlessness is unbearable and yet absorbing: we are 'in' and 'out' at the same time. The experience of Clarke's films is immensely physical, like music or the sensation of dancing – and the basis of this is rhythm: both visual and aural.

Bennett associates the category of trauma with memory – the trauma lingers, it remains in the body in a mode of memory that can be described as sensory (deep, traumatic, affective). This mode, as opposed to narrative (or common) memory, refers to corporeality, to physical sensations. The distinction between these two notions *seems to offer a useful schema for distinguishing a realm of secondary imagery in which affective experience is not simply referenced but activated or staged in some way.*⁴⁵ The political context would belong, to use Bennett's concept, to the

narrative memory, and the bodily experience of these films renders the traumatic memory: *It is not about the past so much as a haunting of the body.*⁴⁶ The two are intertwined, inseparable, but Clarke structures them so that the gate to narrative memory is opened by the traumatic. In fact, the former is shaped by the latter.

This brings us back to the problem of (non)representability, as the *trauma itself is classically defined as beyond the scope of language and representation; hence, an imagery of trauma might not readily conform to the logic of representation.*⁴⁷ So, the only way to adequately express or convey its dynamics is to look for a specific language beyond representation – and films that focus on rhythmic patterns may offer examples of such a language. *Such texts, Bennett argues, rather than narrativizing traumatic experience, are seen as bearing the imprint of trauma.*⁴⁸

If one abstracts the ‘plot’ of *Contact* from its literary origins, one might assume that the platoon’s repeated rounds never happened, that only one occurred, that there was one explosion, the sudden death that caused the commander’s breakdown. Then, the final explosion would be the actual trigger for the whole story, and that one round would be repeated and repeated in the commander’s mind to work through the trauma and get rid of it. Both *Contact* and *Road* were created in response to current events, yet they seem to be equally concerned with the present and the past, with experiencing and remembering, with sensation and memory: the circular return, spiral flows, and repetitive patterns express the feeling of being trapped, despite the perpetual motion – it never stops, it is always there, haunting and alive at the same time.

¹ This, in a way, brings Clarke close to Robert Bresson’s method of using ‘models’ instead of ‘actors.’

² J. Bennett, *Emphatic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005.

³ See, for example: G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. R. Howard, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2003; G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, “Precept, Affect, and Concept”, trans. H. Tomlinson, G. Burchell, in: G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What Is Philosophy*, Verso, London – New York 1994, pp. 163-199; B. Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect”, *Cultural Critique* 1995, no. 31, pp. 83-109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354446>.

⁴ T. Elsaesser, M. Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, Routledge, London – New York 2015.

⁵ See: V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992; eadem, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004.

⁶ T. Elsaesser, M. Hagener, op. cit., p. 127.

⁷ J. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, University of California

Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2009, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 12-13.

⁹ J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

¹⁸ I have written more about this in: K. Kosińska, “‘To jest twój człowiek – idź z nim’. O zakłóconej identyfikacji w filmach Alana Clarke’a”, *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2021, no. 114, pp. 104-124.

¹⁹ D. Rolinson, *Alan Clarke*, Manchester University Press, Manchester – New York 2005, p. 115.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Interestingly, the estate returned to the screen with the film *Billy Elliot* (2000) by Stephen Daldry, which, in a way, reclaimed it as a kind of national treasure.

²³ R. Kelly, *Alan Clarke*, Faber and Faber, London 1998, pp. 184-185.

- ²⁴ Ibidem, p. 117.
- ²⁵ Rolinson also mentions the significance of the past, as for him in *Road* there is *inbuilt in its cultural topography a potent manifestation of repetition: in the scarred desolation of the mise-en-scène reminiscent of the bombsites of post-war Britain, there lies a negation of the cultural and political agenda which emerged from it*. D. Rolinson, op. cit., p. 118.
- ²⁶ It would be interesting to explore the relationship between the attitudes of the working class and the verticality or horizontality of the architecture designed for them. There is a rich catalogue of films (not necessarily made in the convention of social realism) set in high-rise buildings and referring to the problem of the decline of the proletariat.
- ²⁷ Ibidem, p. 117.
- ²⁸ Ibidem, p. 112.
- ²⁹ The third and earliest one is *Psy-Warriors* (1981), an episode of the anthology series *Play for Today*, a very dense theatrical piece written by David Leland, presenting the quite controversial topic of the psychological tortures employed in the interrogation of the Northern Irish paramilitary prisoners.
- ³⁰ D. Rolinson, op. cit., p. 121.
- ³¹ In one of the most famous cases, the statement by Gerry Addams of the Sinn Féin (and also the commander of the IRA, though he never admitted this affiliation) was read by the actor Stephen Rea, whose wife, Doulours Price, was one of the most notorious IRA bombers.
- ³² B. McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland*, Steveston Press, Vancouver 2001, p. 127.
- ³³ Ibidem.
- ³⁴ She recalls Sandra Johnston's *To Kill an Impulse* (1993) and Willie Doherty's *The Only Good One Is a Dead One* (1993). Doherty's work rhymes very well with the strategy used in *Contact* and *Elephant*.
- ³⁵ R. Kelly, op. cit., p. 187.
- ³⁶ Ibidem, p. 153.
- ³⁷ Ibidem, p. 154.
- ³⁸ B. McIlroy, op. cit., p. 126.
- ³⁹ Ibidem, p. 127.
- ⁴⁰ D. Rolinson, op. cit., p. 115.
- ⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 115-116.
- ⁴² See: H. Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1996.
- ⁴³ J. Bennett, op. cit., p. 5.
- ⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 59.
- ⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 23-24.
- ⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 40.
- ⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 3.
- ⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 23.

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Słowa kluczowe:

Alan Clarke;
trauma;
afekt;
rytm;
kino brytyjskie;
Irlandia Północna

Abstrakt

Karolina Kosińska

Afektywne rytmy. Doświadczenie traumy w filmach Alana Clarke’a z lat 80.

Filmy Alana Clarke’a z lat 80. zwykle postrzega się jako radykalne testy granic realizmu społecznego i narracyjnego minimalizmu. Traktuje się je więc jako szczególnie polityczne, choć potencjał ten odnosi się przede wszystkim do formy, a nie treści (fabuły czy historii). Konsekwencją krytycznego podejścia Clarke’a do bieżących wydarzeń w Wielkiej Brytanii jest nie tylko surowa i pesymistyczna diagnoza stanu narodu i kraju, ale także analiza narodowych i społecznych traum lat 80. Specyficzne strategie formalne i narracyjne zastosowane przez reżysera są wysoce afektywne – wykorzystuje on nakładające się na siebie rozmaite natrętne i repetytywne układy rytmów, zarówno wizualnych, dźwiękowych, jak i czasowych, nie po to, by wyrazić znaczenia intelektualne, ale by działać na widza afektywnie, wciągnąć go w pewne transowe doświadczenie. Autorka wykorzystuje refleksje Jill Bennett na temat traumy i afektu w sztuce do analizy rytmicznych układów w dwóch filmach Clarke’a – *Road* (1987) i *Contact* (1985).