Non-Naturalist Realism: Sound and Image in Alan Clarke's Road (BBC, 1987)

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In 1964 Troy Kennedy Martin declared that 'Television [was] going nowhere fast.' (Kennedy Martin, 1964: 21) British drama, he asserted, had entered a cul-de-sac of naturalism. Low budgets, time constraints, and a lack of cultural permanency had resulted in a television drama that was of devoid aesthetic experimentation, progressive management, and modernist flair. The answer, he said, was to break the link between theatre and the screen and to view television drama as an art form in and of itself, encouraging writers and directors to defamiliarize its forms, its structures and its aesthetics.

The impact of this important call to arms was immediate and far-reaching and throughout the 1970s and '80s, TV producers, writers, and directors would stretch the artistic boundaries of television, creating dramas that were both challenging and socially relevant but that also remained resolutely based in the apparatus of TV production. An important form at the heart of this popular aesthetic revolution was the TV play. Many have even suggested that this form of popular drama constituted the true national theatre of the period, that it reflected the psychology and structure of feeling of 1960s and '70s Britain more than more established dramatic forms.[1]

It is against this background that this chapter examines Alan Clarke's TV version of Jim Cartwright's play *Road* and especially the relationship between image and sound. Part of the BBC's *Screenplay* series, *Road* was both harshly realist *and* non-naturalist in its production and aesthetics.[2] Heavily dependent on the soundtrack and its use of Steadicam, *Road* was a searing indictment of Thatcherite Britain but also an assertion of the aesthetic possibilities of television, in what was perhaps for Britain at least, the last period of popular experimentation. Although Clarke does base his work on the play by Cartwright, as this chapter asserts, it is the director's camera and inventiveness with image and sound that turned a piece of theatre into a memorable piece of television. Television's aesthetic and narrative potential, its ability to utilise broadcast technology to tell small and intimate stories, is a notable facet of Clarke's work and this TV play in particular.

Road follows the lives of a group of people who live on the same socially deprived street in the North of England. During the course of the 60 minute TV play we are made aware of the characters' hopes, dreams and memories as they let us into their minds through monologue and dramatic dialogue. There is no discernible plot, instead a series of tableaus and glances allow the viewer access into the worlds of characters on the margins of society. It is an intimate narrative that is, at the same time,

[1] This opinion was expressed throughout the 1970s but most notable by Dennis Potter, see Purser in Brandt (1981: 168)
[2] *Road* was first broadcast on 7th October 1987. It was first performed as a play at the Royal Court Theatre in 1986.

universal and political. What distinguishes *Road* as a piece of television is its aesthetic form. Commensurate with Clarke's oeuvre, it presents a coming together of popular realism (arguably television's basic style) and subtle experimentation.[3] This combination is both familiar and challenging and neatly answers questions raised by critics of TV naturalism in the 1960s. As I shall explore, such experimentation relates both to the image and to the soundtrack as Clarke adapts a theatrical work into a televisual drama that draws from British social realism and the Modernist avant-garde. He creates what we term *non-naturalist realism*.

Road and the Evolution of Avant-Garde TV Sound

Troy Kennedy Martin's manifesto for progressive television was published in 1964 in the theatre journal *Encore*. Other articles in this issue included Tom Milne on the theatre of cruelty (Milne, 1964: 6-9), reviews of Edward Albee's *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Marowitz, 1964: 51-52) and the text of a short experimental play by John Arden (Arden, 1964: 14-21). It is meaningful then that Kennedy Martin's infamous and provocative article 'Nats Go Home: First Statement of a New Drama for Television' set out its tenets in a forum more usually associated with an older, more established medium, one that was seen (by Kennedy Martin at least) as being superseded by a younger offspring. This article was nothing less than a manifesto for a more progressive and freer popular form and it began in suitably strident tones:

> Television drama at the moment is going nowhere fast. Informed management believe it is so bad it can't get worse. They are wrong. It can and will destroy itself unless a breakthrough in form is made, substantiated and phased into the general run of drama programmes.
>
> (Kennedy Martin, 1964: 21)

Although never quite defining it precisely, the article goes on to berate what Kennedy Martin calls 'naturalism', a form that, he indefatigably states, was 'the wrong [one] for [television]' (Kennedy Martin, 1964: 21). John Caughie correctly asserts that the term 'naturalism' often occurs as a vague negative in television criticism and that it is contrasted with modernism or progressivism. As Caughie states: "naturalism is an easy target, that which we do not like, and 'non-naturalism' is the stick to beat it with." (Caughie, 2000, p.153). Lez Cook, for example, outlines the association between

[3] Throughout this chapter I shall be referring to realism and, more specifically, its aesthetic and dramatic properties. In my use of the term realism I am referencing studies such as Hallam and Marshment (2000), Lay (2002) and Forrest (2013) who define realism as a set of artistic practices and techniques that are designed to convey a sense of real and quotidian life and that supress the presence of the cinematic or televisual apparatus. Often, realism is held in contrast to modernism, or avant-gardeism.

naturalism in television drama and the popularity of forms imported from America. The onus on these shows was on cost and time effectiveness. ABC's *Armchair Theatre*, for example, providing an exemplar for what Kennedy Martin saw as an ever aesthetically conservative form of television that borrowed from the theatre and that, in turn, failed to sufficiently capture the possibilities of the newer medium.

'Nats Go Home' was a proscriptive blueprint for a popular yet progressive television that most specifically advocated challenging the limits of broadcast technology and expanding the possibilities of the TV script. As a manifesto it was imbued with the spirit of its time and, looking back now, we can note the frustration of a writer who saw every popular cultural medium other than his own being transformed by sixties experimentation. Although it is easy to overestimate the impact of 'Nats Go Home' on a medium that, since the 1950s, has on the whole been led by audience figures and advertising, the responses to the article (published in the next edition of *Encore*) were testimony to its influence amongst contemporary writers and producers.[4] However symbolic, 'Nats Go Home' can be seen as a major turning point in the conception of what television was capable of and a first step to determining what it could achieve.

Although never rivalling cinema in terms of experimentation, by the mid-1970s TV drama was embracing the aesthetic possibilities of the medium. Series such as *Play for Today*, *The Wednesday Play* and *Pennies from Heaven* all pushed the boundaries of the television form whilst also often being scheduled in mainstream time slots. Screenwriters, producers and directors created works that were self-consciously avant-garde or progressive and programmers scheduled them alongside more established shows.

Kennedy Martin's recipe for a more progressive television was concerned mainly with its visual aspects. His conception of a non-naturalist form consisted of three elements, as he states:

> The primary concern of the new drama must…be:
>
> to free the camera from photographing dialogue
>
> to free the structure from natural time and
>
> to exploit the total and absolute objectivity of the television camera

[4] Those responding to Kennedy Martin's article in the May-June 1964 edition of *Encore* included Sydney Newman, then Head of BBC TV Drama; Michael Barry, former Head of BBC TV Drama; Dennis Potter who was at the time the TV critic for the Daily Herald; Ken Taylor a playwright, Philip Mackie a producer for Granada TV and Tony Garnett then an actor but soon to be producer and collaborator to Ken Loach.

(Kennedy Martin, 1964: 25)

As is evidenced by this quote, very rarely does Kennedy Martin evoke the progressive qualities of sound, however it *was* to play a small but important role in the new drama, mainly through the work of dramatists such as Dennis Potter and John McGrath.

Potter and McGrath both employed music and song in ways that deliberately undercut the usual relationship of television viewers to the images they were presented with. Potter's use of popular tunes mimed by his actors and McGrath's use of song as a narrative device foregrounded the audio rather than the visual aspects of television and exposed the debt that TV has to radio. Potter's use of music especially, in series such as *The Singing Detective* and *Pennies From Heaven* can be read as both Brechtian distancing devices and meta-critical metaphors for a lost British culture.[5] Potter uses music as an evocation of feeling rather than time and place, much like (as we shall see) Clarke does in *Road*. Moreover, in *Pennies From Heaven* Potter used popular song as a way to evoke a particular sentiment or feeling that in the form of dialogue would seem mawkish and trite. As the author himself states:

> [popular songs] are our diminished nod-back to the psalms, but they are only like them in the sense that popular tunes are saying the world is other than what it is, or simpler than it is, or are bemoaning lost love. The Psalms of David can sound very paranoid even when they are aching with love for God. There's a huge gap, obviously, between the psalms and those songs, but their function is not dissimilar. It's the idea of a world shimmering with another reality, which is what 'Button up your Overcoat', or 'Love is Just Around the Corner', or 'Down Sunnyside Lane' are saying in their cute, tink-tink-tink syncopations.
>
> (Potter, in Fuller, 1993: 86)

It is precisely this metaphorical use of sound that characterises Potter's work as existing within the tradition first outlined by Kennedy Martin in 'Nats Go Home' and what Potter was responding to in his letter to the editors of *Encore.* Music is used in Potter as a way to evoke sentiment without sentimentality, the past without nostalgia, and to assert the connections between popular culture and working-class experience.

Similarly in John McGrath's TV adaptation of his own play *The Cheviot*, *The Stage and the Black Black Oil* (1974) music is used to distance the audience from the realism of television. In an example of Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt,* folk music (a staple of BBC music production in the 1970s) is

[5] See for example Caughie (2000: 174) and Creeber (1998).

employed as a way of reminding the audience that what they are witnessing is a fiction and a construction. This technique is of course prevalent in contemporary theatre, however, in television, a medium where baring the device is usually limited to mistakes in the form of blooper reels and outtakes, it is very rarely seen. Sound and music then, do have a place in the development of non-naturalist and modernist TV, despite not being heard to any great extent in Kennedy Martin's original statement.

Alan Clarke and the Non-Nat Realist Image

Road is imbued with a series of realist techniques that are primarily based in the image – the visual aspects of the text: set design, camerawork, performance, shot selection and so forth. In this section these important factors will be explored and then a synthesis will be offered in the succeeding section of how image and sound work together.

David Forrest writes about Alan Clarke in his book *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics.* That Clarke is included in a book that has chapters on Mike Leigh, Ken Loach and the British New Wave might, at first glance, point to the director's place within a canon of British social realist directors and writers. However, as Forrest is at pains to point out, Clarke fits uneasily into this camp:

> While Clarke is most well-known for the controversial *Scum* and its banned BBC original (1977), there is no question that his most challenging and experimental work was produced in the 1980s where Dave Rolinson saw him to be "attaining precisely the ideological complexity for which critics had been calling" and displaying a "restless experimentation and formal dynamic which addresses these issues as part of a wider questioning of the "visual epistemology" of state and media discourses".
>
> (Forrest, 2013: 148)

Rolinson's point here (cited by Forrest) - that Clarke represents a different form of realism than that which is usually associated with British drama, one that incorporates experimentation - clearly harks back to Kennedy Martin's article. However both critics (Forrest and Rolinson) make the valid point that, in Clarke, this was also twinned with a social and political conscience that added yet further dimension to his work. Even in the mid-1970s, Clarke explored issues of Britishness and Englishness through TV plays such as *Penda's Fen* (1974) and *Scum* (1977). Although wildly different in their aesthetics, both plays can be considered 'state of the nation' works, works that explore the structure of feeling associated with national identity at particular moments in time. *Penda's Fen's* dreamy exploration of Englishness resonates with the social and political scene of the early '70s just as

Scum's punk inspired rage against the system resonated with the latter half of the decade. It is also the case that both plays foreground the image as a carrier of realism. It is through the visuals that realism is conveyed.

As Clarke's career progressed he became more and more adept at articulating socio-politics through visual, rather than narrative, means. This difference in strategy can be exemplified by comparing the treatment of Carlin (Ray Winstone) in *Scum* with Trevor (Tim Roth) from *Made in Britain* (1982). Carlin is an anti-hero in the spirit of the 1950s teen movie, a rebel against the system, who battles against life's hard realities. He is both symbol and character, a distillation of Clarke's social and political thinking up to this point and as Rolinson states:

> Through the distorting lens of hindsight, Clarke's work seems to build to this study of incarceration and institutional violence, combining in Carlin's swaggering borstal walks the attempts of his previous protagonists to assert their identities.
>
> (Rolinson, 2005: 76)

Carlin however is framed through the film's starkly realist visuals. Although long shots are used in *Scum* (especially in the cinematic version), the camera is often static harking back to the traditional Bazinian realism of the 1940s and '50s. The image is one of observation and interrogation, coldly capturing a world through the camera lens.

The framing of Trevor in *Made in Britain* is quite different. Clarke's famous use of the Steadicam (a device he first observed being used by cinematographer Chris Menges in Stephen Frears' TV film *Walter* (1982)) underlined Trevor's restlessness and rootlessness (Kelly, 1998: 142). The image here is imbued with meaning, it becomes a carrier of character and of metaphor. It is a development we see throughout Clarke's career. The ability of the camera to move with the actor suggests a symbiosis of form and meaning rather than the hierarchy that is often associated with realism. The fluidity of the cinematography is more than a way to photograph the character, it mirrors the character's consciousness. *Made in Britain* is still rooted in social realism, however technical innovation allows it to avoid the bland naturalism outlined by Kennedy Martin, the conveyance of visual metaphors extend beyond narrative and character and are transmitted also by the formal properties of film. This last point is exemplified by critical discussion around this TV play that often gives equal weight to its formal as well as its political dimensions[6]. Again, it is clear here that the

[6] See for example Rolinson (2005: 112) and Hill (2013; 257).

major carrier of meaning is visual. Television's tendency towards visuality is foregrounded and relied upon by Clarke's camera, as it captures an image that attempts to re-create the veridical world.

What began with *Made in Britain* continued in Clarke's other works of the 1980s: his filming of Brecht's play *Baal* in 1982, the otherworldly and absurdist *Stars of the Roller State Disco* from 1984 and 1989's short masterpiece *Elephant*. This last piece has been described as both 'understandably controversial (Rolinson, 2005, 128) and 'the best film Alan ever made' (Leland, in Kelly (1998, 198)). In it, Clarke displays a method of working that he had developed throughout the 1980s and that allowed him to marry image with meaning. The camerawork in *Elephant*, with its long unedited takes, makes up for the lack of narrative and the same can said for the mise-en-scene in *Stars of the Roller State Disco,* where the dinginess and claustrophobia of the disco are as much metaphors for the fate of contemporary Britain as the narrative and characters. Clarke maintains his auteurist obsessions during this period but he articulates them through an ever-widening set of artistic strategies. Slowly, but gradually throughout the 1980s the visual properties of Clarke's work began to rival and, in the case of *Elephant*, supersede the narrative content. By the end of the 1980s, Clarke had developed his visual style and began to move beyond the traditional realist aesthetics of his earlier career.

Road is a perfect example of how Clarke developed what we might think of as a non-naturalist visual style throughout the latter part of his career. Ostensibly the play is realist in form, however, as many contemporary critics pointed out, it seeks to peel back the veneer of ordinary life and allow the internal monologues to be seen. This is done through sound obviously but also through image as visuals are employed as objective correlatives to the inner lives of the characters .[7] Mise-en-scene, cinematography and the employment of space combine to produce startling visual images that are based in the real world but also stand as metaphors and symbols.
As Rolinson states:

> Clarke's 'formal inventiveness' and 'foregrounding of technique' were employed…relentlessly, and with more success, back at the BBC. For the *Screenplay* strand, Clarke filmed two of his finest pieces, *Christine* and *Road*…[and] continued to thrive in the television system.
>
> (Rolinson, 2005: 112)

[7] See for example Mossie Smith's insightful and passionate defence of the play on the BBC's *Open Air* broadcast on the morning after *Road*'s airing. Smith's interview, which is available as an extra on the BBC release of the TV play, highlights the cast's commitment to the political anti-Thatcherite tone of the work.

The basic building blocks of *Road*'s visual style were present from the beginning. As Paget (1998: 108) outlines, Cartwright's play can be read in a tradition of challenging and socially relevant works first performed at the Royal Court. *Road* was Cartwright's first major staged work and it crackles with the politically charged milieu of mid 1980s Britain. *Road*, the stageplay, is decidedly vague and unspecific, the programme notes for the original Royal Court performance read: "The action takes place in a road in a small Lancashire town – tonight" (Cartwright, cited in Paget (1998, 107). Original and subsequent stagings of *Road* have made use of sparse sets, black boxes and the audience's imagination to create the fictional road upon which the drama takes place. Clarke's *Road,* through the production design of Stuart Walker (who worked on some of the most well-known episodes of *Play for Today*), skirts the dividing line between real and surreal as lighting and set design create a space that mirrors the intensity of the dialogue. Also unlike the stageplay Clarke uses his camera and his microphone to isolate individuals, as sound and vision both serve the same ends: exposing the interiority of the characters and allowing us into their psyche. It is this last aspect that displays exactly the kinds of formal experimentation that Kennedy Martin called for 25 years earlier. Music, sound, voice and silence are used to explore further the interiority of characters in a medium and milieu that is more usually associated with exterior truth and reality.

Both in its use of sound and its use of mise-en-scene *Road* foreshadows what Murray Smith, in relation to another classic British text, *Trainspotting* (1994), calls "black magic realism". As Smith outlines:

> British [culture] is most often associated with a robust social realism, sometimes dour, sometimes mordant…A large part of the achievement of the film (*Trainspotting),* however, involves a transformation of this realism, accomplished by the novel's black humour, buoying it up with an effervescent style, fuel-injecting it with rhythms of pop, and leavening it with fantasy in the manner of magic realism….Integral to this black magic realism is a concentration on the most dismal aspects of realist mise-en-scene, in order to draw a kind of gallows humour from them, and to lay the groundwork for a miraculous transformation of them.
>
> (Smith, 2002: 75)

Smith's idea of 'black magic realism' here perfectly captures the dynamics of Clarke's use of imagery in *Road*. This is particularly noticeable in the scene in the community centre, where drinkers and revellers are depicted in a run-down hall that is noticeable for its peeling paint, its bare floors and its cramped atmosphere. Coming half way through the drama, the scene exists as a nexus for the various monologues that make up the play. The community centre is the destination for many of the characters. It where they end up, physically and socio-economically. As the Steadicam moves around the club, we are presented with the faces of the patrons – some look drunk and happy, others look miserable. The visual imagery of this scene (like many scenes in the tv play) is drawn from realism but on closer inspection reveals a bleak dilapidation that is more reminiscent of Samuel Beckett than Ken Loach. The large hall that houses the community centre allows Clarke's camera to have free reign, the walls of the room are peeling and there are pot marks in the plaster. Visually the scenery mirrors the decaying of the character's dreams as the paint chips and the wooden floor boards are exposed. In a foreshadowing of the famous scene in *Trainspotting*, in one section a broken toilet is depicted to the side of the room and the camera lingers on the pile of rubble that once separated it from the main space. Clarke here is offering a series of images that are at once realist and at the same time metaphorical. He makes a political as well as an aesthetic statement on late 1980s Britain. The visuals in this scene reflect Smith's description of similar scenes in *Trainspotting* that he describes as depicting the "grim realities of ordinary life" (Smith, 2002, 78) and much like *Trainspotting,* popular music is used to undercut the bleakness of the visuals and to add absurdity to the black magic realism.

This altered sense of realism permeates throughout the entire work, however it is most notable in a scene where two lovers shelter from the outside world and discuss the breakdown of their relationship. The exchange between Joey (David Thewlis) and Clare (Moya Brady) is charged with socio-political spite. Joey is suicidal after losing his job and Clare's words of comfort merely serve to anger and alienate him. The dialogue has very little of the poetry of other monologues and instead consists of accusations and rebuttals, the visuals are imbued with a modernist sparseness that makes the scene an ideal example of Clarke's developing oeuvre.

Unlike the scene in the community centre, which is mainly based in oranges and rusty reds, the overriding colour in Joey and Clare's scene is blue. The walls, the curtains and the two characters' clothes are a muted blue suggesting at once a coolness of tone but also the decaying resonances of Thatcher's Conservativism. The room in this scene is notably empty and the plaster is cracked and water damaged. This is a house that has lost its heart. Clarke lights the scene through the blue tinged net curtains, further developing the colour palette and the permeation of blue throughout the scene. Clarke subtly manipulates the mise-en-scene to suggest the isolation felt by both characters and this visual imagery is deployed as a reflection of the character's inner lives and thoughts. At the end of the scene the director combines lighting and the Steadicam to isolate the couple as they dance silently in the middle of their rundown abode. They are inextricably tied together by the camera that circles around them.

The scene between Joey and Clare comes around eighteen minutes into the sixty minute drama. Like the rest of the play, it takes its fundamental visual language from realism (long shots, real locations, lack of postproduction). However it is also imbued with defamiliarizing touches that lend it a magical, or black magical feel. This looks like the real world but is filtered through the lens of extra diegetic meaning. This harks back of course to the kinds of strategies that Kennedy Martin advocates and that formed the basis of the progressive realism that Clarke develops in his later career.

'In the Mood for Dancing' – The Nolans and Alan Clarke.

I want to turn now to a specific moment in *Road* that utilises image and sound in a way that mirrors the aesthetic concerns of Kennedy Martin. Located within a realist milieu but being inflected with experimental tendencies, it is what we might think of as *non-nat* or progressive realism. This is particularly noticeable in relation to the play's use of music and the relationship between sound and image. As we have seen, such formal inventiveness is not unique within the history of television however it is unusual.

The teleplay opens with the swaggering sounds of Gene Vincent's 'Be-Bop-a-Lula'. The rock and roll classic plays non-diegetically as Brink (Neil Dudgeon) walks through the disserted streets in time to the beat of the music. The initial feeling created is one of masculine menace and aggression – Vincent's evocation of teenage lust and excitement is twinned with the character's strident walk, framed against the dilapidated tenement housing of a grim Northern town. 1950s Rock and Roll is a world away from the song that opened the original play in 1986 – Judy Garland's 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'. If Cartwright's choice of music suggested whimsey and wistfulness, Clarke's heralds a noticeably different emotion, one that is altogether less romantic and sentimental. This split will be mirrored throughout the TV play, as the realism of television clashes with the theatricality of the original text in what Paget calls Clarke's "savage visual aesthetic" over Cartwright's manifest humour (Paget, 1998: 122). As we shall see, music played a crucial role in this translation from stage to screen.

Often, in both cinema and television, music is used as a historical signifier, a form of visual shorthand for the time period in which the story is set. If this were the case then the opening of *Road* would be set in the mid-1950s, a decade that is usually associated with the birth of British social realism and the kinds of gritty narratives that this form of cinema celebrated. But this is not the case: *Road* is set firmly within the 1980s. Its political objects were Thatcher's Conservativism and the socio-economic degradation that was visited upon Northern towns like Darlington (where the play was filmed). The use of music then is suggestive of mood and tone rather than time. We are asked to understand what the music means rather than when it was produced – a carrier of poetic rather than historical information. In what will become a motif of the text as a whole, Clarke's use of music challenges, and in some cases erases, the usual binaries of interior/exterior and diegetic/nondiegetic. Although we understand that the rock and roll classic is played non-digetically, the rhythmic harmony between the song and the footsteps of the character suggest that we are experiencing Brink's internal soundtrack. We might even assume that his braggadocio is underlined by a replaying of Vincent's song in his head as he walks through the deserted streets on the way to a night out. In his outline of the functions of the soundtrack, composer Aaron Copland suggests that this creation of interiority is one of its major roles.[8] As we shall explore later, however, Clarke only hints at this possibility in the opening scene; the full importance of this technique is displayed in the following ones.

The use of a suggestive but initially jarring piece of music to open a film or TV play was not uncommon in Clarke's work. The 1987 play *Christine* about a group of young drug addicts opens with the sound of a music box playing a waltz suggestive of a Victorian nursery rather than the housing estate where the play is set. The opening of *Made in Britain* features a song by the punk rock band *The Exploited* in what again could be interpreted as tapping into the lead character's consciousness. The beginning of *The Firm* (1989) twins images of violence with a jaunty Italian soundtrack in scenes that clearly owe a debt to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Such contrapuntal use of music should be held in comparison with those of Clarke's works that open without music at all. The beginnings of *Scum* or *Elephant*, for example are all the more powerful because they are presented without an opening soundtrack; the plays begin without the fanfare of music, as if we were eavesdropping onto realities that predates the turning on of the camera.

[8] See for example Buhler, J. 2019. *Theories of the Soundtrack*. Oxford: OUP.

Clarke’s subtly experimental use of music is exemplified three minutes into *Road* as The Nolans’ ‘I’m In the Mood for Dancing’ accompanies images of Eddie (William Armstrong) preparing himself for a night out. The skill with which Clarke and his editor Bill Wright construct the relationship between image and sound is highlighted as we cut to the scene: the music begins to play just as Eddie slaps his face with aftershave and preens himself in the mirror. As with the play as a whole, meaning is created through the interaction between actor, environment, camerawork and sound, as each subtly undercuts and challenges the supremacy of the other. Like Gene Vincent’s song, ‘In the Mood for Dancing’ seems jarringly incongruous in the dilapidation of the room that forms the real life ’set’ for the action. As the scene progresses, the relationship of diegetic and non-diegetic sound becomes indistinct as Clarke plays (and sometimes erases) the boundary between these two states.

‘I’m In the Mood for Dancing’ reached number 3 in the UK charts in February 1980. Coming six years before the play’s broadcast on television it is yet another example of a piece of music that is used less to suggest a time period and more for its socio-cultural meaning. The Nolans’ brand of middle-of-the-road pop was a perennial feature of family friendly TV shows of the late 1970s and early 1980s. By 1986 they had become a signifier for working class middle of the road entertainment, appearing ironically and being mentioned in shows such as Ben Elton’s ‘Filthy, Rich and Catflap’ and ‘The Young Ones’ as well starring in early evening light entertainment shows such as ‘The Michael Barrymore Show’. Clarke’s use of their most famous hit then has particular meaning and situates the scene within a specific milieu rather than time. This extra diegetic meaning is totally Clarke’s, Cartwright’s original play has the scene played out without extra diegetic music at all, the stage directions simply reading:

> The lights come up on a room. There is a television up back facing the audience and an old armchair facing the television. Eddie’s Dad is in the chair, his back to the audience, fixing a Hoover. The TV is up full, rocketing blast. Front stage, a young lad, Eddie topless, is combing his wet hair back to shape it, looking in a mirror on the wall. Knock, knock at the door.
>
> (Cartwright, 1996: 17)

Throughout this brief scene Clarke constantly plays with the sonic landscape. As it begins it is unclear whether we are witnessing diegetic or non-diegetic sound. The meaning of the lyrics could refer to Eddie's preparations and hence the music would, as with 'Be Bopa Lula', be a form of interior monologue or thoughts of the character. However, unlike the earlier use of music we get the sense that the characters themselves hear it, both Brink and Eddie shout to each other as if the music were drowning them out and, at one point, Eddie bangs on the wall with a saucepan suggesting that the sounds are emanating from the room next door. We also see a possible source of sound as the camera captures a stereo radio perched on a chair by the side of the room. However we are never sure.

As Robyn Stillwell asserts, it is not unusual for directors and sound technicians to erase or (as Stillwell puts it) cross the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. The distinction between these two is, as she sees it, a necessary one in the stabilization of the text, consequently destabilsation occurs when the line between the two states is effaced. What Stillwell terms a 'fantastical gap' opens up between non-diegetic and diegetic sound that allows for aesthetic and aural experimentation. As she states:

> The phrase fantastical gap seemed particularly apt for this liminal space because it captured both its magic and its danger, the sense of unreality that always obtains as we leap from one solid edge to another at some unknown distance and some unknown uncertainty – and sometimes we're in the air before we have left the ground.
>
> (Stillwell, 2007: 187)

This fantastical gap can disorientate us and distance us from the narrative but it can also open up space for interpretation and experimentation. Sitwell's assertions on the fecundity of the soundtrack however mainly refers to cinema. Due precisely to its orienting function, the television soundtrack is largely sacrosanct and very rarely provides the basis for aesthetic experimentation. Although, as John Caughie and others have detailed, British television has provided numerous examples of avant-gardism within broadcasting this has mostly been situated within the visual rather than the sonic realm (Caughie, 2000: 119).

As the scene progresses, the suggestion that the characters hear the music is underlined by Eddie's father (Willie Ross) standing up and beginning to hoover a threadbare carpet in time to the beat. His dancing adds to the absurdity of the scene but also of course adds to the fantastical gap between what can be heard and not heard by the characters.

As the interior scene plays out Clarke's signature Steadicam follows the action around the dilapidated room and the fluidity of the camerawork is intensified by the relentlessness of the soundtrack. By the time the sequence finishes we will have heard two minutes and thirty two seconds of a track that lasts three minutes and eight seconds. Again, in television, such extensive use of music is unusual, however this will be the same throughout the teleplay. Clarke's use of music then mirrors that of his camera, the long take that so characterizes his work corresponding to the length of the track played. Both techniques defamiliarize the experience of the text in the way advocated by Kennedy Martin in 'Nats Go Home'. Clarke's unwillingness to cut away using traditional editing, or to suggest diegetic and non-diegetic sound would be unusual in cinema, but in television they are almost never seen.

The intentional confusion over the soundtrack is further developed as Brink and Eddie leave the house. The music continues to play at the same volume and the same intensity, suggesting now that what we are experiencing is non-diegetic. As in the opening scene, the steps of the characters match the rhythm of the music but this time the feeling is not one of masculine menace but ironic absurdity as the aggression of the black suited figures is undercut by the cheery pop music of The Nolans. The two figures are in fact dancing together, as their carefully choreographed steps are expertly set in time. The pas de deux is at once comic and tragic occurring, as it does, in the abandoned streets of the once proud mining town. This and subsequent scenes highlight the quiet desperation that dogs Brink and Eddie's night out, and presumably their lives beyond the pub. This desperation will reach its dramatic and psychological climax in the final scenes of the play underpinned by yet another piece of music – 'Try a Little Tenderness' by Otis Redding.

The scene in which Eddie and Brink walk along to the rhythm of the music is an invention of Clarke's. Cartwright's play has Brink and Eddie leaving the house only. The balletic movement of the two characters through the streets not only chimes with Clarke's other television work it underlines the importance of music within non-naturalist television per se. Only mentioning sound once in his essay, Kennedy Martin does specifically highlight the importance of it in the construction of challenging and progressive drama, he states:

> If this drama is ever to get off the ground it must create a new grammar, especially in relation to editing. It must employ new techniques, like Mobile Ampex. It must develop new designs leading to maximum fluidity in the studio by doing away with the old box sets and creating acting areas specifically through the use of lighting.
>
> It must reemphasis the importance of the nature of sound on drama (totally ignored up until now). It must develop sound distortion to the level of the art it is on radio for the purpose of design and dramatic action.
>
> (Kennedy Martin, 1964: 31-32)

Kennedy Martin's evocation of the power of radio here fails to fully anticipate Clarke's use of audio-visuals. Rather than borrowing radio's progressive relationship to sound, *Road* and other works by Clarke, successfully exploit television's potential for multi-layered populist experimentation.

The scene ends as suddenly as it began, as Brink and Eddie's walk to the pub is cut short by the long monologue delivered by Jerry (Alan Davies). Jerry's monologue is one of the quietest and most philosophically rich in the whole play. In a contemporary review, Alan Davies' performance was seen as a highlight and in Cartwright's theatrical script this is one of the most poetic and lilting moments. Clarke's version rearranges Jerry's monologue to come just after the scene with Brink and Eddie whereas in the stageplay the monologue comes a full six scenes later. In this way Clarke's adaption specifically juxtaposes the new with the old: the easy cheapness of 1980s Britain is contrasted with Jerry's evocations of "from ago [sic]" and the atmosphere of the 1950s dancehall. The Nolans' song takes on extra meaning as it is held in comparison with images of post-war innocence and romance. Jerry states:

> Oh they were lovely lovely times though, and such a lilt to them, or I go down it when I think...I hate to mention it, but that big silver ball turning up there and all the lights coming off it onto us lot dancing below, and the big band there. And all the lads and girls I knew, all with their own special character. And the way you stood, you know, and you had a cigarette.

> You even lit a cigarette differently then. There was some way, I can't do it now, good thing too, if I could I'd cry me flipping heart out.
>
> (Cartwright, 1996: 30)

In a rare moment of sentiment, Clarke's script juxtaposes these two images of courtship – one which is empty and meaningless, the other innocent and dreamy, one which is framed through nostalgia, the other lit in stark realism. In the context of 1980s politics, this juxtaposition becomes prelapsarian – the 1950s standing in for a time before Thatcherism and the dissolution of the communities that would have formed the backdrop to the drama.[9] Jerry's monologue is a romantic moment in the stageplay but even more so in the TV film where the actor is closely miked and no non-diegetic sounds are heard.

The climax to the drama also uses sounds and music in a way that it is both non-naturalistic and experimental. Eddie and Brink meet Louise (Jane Horrocks) and Carole (Mossie Smith) in the pub and all four retreat to a suitably dilapidated house to drink and listen to soul music. The song that plays diegetically is again metaphorical (or perhaps emotive) rather than a signifier of time period. Unlike 'In the Mood for Dancing' there is a definite source for Otis Redding's 'Try a Little Tenderness', a small tape recorder in the room and the timbre of the sound reinforces the effects of realist sound design. However, the length of the shot, the mise-en-scene and the intensity of the performance from all four actors transforms the scene into a surreal and noticeably dramatic conceit.

As the Steadicam explores the room, the faces of the four revellers reveal their different reactions to the music: Louise stands staring into the middle distance with silent tears rolling down one cheek, Carole's expression is defiant and sneering, Eddie's eyes are closed as he lets the power of the music well up inside him and Brink looks angered by his situation and frustrated by his life. It is a scene that sums up the underlying tensions and sadnesses of the drama and one that is prompted by the authenticity of Otis Redding's voice. Again, we can note a contrast here with The Nolans' easy pop

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[9] We can note that this evocation of the 1940s and 50s as a time of cultural innocence for Britain was prevalent throughout 1980s cinema and television. Films such as *Dance with a Stranger* (1985); *Absolute Beginners* (1986); *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988); *A Private Function* (1984) and many others served as signifiers for a simpler, better Britain.

that promises happiness but often delivers only disappointment, music that is packaged and commodified in a way that mirrors the pleasures of modern British (or at least Thatcherite) culture.[10]

This is the moment that Murray Smith refers to as one of “magic redemptiveness”, the dark mise-en-scene up until this point, the intensity of the dialogue, the camerawork combine to produce what is in essence a transcendence (Smith, 2002: 78). The four characters reach a form of apotheosis facilitated by the music and the play comes to a redemptive and defiant end. For Smith, it is precisely this semi-spiritual element that transforms otherwise grim realism into black magic realism. Like its use in Dennis Potter, popular music reveals itself to hold definite and long lasting meaning. We could assume the lyrics themselves to have meaning – in 1987, the general election year, the year of the Hungerford massacre and the year of the Remembrance Day bombing in Enniskillen – tenderness was certainly something to try. However, like Potter’s use of dreamy sentimental tunes of the 1930s, the meaning lies within the emotive, rather than the linguistic suggestion.

Conclusion

> “That Be-Bop-a-Lula – why Alan used music so well I’ll never know, because he was musically illiterate, tone deaf. Its lovely when Mossie and Jane are clacking along reciting all the names of the pubs – Ikkey’s Swan, Ancient Shepard, New Zealand Chief…”
>
> John Ward, cineamatographer (cited in Kelly, 1998: 186)

Clarke is often cited as being in the canon of British realist directors. However his work transcends the usual methods and working practices of traditional realist television or cinema. As Mossie Smith highlights, the end scene of *Road* was meticulously filmed over thirty takes and the location in which the action takes place was purposefully dilapidated (Kelly, 1998: 190). Clarke eschewed the improvisation of Mike Leigh, the heavy social research of Ken Loach, or the quotidian and indexical mis-en-scene of modern realist directors such as Andrea Arnold. Clarke’s realism, especially in his later works, became imbued with his own auterist sensibility. It is this that has often singled him out as one of Britain’s most innovative directors. In the critical work surrounding Clarke, much has been made of his use of realist visuals, his use of sound has very rarely been discussed, however it is

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[10] See for example David M. Thompson’s assertions on the end scene: “I think the last scene is one of the most extraordinary pieces of television I’ve ever seen. Alan was an angry person, not overtly political but there was a broadly political agenda about giving people a voice how wouldn’t otherwise have it, and I think that’s most effectively expressed in Road, in that big speech of Jane Horrocks’ – about finding your own voice and becoming a person.” (Thompson, in Kelly (1998: 190-191).

noticeable in *Road* and in many other works. *Road* represented a coming together of form and meaning; an aesthetic strategy that we see Clarke developing from the early 1980s onwards.

Road's historical moment however is as important as its formal experimentation. Coming after eight years of Conservative government, the play and Clarke's adaptation of it, is oppositional and lyrical. Sound, both in terms of music and the human voice, plays a major role in the conveyance of socio-political meaning. Much has been written about the BBC's choice not to film *Road* on a sound stage but instead to move the production to an abandoned ex-colliery town near County Durham.[11] This decision, forced on the BBC because of an electricians strike, was to shape the aesthetic of the film. It allowed Clarke to develop his visual style through camerawork and mise-en-scene but it also encouraged a freer and more flexible use of sound. The sonic properties of location shooting are of course very different to a BBC sound stage which, as the name suggests, is designed to offer a consistent level and timbre across spaces. This is harder to achieve on location where different rooms and environments effect the quality of what can be heard. This contributes to the realism inherent in *Road*, and continues a social realist technique of location filming.

As we have seen however, Clarke uses sound to subtly alter the viewing experience, at some points challenging the boundary of diegetic and non-diegetic positioning, at others contrasting bubblegum pop with grim environments, at others juxtaposing closely miked monologues with noisy internal spaces. As the quote that opens this section suggests, Clarke use of music may well have been instinctual but it was also crucial to many of his works. Clarke used music as an poetical device not as a chronological signifier.

The TV play was an integral part of what is often considered to be a golden age of television drama. As a form it was short enough to offer the chance for directors and writers to experiment but was robust enough to encourage audiences to tune in week after week. The TV play is also a format that has become extinct. It was considered too costly and cumbersome for a television environment concerned with cost effectiveness and seriality. Plays such as Clarke's *Road* are a testament to what is possible in a one hour slot, sandwiched as it was between an episode of M*A*S*H and a party political broadcast.

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[11] For example see Richard T Kelly's essay in the DVD notes for *Dissent and Disruption: Alan Clarke at the BBC* (BBC, 2016)

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