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Declan Clarke’s Fantasies

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The seagulls are difficult to place. Generic, as seagulls often appear, they fly with unhurried purpose over a neo-classical bronze, a lady, laureate, draped, suitably robust, her hand resting on a book, the contents of which are unseen. She gazes from right to left across an expanse of sky, attentive not to the seagulls but to something off screen. There is a small round hole just above her elbow. The camera does not move. Her companion gazes weightily in the other direction, also draped, but with a chignon and the suggestion of wings unfolding out of shot. She has a hole of equal size further above the elbow, at the base of the upper arm. Close-ups of the two holes show irregularities at their edges. They are accidental, then, without design. Thanks to the proximity and nuanced register allowed by 16mm film, the weather-burnished, lightly-pitted bronze resembles skin. The title of this short film, *Will Be This Way Until the End of the World*, could be either a promise or a lament. Evidently, these details matter, but why this should be so is not clear.

In a sequence from a different film, all is precisely designed. Two fenders taper skyward, culminating in tail lights edged with chrome and launched, so to speak, diagonally. Inside the door, the trim of an armrest likewise tapers one way into fins and the other way, projectile-like, to a nose. Aeronautical. Sharp moth. The licence plate nestles in symmetrical, glancing arms of chrome. Chrome beams arch over the interior of the roof. Two-tone seats divide snugly into two rectangles, the one supported by the other. Comfort and protection. A cruciform insignia recurs on bonnet, hub cap, steering wheel, door handle. Tout communiqué. Reflecting in the chrome of a wing mirror a miniature figure entwines in a warm Southern tint. It is both an artefact and an accomplishment. To judge a film such as *This Is Not a Love Song*, without reason, or otherwise, we infer purpose. 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the history of the June 2nd Movement (Loneliness in West Germany), or of that which investigates, mainly through an interview with a witness, the final days of Che Guevara in the Bolivian highlands (This Far and Further Still). The qualities of these films that most readily court judgement in terms of their tendency (even a tendency that is lost and lamented, as Fite-Wassilak claims) are those that matter the least; or rather, they matter, but for different reasons.

My contention is that many of Clarke's videos show a commitment to form – sometimes sporadic or incidental, sometimes more developed – in the midst of a more straightforward informative use of documentary techniques – intertitles, subtitles, voice-overs, interviews, shots of evidence (newspaper articles, photographs). This is a commitment to the elaboration of complex means rather than to the more or less worthy ends of tendentiousness, and therefore also to qualities that do not simply follow from or equate to any tendency these films might either disclose or desire.8 The counterpart to such commitment is an attraction to enthusiasm, his own and that of others; an attraction that correlates Clarke's interest in Bobby Buffalo and Rosa Luxembourg, wherever their many differences. This contention is supported by Clarke's occasionally oblique treatment of, for example, the ghosts of Ceaușescu in present day Bucharest in On Our Own We Are Free to do Many Things (2012). Here, the documentary techniques of voice-over, subtitles or intertitles, which might otherwise clearly indicate a tendency, a position on what is shown, no longer anchor the succession of images. Instead, silently, shots of Ceaușescu's notorious 'palace of parliament,' a brief montage of the famous photograph of Ceaușescu and others escaping by helicopter from the roof of this palace in December 1989, followed by a view of the same shot in the present, complete with a new, empty office block in the background, and shots of a public exhibition documenting the events and displaying artefacts of December 1989. With all of these shots, as before, Clarke takes on the role of an amateur historian, which has its own virtues and significance; but these are interspersed with a curious light show performed by chandeliers in the palace, a brief night-time shot of an unidentified luminescence passing above the palace. Then, for the last three minutes or so (of what is only a thirteen minute film), there are static shots of housing blocks, during the daytime, first in summer and then in winter. At the very end, a hazy winter sun metamorphoses into five mobile luminescences of the kind seen earlier, which exit in looping paths past the viewer. The rectilinearity persistence, which mundane housing blocks share with pompous palaces and corporate offices, sprouts a sudden curvature, an arabesque. Here again is the subjunctive in the heart of the indicative, the fantastic confused with the demonstrative and persuasive ambitions of documentary techniques.

Even when these techniques appear to be most straightforwardly indicative, such as in We Missed Out on a Lot, a short, silent demonstration of how to make a Molotov cocktail in four steps, there is also redundancy and a move toward fiction. There is no need to seek out a top floor room of the Goethe Institute in Dublin in order to learn how to make such a thing. So this demonstration must matter otherwise. Their redundancy as instruction nudges the concise and casual gestures of the demonstrator toward the subjunctive. The 'just so' character of a gesture, in a redundant demonstration, acquires new formal qualities from the fact that it need not be.9

Or further, consider the film Everything Must Finally Fall. This shows the take off and flight of a small plane from Weston Executive Airport near Dublin. The plane pulls a banner, on which is written in large capitals “I HAVE DOUBTS.” Again, we infer purpose, even problem-solving: the flying of such a banner as a response to a problem or set of problems. But what problems? To address, with the least discrimination, the largest public within the city? To declare one's doubt? But then, with regard to what? The 'situation', as the statement flies above the housing estates and business parks of West Dublin? The validity of such a statement? Is the purpose to sustain our interest with a subjunctive declaration – a declaration of doubt and passion, which must be doubted, enthused? And is this the basis of a conviction toward the world, as Cavell claims?

Rather than the development of a tendency, Clarke has found a way to enthuse without certainty, to persuade us not of a state of affairs but of the legitimacy of certain enthusiasms; again, his own and those of others. What is most compelling about this is his growing commitment to the formal requirements of presentations made in the subjunctive. It is from these qualities that we infer purposes less grand and more significant than the purposes demanded by those who would replace fantasy with realism.

(Endnotes)

4. Żmijewski, op. cit.
10. As Adrian writes: ‘Even an ordinary ‘was’, in a report of something that was not, acquires a new formal quality from the fact that it was not so,” op. cit. p 302.

IMAGE: Declan Clarke, Everything Must Finally Fall (2007) | DVD 04° 36”, courtesy of the artist.