

CLARA

(dir. Akash Sherman, 2018 – 105 mins)

The question of whether we are alone in the universe has fascinated humankind forever. We only need to look at stories of alien invasion in art, or track scientists' impulse to reach for the stars to realise the extent of our obsession.

Cinema has repeatedly latched onto this mystery and the mind-expanding possibilities it entails. Whether space movies choose to delve into the darkest recesses of the unknown, or to imagine the exhilarating possibilities of first contact, they automatically relate not just to our curiosity about aliens, but also to the more everyday questions of loneliness. What if we are the only ones? What if this really is it?

At the beginning of Akash Sherman's *Clara*, the laconic Dr. Isaac Bruno (Patrick J. Adams) is so obsessed with proving the existence of life on other planets that he finds himself more and more alienated — pun intended — from everyone around him. Ironically, it is the search for others like us that isolates him from his peers. Using university equipment outside of normal hours, he even jeopardises his own research. It soon becomes clear that this self-destructive behaviour is not motivated by science alone. But it is only thanks to the mysterious Clara (Troian Bellisario) that, as the film goes on, the story of Isaac's painful past progressively unfolds.

Hired as the doctor's research assistant, Clara appears out of nowhere. Travelling with her dog and her backpack, the young woman follows the whims of her heart wherever they lead her. When they bring her to Isaac's door, she meets someone who, as opposed to herself, only trusts scientific fact. Isaac would never let his emotions lead him anywhere; or at least, not anymore.

Sherman's second feature is a daring but winning combination of drama and space adventure. Through the relationship between Clara and Isaac — the stories of their very much earthbound, personal lives — Sherman's film updates the familiar tropes of the space movie to explore modern questions of existence and isolation. The launch of two extremely powerful satellites collecting previously unavailable data represents an exciting opportunity for Isaac as he looks for proof of extra-terrestrial life. Like other space movies, *Clara* evokes the excitement of research and the stress of the race to be the first finding a new, habitable, or even inhabited planet. But here, the satellites also represent for Isaac a chance to finally let go of his anger and bitterness, and to open up to the world in all its dimensions.

Sherman pushes this parallel between science and emotions further: in *Clara*, there is only so much the astronomer can do without acknowledging a certain part of magic. At the film's poetic conclusion, the divide between feelings and science collapses in an unexpected moment of grace. Though it used to feel light years away, this reconciliation between tangible facts and intangible truths suddenly reaches us in one swift but monumentally comforting instant.

- **Elena Lazic**