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Q&A / ART SHEZAD DAWOOD

UFOS, MORMONS AND ALIENS THAT THINK THEY'RE HUMAN

Have you always been interested in science fiction and the idea of aliens?

I'm a huge sci-fi fan, in particular from the 60s and 70s on in terms of counter-cultural sci-fi writing. I also like using genre because it becomes a good prism to talk about other things beyond its obvious scope. I'm not sure I'm that bothered about the 'what if?' of alien phenomena. I'm more interested in how science fiction allows us to reflect on the world or society.

Did you spend a lot of time researching in Preston?

All my films are usually based around a place. I love this idea about an archaeology of place – you're almost excavating the unexpected in a particular location. I spent a lot of time in Preston with Lapis, the Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society, attending their meetings and conferences. Their meetings were held in this sub-masonic order-lodge in the back of a pub in Blackpool, which just added to the whole flavour of the piece.



Did you look at why alien sightings occurred in that particular region?

The fact undermining more bonkers theories is that BAE Systems have a huge plant nearby, so there are all kinds of experimental aircraft being tested. There are also the old weather balloons and Chinese lanterns which seem quite common as UFO sightings. Interestingly, one of the Lapis conferences I went to was about how different portrayals of aliens in cinema impact eyewitness reports. The image of aliens and spaceships around the world shifts according to culture.

Was it just the high number of alien sightings that interested you most about Preston?

I became interested in lots of other factors. Preston has the fastest-growing mainland Chinese population in the UK, because of the university. With all these Chinese students, other infrastructures popped up. I spent time in secretive karaoke bars getting to know the Mandarin meeting places in Preston. This idea started to come up that there were all these secret cabals in this city in the north.

How does this feed into the genre of science fiction in the film?

Science fiction became a really nice way to speak about ideas of immigration; what we think of as migration on this planet

may be superseded by the interplanetary trajectories that explode our limited perspective. There's a larger story in which aliens turn up in Preston to effect the return of the Glorious 100, who are this elite group of aliens sent millennia ago to witness the birth and development of a new species. But they've been here so long, and nobody's come to get them back, that some of them have started to forget who they are and started to believe themselves to be human.

Did you merge the architecture of Preston with a science fiction story?

I wanted to suggest that Preston had something of the alien and uncanny about it. On the first trip to Preston I went to the bus station car park, an amazing brutalist monument. It has all these arrows and markings, and it was immediate that this is the runway where the UFOs land. Interestingly, for the past five years, the council have actually closed the top five levels, so I imagined this was part of the alien conspiracy. I'm always interested in the weird in the everyday, the aliens within quite kitchen-sink communities. The point where documentary just spills over into bonkersness.

Does the film feature the people of Preston?

We had 100 extras from Preston. We got some really amazing characters. On the first day we were shooting in this cafe. At 10pm, this guy's thing starts beeping and he had to go back to prison – he was out on day release.

What was the most challenging parts of making the film?

I worked with this Arab actress to create a language. We took high Arabic but tried to make it weird, like some kind of proto-Arabic. I really bit off quite a lot by having four languages and seven main characters. It was one of the hardest things.

Was there anything you used from the history of Preston?



Right at the end, the aliens manage to effect extraction and all the town's people descend into Avenham Park. The river Ribble, which runs through Avenham Park, was the site of the first mass Mormon baptism – Mormonism was born in Preston. So when spaceships start to appear at the end, some people shift

from civilian gear into these white Mormon-style robes.

Does much of the film take place in space?

I didn't want to necessarily do big-budget things. We used lighting really effectively and the whole interior of the spaceship was just a white infinity studio. It's more about creating a metaphorical, poetic space for it, which I think works beautifully. In fact, I would do that even if I had a bigger budget, because it creates more of an ambiguity between the everyday and the otherworldly.

Were there any eyewitness stories that stood out?

One night I was looking at a drawing of an eyewitness had done that I thought I'd seen before. I put it on top of this 11th-century Sufi diagram and they were almost the same geometry. A friend pointed me to fourth-century Chinese astronomical diagrams and I found almost the same geometry. That for me was the late-night epiphany that there's something in all of this.

Did you use any documentary footage of Preston?

We took footage of a night out that I cut into the film to add to the sense of the uncanny. Gaggles of girls in short skirts and bruises, pissed on a night out, will cut to a flock of birds and then to a scene of something quite literally alien. I'm trying to connect all those dots.

Did your interest in science fiction feed into your previous work?

Definitely. I also make neon light sculptures with a certain cinematic and futuristic bent to them. I was quite intrigued by the weird parallels between near-death accounts and UFO eyewitness reports – ideas of light and its effect on perception. That's definitely part of the visual coding of the film. Even the whole dream machine project was very much part of the idea of higher perception or a higher perceptual order of meaning.



"I'm interested in the weird in the everyday, the aliens within quite kitchen-sink communities"

SHEZAD DAWOOD'S ESSENTIAL SF READING LIST (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)

Dhalgren – Samuel R. Delany
I'm a huge Samuel Delany fan. This book is an example of when genre exceeds its own boundaries and becomes really great literature. I see it as the *Ulysses* of sci-fi; it's genius.

Shikasta – Doris Lessing
This was a particular influence. It talks about quite fantastical things but connects it to a real-world politics.

Chariots of the Gods? – Erich von Däniken
Von Däniken has this mad theory that alien astronauts have been visiting Earth forever. While taking it with a pinch of salt, I love all that stuff.

Mao II – Don DeLillo
Another favourite book of mine, all about cults. Warhol and ideas of the copy.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead
Space is such an unexpected paradigm, it's the uncharted territory of the imagination. For me, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* represents exactly that attempt to codify the unknown, like a roadmap.

