



Piercing Brightness by Shezad Dawood 2011. Courtesy of UBIK Productions Ltd.

Director Shezad Dawood

by Marshall Julius

Published: June 7, 2013



MASK (played by Houda Echouafni) giving orders to the aliens as they arrive on Earth in Preston, North West England.

The debut feature from **Shezad Dawood**, an internationally acclaimed visual artist represented by the London gallery **Paradise Row**, “**Piercing Brightness**” is an eerily beautiful and boldly experimental sci fi saga set in Preston, Lancashire. Commissioned by

Preston’s public art organisation **In Certain Places**, the film investigates religious, racial and class-based social hierarchies in a way that is at once cerebral, surprising, invigorating and entertaining.

Two youths land in a spaceship outside Preston. Their mission: to re-establish contact and effect the retrieval of the Glorious 100, sent to earth millennia ago in human form to study and observe the development of another race. After making contact with one of the 100, now a Pakistani shopkeeper (**Bhasker Patel**), they discover that many of their kind have become corrupted, forgetting their original purpose and slowly becoming influenced by and in turn influencing their adopted home.

What was it about this project, and this stage in your development as an artist, that you felt the time was right to make your first feature?

I’m always looking for the next step, the next evolution. The longest film I’d made to date was 55 minutes long, and actually called “Feature,” as both homage to **Samuel Beckett’s** “**Film**” and a play on the fact that at 55 minutes it was officially 10 minutes too short to be a feature. So actually making a feature-length film seemed the next right thing to do.

Film is collaborative medium. As an artist with a personal style and viewpoint, how did you find working with others?

I’m often working with others, from my studio team to various collaborators, such as musicians, curators and writers. And my short films still require a crew, so it was more an increase in scale and ambition. So it’s taken a few more voices to make it happen, and it’s really benefited from those voices.

Your movie uses Preston and its inhabitants to investigate religious, racial and class-based social hierarchies. Why explore those themes using science fiction?

In a way I feel genre was invented to explore important themes, through imaginative spaces. Think of the highly political nature of the spaghetti western. In this case, science fiction seemed an ideal way to look at certain issues of belief and race through a much wider prism – i.e. from the point of view of an alien race embedded in the fabric of our society.

Do you consider yourself a fan of sci fi? What sort do you enjoy?

I love Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick and Doris Lessing's particular brand of philosophical sci fi.

Preston's an unusual place to set a science fiction movie. Or so I thought. I had no idea that Lancashire boasts the highest rate of UFO sightings in the UK. What interests you, if anything, about flying saucers and alien visitation?

I guess one of the key aspects of alien visitation that interests me, is how it becomes the religious experience of our times. Interestingly at LAPIS (Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society) annual conference, I heard a very interesting paper examining the reflexive impact of film and tv renderings of aliens and their spacecraft on actual sightings and vice-versa. I like the way the whole science of ufology is so entwined with visual and mediated representation.

Were you inspired by any particular artists or filmmakers while making "Piercing Brightness"?

John Sayles' "The Brother From Another Planet," Hugo Santiago's use of Buenos Aires in "Invasion", and even the more commercial but no less political, and often overlooked "Alien Nation," with James Caan and Mandy Patinkin.

What was your experience of making the film? Was it a complicated shoot?

Oh yes, I won't be rushing out to make a film with seven main characters, and in four languages again in a hurry. It made it a tough call for everyone involved. That said I'm very proud of the film, and it's doing everything I had in mind.

Between the film's text and subtext, your multi-media approach to the visuals and the need for the film to be engaging and entertaining, how did you manage to balance so many elements so successfully?

I had always set out to do that. It was almost a point of pride to demonstrate that there could be another way to make cinema. That you could be experimental, and yet ambitious in terms of production values, and still create a film that would map out to a broader audience. I'm very grateful you feel it was successful.

Are you excited about the film's release? Have you seen it with an audience yet?

Very excited. I've had the opportunity to watch it with a couple of audiences at test screenings and film festivals, but I'm still really looking forward to its release, and doing Q&As at certain screenings - which is a great way to encounter people through the film.

What are you hoping your film leaves people with?

A sense of wonder, imagination and possibility that gives them a fresh viewpoint on the universe of belief and meaning.

Is there anything you're surprised that you haven't been asked yet about the movie? And what would be your answer?

Nobody's picked up on the nod to Jim Jarmusch, and the answer would be yes it is ...

What's next for you, and when can we expect another feature?

I'm working on a fairly bonkers short film, which goes into production in Southern Morocco in October, and is about blue-skinned aliens being assaulted by cavemen - it's due to premiere at the Marrakesh Biennale next February. And the next feature, maybe two to three years before it comes out.

Piercing Brightness is in cinemas from Friday, June 7.

