



Future Past

Sophie Cavoulacos

In 2002, Shezad Dawood traveled to Karachi to remake Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up*. Filming began with the city's top beauties and luminaries in a colonial-era building, where the protagonist's photo studio (played by David Hemmings) had been meticulously recreated. The following day, the flummoxed cast discovered that the set had been removed overnight; it was then revealed that there had been no film in the camera, and that there had been, and indeed was no, recreation of *Blow-Up*. All that exists today are a series of set photographs and hand-painted posters Dawood commissioned from local poster artist Faiz Rahi – industry *accoutrements* never intended to serve their purpose. This performance of a film recalls Louise Lawler's *A Movie Will Be Shown Without the Picture* (1979), with its play on the syntax and structure of cinema. Dawood's sleight-of-hand revelation of cinema's intrinsic artifice offers a guiding precept for his work, which moves across disciplines and mediums: look again.



Make It Big (Blow Up), (2002/3) Film Still (C-Print on aluminum)
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam

Dawood incorporates references from a vast, eclectic canon, crisscrossing for instance between William S. Burroughs, George and Mike Kuchar, experimental music, mysticism and science fiction – and much more (as the second text in this volume shows). It seems of chief importance to understand the methodology behind this approach, lest it be mistaken as obscurity for its own sake or a sort of “B-side-mania.”¹ Equally relevant is the idea that while meaning is up for grabs in a postmodern era, making art via salmagundi does not represent nihilism or a “dropping out.” On the contrary, the hybridity in Dawood's work serves to “play with histories, narratives and fictions (...) as a way of reinventing the world for further perusal.”²

For Dawood, fluidity plays out in a number of different ways. Take the paintings and neon sculptures, which the artist uses to work through his ideas in the build-up to his films; they serve as a kind of abstracted storyboard. As always with the artist, the relationship between two things is synergetic. A moment on set – using a 1970s prism filter in his science fiction feature *Piercing Brightness* (2013), for example – feeds back into his painting process in the studio. Another key interplay concerns how approaching a particular taxonomy always leads to another, alternative taxonomy. As part of his research for *Piercing Brightness* – which chronicles two extraterrestrials in Preston, England, searching for the “Glorious 100” being called back to their planet after many years on Earth – Dawood gained access to one of the largest moving image archives of UFO sightings, which in turn revealed itself as an archive of handheld film and video formats from the 1950s to the present. This consequently informed the varying textures of the film, which combined this archival footage with 16mm and video. These various formats represent just one of the many layers of meaning at play, each providing a point of entry that invites multiple viewings.

Fluidity also comes into play in a much larger, philosophical sense. Dawood is expansive in his way of thinking, putting ideas and images in dynamic tension to see what new things might emerge. This is perhaps characteristic of his distrust of Modernism and the Enlightenment principle of progress, which casts anything that came before it aside (the eclectic references in Dawood's arsenal having proved their use). Dawood has described himself as not being interested in “the consensual ‘real’, but in revealing the cracks and fissures within it that point to other ways of approaching meaning.”³ This sounds abstract but it's quite the opposite: received ideas set the terms surrounding not only *what* we think about, but *how*. For instance, when asked about his use of genre (in addition to science fiction subjects, Dawood plays Billy da Krishna in his fanciful *Western Feature*, from 2007-08), he replied that it's a moveable concept with openness to it, if one steps back to see its structural ability to be replayed incessantly – offering as examples the psycho-sexual aspects of *The Searchers* (1956), the gender play in *Johnny Guitar* (1954), the particular Marxist framing of spaghetti Westerns, and the vaudevillian, homoerotic elements in the Thai *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000).⁴ The rich field of possibility created in Dawood's work has been likened to Walter Benjamin's illuminations, those “constellations

of ideas, emotions, intuitions and experiences.”⁵ This aptly represents the open lines of inquiry in his working process, which invites other ideas, interlocutors and collaborators. I might offer another analogy for its indelible notion of being without a frame: Jorge Luis Borges’ Library of Babel, with its book-laden chambers extending in every direction, encompassing the universe within “a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable.”⁶



Piercing Brightness (2013) Feature Film (HD, Super 16mm and various formats transferred to HD) Film Still. Running Time: 77 min. Courtesy of Ubik Productions.

These open-ended, hybrid explorations can be understood in relation to the artist’s own background, which “moves between India, Pakistan, the Gulf, and London in the heady days of the British National Party and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).”⁷ Indeed, Dawood draws on the history and culture of Greater India, most notably with his paintings, which are made on vintage textiles from 1970s Pakistan. This dates to childhood years the artist spent there, but also to a moment of rapid growth in Pakistan’s textile industry, when patterns from Nigeria, China, and elsewhere were brought into a handmade tradition – all of these nuances are part of the work before the first brushstroke is applied.⁸ However, it would be a mistake to interpret his output as a product of nostalgia, identity politics or a one-to-one relationship with personal history. Dawood was invited by the Devi Art Foundation, in Delhi, to develop a project on the theme of diaspora; the 2013 exhibition that resulted, *Black Sun*, was accompanied by a publication, which is required reading on the artist. If Dawood was initially wary of taking on the topic,⁹ *Black Sun* explodes the binaries bound up in the idea of diaspora and outlines, and offers an epistemological position key to approaching the artist’s work as a whole.

That is, Dawood looks at the structure of diaspora – being home to zero, one or several places and alienated from zero, one or several places at once – and

neutralizes any personal feelings or emotions, using the empty frame as a means to develop an expansive subjectivity. Or, as he has written, he aims to “really take [diaspora] to task syntactically,” and to think about how ideas are “diasporic in terms of their fugitive and networked nature.”¹⁰ Digging deeper, we might begin to consider how temporalities and geographies fold into each other – conceptualizing that the future and past always each contain the other, as do utopia and dystopia – perhaps by way of atemporality, as theorized by William Gibson; the double bind of Michel Foucault’s heterotopias, where opposites can coexist; or the play on temporalities in Chris Marker’s cinema. (Or recalling, quite concretely, how Dawood’s paintings conjure nations and decades past through textiles). An alchemical mirroring becomes central, represented by the Black Sun, that joining of light and dark by which the sun’s eclipse creates its own illumination. The metaphor of classical alchemy fittingly sheds light on the intuitive ways Dawood transforms disparate starting points into a singular other, replete with a set of meanings not previously present. For Dawood, a work must “become its own universe or die trying.”¹¹

From its intellectual framing to its production, the *New Dream Machine Project* (2010-ongoing) provides insight into the workings of a Dawoodian endeavor. Envisioned as an open-ended research process, this reimagining of (and homage to) Brion Gysin’s 1962 stroboscopic device opened up the iconic work to new contexts and readings. Dawood sought to create a large-scale Dream Machine, integrating responses from artists and scientists alike in the intervening decades. In 2011, it was the center of a performance by the Master Musicians of Jajouka at the Cinémathèque de Tanger. The Jajouka musicians performed regularly at the famed 1001 Nights café Gysin operated with the painter Mohamed Hamri. Indeed, the *New Dream Machine Project* calls attention to the often-overshadowed years Gysin spent in Morocco in the 1950s. The Dream Machine – which emits pulses of light on the viewer’s closed eyes to induce (psychedelic) activity in the brain – tends to be placed in the context of Gysin’s relationship to Burroughs’ cut-ups and the flicker of structuralist film.¹² Dawood relocates our understanding of Gysin to include his experiences with Sufism in Morocco, arguing “you can see it in his early drawings, before the Dream Machine came about, and in some of his paintings; the patterning of the Dream Machine is Islamic.”¹³ So too with Tangiers and its role in the Beat

Generation; the city was a nexus for Western luminaries fleeing the draft and other obligations in the 1960s.¹⁴ In this way, the artist recreates both an object and a zeitgeist by entering into conversation with kindred spirits across places and times, while also forging meaningful collaborations in the present tense, with Yto Barrada and Abdellah Karroum among others.¹⁵ The final element to consider is the project's iterative nature. Dawood filmed the Tangiers concert not as a documentary, but in an attempt, through editing, to transmute the oneiric effect on celluloid – exploring how the film might be its own dream machine. Working with London's Parasol Unit, Dawood staged a second concert as part of their Winter Light festival, exploring further collaborations (and leading to another film) in an endlessly mutable line of thought.

Let us return to *Piercing Brightness* as a way to approach Dawood's newest work, *It was a time that was a time* (2015), which charts a post-flood future in New York City. While *Piercing Brightness* can be called an experimental film, it's important to recall the film resulted from multi-year research and engagement with the inhabitants of Preston, a town notable for the highest rate of UFO sightings in the country.¹⁶ Through interviews with local interest groups and by enlisting nearly one-hundred locals as extras, Dawood cast the town's residents in their own portrait. The process of working with a group to somehow enact a sense of place (and to look at it anew) is crucial for the artist, who has cited the making of a film as "the first screening."¹⁷ *Piercing Brightness* has been reworked in different formats and contexts, including a live version accompanied by the Japanese psychedelic group Acid Mothers Temple,¹⁸ whose leader Kawabata Makoto scored the film. On the invitation of Channel 4, Dawood produced the 3-minute *7669* (on view in the exhibition) in 2013, which delves deeper into a character in *Piercing Brightness*, Naseer Khan, a Pakistani shopkeeper and one of the "Glorious 100" being called back to their faraway planet.¹⁹ Khan is a solitary figure – the only one to have followed the directive to not mix with humans – and is revealed to have lived several lifetimes on Earth: a widow before his current incarnation, a retired foreman before that. His isolation (which is endured with a surprising *joie de vivre* and a penchant for Buster Keaton films) stands in for a more universal alienation. In turn, *7669* imagines

Khan's mind's eye just before leaving Earth in his rapture moment, which is unresolved in the feature film; it's left unclear whether it's death or rebirth, which begin to equate considering Dawood's citation of the Tibetan *The Book of the Dead* (8th Century) in his conceptualization of the film. Through a montage of landscapes, animals, and flashing colors and words, Dawood accesses the interiority of a being outside gender, race, and time.



7669 (2013), Various formats and archive material transferred to HD, Film Still. Running Time: 3 min and 32 sec. Originally Commissioned by Random Acts for Channel 4. Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London.

Accessing this kind of "blank" subjectivity is the keystone of *It was a time that was a time*, commissioned by Pioneer Works and developed and workshopped with young adults from the social justice non-profit Red Hook Initiative. The 16-minute film speculates how a community formed in the wake of a catastrophic environmental event might operate. The production of the film was framed by specific driving principles. The first: that the group not make a fictional work, but embody their future community to the extent that they're simply documenting themselves, in the spirit of material culture traditions dating back to cave paintings. Secondly, that the film be shot with technologies that could have endured a major flood: Super-8 film, which could be processed in Jamaica Bay, and early digital still cameras with video capabilities, whose batteries could be recharged using a jerry-rigged saltwater battery.²⁰ So what does this amount to? For one, "science fiction without special effects," as Andrew Sarris would describe Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965).²¹ Furthermore, in that it puts forward a cinematic space radically positing itself as *being* rather than *representing*, *It was a time that was a time* recalls Pierre Huyghe's *The Host and the Cloud* (2009-10); its opening credits announce the film as an experiment, "witnessed live and partially recorded." In both projects, each participant is

cast, crew and cameraperson alike. Additionally, *It was a time that was a time* attempted to create a temporary community that explores ideas more profoundly than a typical public art project might allow. Dawood began developing the concept with Pioneer Works not long after Hurricane Sandy. Situated in Brooklyn's Red Hook waterfront neighborhood, the space was in one of the worst affected areas. The specter of the storm looms large, complete with the inequities it revealed across the city's boroughs.

Unfolding to a score by experimental composer-musician Weyes Blood, the film includes panning shots of waterfront scenes, an abandoned aquarium, and groupings of men and women in varied salvaged dress carrying out series of movements. What else does this new work tell us? Dawood sets out to enact some of the nested ideas he works through in *Black Sun*, for instance, juxtaposing the Manhattan skyline with celestial shots of ancient-seeming sea creatures (at Coney Island's New York Aquarium, half of which has yet to reopen after Sandy) to create a setting both post-urban and primal. Another mirroring he returns to is between individual and society, with the proposition that, within attempts to map the future, "utopian projections and interior states of consciousness [are] always incorporating and transforming the other."²² The reigning principle is the power of individual imagination to create new social bonds that exist outside the attributes of race and gender – such as with Naseer Khan – or doing away with creed, culture and politics in the tradition of utopian communes.

Choreography is the vehicle for this reimagining. In the workshoping process, the group worked with Brooklyn-based choreographer Lauren Bakst to develop movement for the film. After a brief verbal phase, the participants explored gestures through authentic movement, partner work and tai chi practices. Those initial gestures grew, without verbal direction, into the actions seen in the final piece, creating a hermetic physical language born unto itself. These movements have set the terms for their existence, and they succeed in scrambling the viewer's reading of intertwined bodies and undetermined gestures – are these rituals of mating, healing, mourning? This is particularly potent in the difficult reading of ostensibly intimate gestures as sexual, or even sensual. Interestingly, sex plays a role in two works Dawood referred to in the development of *It was a time that was a time*: Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) and the films of the

Kuchar brothers (specifically, 1965's *Sins of the Fleshapoids*). A poem written as a starting point for the project (reproduced in this volume) also references sex in a more direct way, but ultimately the group's exploration of how sexuality and relationships might evolve after the flood carries the film to its final incarnation. This filmic exploration occurs outside language, other than on-screen text at the beginning and end of the film. Its design recalls another utopian cinema, that of Jean-Luc Godard. The final text closes the experiment on the fluid note of synesthesia: thank you for listening.

Dawood has remarked that in creating communities around his projects, he is the one coming in as an outsider, a process that requires generosity from all parties. While his work has a certain fragility to it – meaning it is foreign to us, initially – generosity is the exceeding characteristic. The viewers are presented with a set of layers to peel back, and are challenged to make connections that are, finally, equally theirs.²³

1. I recall Ed Halter using this term at the 2013 Columbia University symposium *Séances: The Cinematic Event*. Its logic goes: you know Andy Warhol, but do you know Jack Smith? You know Jack Smith, but do you know, and so forth.

2. Shezad Dawood, "Black Sun - Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia," in *Black Sun*, ed. Gerrie van Noord (London: Ridinghouse, in association with Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon and Arnolfini, Bristol, 2013), 43.

3. "Shezad Dawood in conversation with Zina Ardalán," in *Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film*, ed. Ziba Ardalán (London: Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, 2014), 44.

4. Modern Mondays: An Evening With Shezad Dawood. April 20, 2015 at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

5. Mark Bartlett, "Synthesist Imaginary and Recyclage," in *Shezad Dawood: Piercing Brightness*, ed. Gerrie van Noord (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2012), 62.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books), 113. I am indebted to Mark Bartlett for the idea of "framelessness" in the essay above.

7. Shezad Dawood, "Black Sun - Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia," in *Black Sun* (London: Ridinghouse, 2013), 6.

8. "Towards the Possible Film," in *Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film*, 67. Dawood adds, "The patterns reflected a pluralism that speaks to the Utopian possibility of a shared Third World, or non-aligned consciousness, that ends with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and Pakistan falls firmly into the sphere of US influence."

9. My focus on the book partly results from not having seen the exhibition, although I think it stands on its own as a remarkable artist's book; on the point of wariness: "I remember thinking, 'Oh, no. I don't even want to go there.' Then over the period of a year I found myself coming back to the question: 'Why not?' And then, 'I really probably

should,'" in "Kodwo Eshun, Shezad Dawood & Gerrie van Noord: In Conversation," in *Black Sun*, 83.

10. Dawood, "Black Sun - Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia," 6 and "Kodwo Eshun, Shezad Dawood & Gerrie van Noord: In Conversation," 83.

11. Email to the author, August 2015.

12. Branden W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts After Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 305-312.

13. "Un-thinking Systems: Shezad Dawood in conversation with Sara Raza," *Ibraaz* 002, February 24, 2012, accessed August 2015: <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/12>.

14. Abdellah Karroum, "Inventer le Monde: The Moroccan New Dream Machine," in *Shezad Dawood: Piercing Brightness*, 24.

15. This performance picked up where another left off: the Jajouka musicians and the Rolling Stones' Brian Jones played at the Cinémathèque in 1968. The quasi-mythical quality of the connections forged is encapsulated by involvement of the Jajouka brotherhood. According to local lore, the Earth would stop spinning if they stopped playing; and indeed it was the son of Jadj Attar, head of the group in the Gysin-Jones years, who led the Musicians in the 2011 performance.

16. Among others: It was also an early site of the Mormon Church in Europe and has the fastest-growing Chinese population in England. The film was commissioned by In Certain Places, a public art project based in Preston.

17. Modern Mondays: An Evening With Shezad Dawood. April 20, 2015 at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Further fleshed out in: "For me that performative idea has always been at the heart of my film-making; that the first audience for the work are those that make it. That somehow film production is less separate from performance than it pretends to be," email to the author, August 2015.

18. The collaboration with Makoto was key to the film; Dawood often knows who would ideally develop the score for a film at the very onset of the process. However, due to the cost and complication of producing a show with a Japanese band, Acid Mothers Temple has only played with the film (in an improvised score) once, at the 2011 AND Festival in Liverpool, adding a talismanic quality to this iteration of the work.

19. Bhasker Patel, who plays Naseer, played the token ethnic extra in a popular English sitcom Dawood recalls from the 1980s – although he later went on to be in Wim Wenders films. Dawood sought out actors of different types for *Piercing Brightness*; in addition to the local non-actors, main characters were played by a leading soap actress, another known for splatter gore films, a stage actor and so on. This juxtaposition of varying types of acting mirrors perhaps the varying visual textures of the film. (Dawood spoke about this on the occasion of Modern Mondays: An Evening With Shezad Dawood. April 20, 2015 at The Museum of Modern Art, New York).

20. Email to the author, July 2015.

21. J. Hoberman, "The Now Futurism and the Then Zeitgeist" *Artforum* 51 (no. 10), 304. This entire article is useful reading here.

22. Dawood, "Black Sun - Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia," 12. Some of the ideas Dawood moves in and out of in forming this idea are the esoteric principle that the individual is the template for the universe, making the evolution of the latter dependent on the former; extending William Gibson's notion of technological mapping to imagine how human evolution through technology would affect neurology; how the "inward journey" of Sufi practices could be applied more universally; Dawood, "Black Sun - Alchemy, Diaspora and Heterotopia," 14 and "Kodwo Eshun, Shezad Dawood & Gerrie van Noord: In Conversation," 96 and "Shezad Dawood in conversation with Ziba Ardalán," in *Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film*, 50.

23. "Shezad Dawood in conversation with Ziba Ardalán," in *Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film*, 50.