Piercing Brightness, by Shezad Dawood: Migration, Memory and Multiculturalism

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‘Science fiction doesn’t try to predict the future, but rather offers a significant distortion of the present…We sit around and look at what we see around us and we say how can the world be different?1 This is not, however, Shezad Dawood’s approach in what is the artist’s first feature-length film, Piercing Brightness (2013).2 The film is not set on another planet; nor does it offer us a glimpse of the future. Dawood shows us a world unvarnished. It is left to us, not the author, to imagine it differently. Rather than a speculative fiction, Dawood presents us with a realist one; Piercing Brightness is not a film about the future, but one about nationalism.

With the aim of ‘...causing us to think differently about issues such as migration, belonging, time and memory...’3 Piercing Brightness holds the refracting prism of mainstream science fiction up to modern-day Preston, Lancashire, in the UK, where a troupe of alien envoys have been sent to retrieve the ‘Glorious 100’, an expeditionary party sent initially to study the progress of homo sapiens. Over time, however, this task has been lost and they have begun to experience psychological symptoms due to their being away from home and their lack of attachment objects.

Dawood is renowned for his conceptual approach to film, once going as far as to shoot a whole movie without there being any film in the camera and leaving behind only the production stills.4 As an artist working with film, he takes a different role to traditional directors: he need not adhere to traditional narrative, genre or any other historical filmic registers. Piercing Brightness is, however, squarely a science fiction. It does have genre – and this is important, as it need not have one at all. Dawood’s sculptures are abstract neon gestures,5 so we could, therefore, ask why this film is not more abstract also. By adhering to genre,

1 Samuel R Delany, from Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction, Dragon Press, 1984; Delany is interviewed by John Akomfrah for his documentary film The Last Angel of History (Black Audio Film Collective, 45 mins, 1996)
2 Shezad Dawood, Piercing Brightness, 2013, 1h 17mins; It is possible that Dawood draws the title from a passage in the Quran, 86:3 Surah at Tariq, which speaks of ‘The stars of piercing brightness...’ – these verses can be seen as analogous to the creation myth in the Bible’s book of Genesis.
4 See Shezad Dawood’s Make it Big (Blow up), 2002–03, boxed series of 7 black and white gelatin prints 40.6 x 50.8 cm, edition of 10
5 See, for example, the artworks that accompanied ‘Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film’, at Parasol unit, London in 2014: Elliptical Variations II, 2014; Ville Urbaine, 2010; or The Black Sun 2010 (see www.shezaddawood.com). In the accompanying book, Shezad Dawood: Towards the Possible Film (Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London, 2014), Dawood explains: ‘I’m enjoying the shift into a greater degree of abstraction...’
Dawood relinquishes experimental structure in order to conform, with a relatively fixed narrative, but in doing so he also engages in dialogue and discourse with science fiction’s rich history.

The SF theorist, Louis Chude-Sokei, claims that dialogues around ‘race, racialisation, slavery, colonialism, and technology’ have been a ‘part of the DNA of science fiction from its genesis’. These may not be immediately noticeable, and must be decoded. For Chude-Sokei, as it is with John Rieder: ‘Science Fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes’.

Preston itself is off the beaten track and it could be presumed that the stereotypical ‘gallery going’ (ABC1) viewer based in a large city, most probably London, has never been there. Consequently, from the outset, the place is shrouded in a veil of mystery. Dawood’s reasoning behind choosing to shoot in Preston is equally cryptic. One is not sure of his point of departure; did Dawood choose Preston because of its high frequency of alien sightings? Or did he decide upon shooting in Preston, and then discover its paranormal underground?

In the cinematography of Piercing Brightness, Dawood emphasises some of Preston’s industrial characteristics, choosing to pan across its brutalist architecture and its interstitial spaces, reinforcing its modernity but being cautious not to position it as futuristic. When interwoven with a little narrative, its brutalist features allow it to transform into a dystopian non-place. This kind of architecture is heavily referenced throughout the science fiction genre, from

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7 John Rieder, Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction, Wesleyan University Press, 2008, Middletown, Connecticut, p 15

8 See Marc Augé, Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity [1992], Verso Books, 2009
A Clockwork Orange (1971) to High-Rise (2015). The concerns of modernist/postmodernist architecture and the concerns of SF literature are one and the same, with both searching for utopia.9 A reference to brutalism in architecture within the SF genre practically creates an instant dystopia, regardless of the architects’ utopic intentions.

Preston is half the size of Leeds or Manchester, and although a city it is not a metropolitan district. Sandwiched between more industrial Blackburn to the east and Blackpool, the Las Vegas of the North, to the west, it could be claimed that it, too, is an interstitial space. In Dawood’s visioning, Preston, which could not be further from eclectic, becomes so. He has the ability to invert the familiar in on itself, and in doing so it becomes as mystical and alluring to its own citizens as Morocco or Karachi, other settings for Dawood’s films.10

If Dawood establishes an interpersonal framework from which to encounter a local, Preston (forced into a fast-paced re-establishment of its relationship to the global), he also presents us with a temporal dissonance. Preston is, at the same time, being forced to re-establish itself in relation to the Future, something it has so far ignored (or had no interest in). This raises the question of whether it has, in fact, been ignored itself. Is there any need for a town in an economic downturn to update itself? Preston was a boomtown of the First Industrial Revolution, but now, however, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,11 it seems to have lost its competitive advantage with no hope of regaining it.

Citizens living in a global or alpha city are surrounded by the future, by electric cars, driverless trains and underground transportation, but when looking at Preston the future is conspicuous in its absence. In Dawood’s film, we are unsure if its citizens even have the internet or smartphones, and they certainly do not allow these things to mould their lives. Alien technologies pull Preston into the future, where it needs to be. If the film is considered as political artefact, viewing it through such a prism can be seen as an elucidation device for envisaging an alternate future that can catapult the citizens of Preston into a technologically updated one. As John Rieder says, elaborating on Frederic Jameson: ‘Science fiction then… emerges as a counter-strategy that revitalises the notion of progress by transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come.’12

SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. Thus we witness the transmutation of Preston as it undergoes a radical, interplanetary paradigm shift. A similar thing happens in the feature

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10 The film was commissioned by the Preston-based arts group In Certain Places, in partnership with Preston City Council and Lancashire County Council, for the benefit of Preston, where it premiered. Charles Quick, the Director of In Certain Places had this to say: ‘There are many stars in the film, both international and local, but the real star of the film is Preston. It was interesting to see a director portray a northern city not as a gritty caricature, but as a visually exotic and multilayered location populated by an intriguing cast of characters.’
11 See the World Economic Forum website: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/archive/fourth-industrial-revolution/
12 John Reider, Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction, op cit, p 29; see also Fredric Jameson, ‘Progress Versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future?’, Science Fiction Studies, Volume 5, no 2, 1982, pp 147–158, p 152, accessed 5 April 2021
films *District 13* (2009) and *Black Panther* (2018): all of a sudden, places thought to be Third World have technologies far more advanced than those in the First World, catapulting them into the future. Alien migration in *Piercing Brightness* is paralleled with human migration. Any fear felt about alien migration is mirrored in the distrust felt for migrants, or our own species, and in doing so Dawood creates a hypothetical empathetic space. Dawood’s allegorisation of the migrant narrative is especially current; it speaks to both the migrant crisis and Brexit – although this is unintentional, as *Piercing Brightness* was filmed in 2013. The perfect translation of Dawood’s narrative speaks to how timeless issues of migration have become omnipresent. An ‘Exodus’ narrative is one everyone can relate to; it is equally suited to past, present and future.

If we want to examine the way Dawood amplifies fear in relation to the migrants, and also the way fear or mistrust manifests itself in the real world, we can look at Freud's notion of the Uncanny: ‘… everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.’

13 The aliens in the narrative are completely hidden, as is the hidden workforce of legal and illegal aliens in the UK. Citizenship is invisible unless you are checking passports; it is intangible, existing only on paper. Dawood is aware of this, and at the beginning of the film the United Kingdom citizenship test is ridiculed. This conforms with the prevalence of alienation as a theme in contemporary diasporic narratives. In law, an alien is any person who is not a citizen or a national of a specific country they happen to be residing in, and has its etymological origins in the Latin *alienus* meaning ‘belonging to another’. There is nothing about

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the alien, in and of itself, that inspires fear, but it is our relation to it that makes us afraid: lack of knowledge breeds paranoia.

All fourteen districts of Preston’s county, Lancashire, backed Brexit in the 2016 Referendum vote. One of the central tenets of the ‘Vote Leave’ campaign was preventing immigration, and specifically the fearmongering that Turkey, a country with over seventy million people, would join the European Union, allowing its peoples to move en masse to the UK. Despite Lancashire having relatively low levels of immigration compared to other parts of the country, its fear levels are some of the highest in the country. An episode of the BBC programme Panorama in 2007, filmed in Blackburn, the town adjacent to Preston, accused the area of ‘White Fright’ and was concerned with the increasing segregation on ethnic and religious lines.

In Dawood’s work we are presented with a dualism in which the visible and the invisible are equally represented. We are forced to come to terms with what we cannot see as an ever present un-sensible: ‘...like a buried spring or a dried-up pond. One cannot walk over it without always having the feeling that water might come up there again.’

Within the film, the ‘aliens’ appear irrational to us due to their differing customs: fear generated by the uncanny sends us back to operating with our gut instinct, thus rendering us irrational. We recourse to the instinctual and operate on a primitive level; logic takes a backseat. Of course, the aliens are acting rationally, and it only appears to be otherwise: a problem that is exacerbated by a lack of a shared verbal language. Initially, the aliens contrast heavily with their surroundings; they stand out, they don’t yet synchronise with the city, but we watch them gradually integrate, just as migrants would do in a process of cultural assimilation. Without a shared language, non-verbal communication is paramount, and it becomes clear how emotionally charged it is in contrast to the spoken word. Miscommunication can occur, but ultimately it bonds us more tightly together, like a mother and baby.

Dawood’s film can be seen as an examination of anthropos, of what makes us human as well as where that begins and ends. One character at the end of the film evaporates: it turns out they were a hologram. This is unexpected, as they have just been expressing a complete range of human emotions; a kind of Turing Test. Dawood asks: is it materiality that makes us human, our skin and bone, or is it our affect, our capacity for emotion and independent thought? When it comes to science fiction, these considerations would normally appear in

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14 Six out of the fourteen districts voted in favour of leaving the EU by more than 60 per cent; see https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36614758

15 ‘Nearly 2 million people came to the UK from the EU over the last ten years. Imagine what it will be like in future decades when new, poorer countries join.’ http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/why_vote_leave.html

16 https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09p718

17 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”, op cit, p 3, accessed 5 April 2021

18 Just like the character Ash in Ridley Scott’s Alien, who is revealed to be a humanoid robot towards the end of the film

19 The Turing Test is an Imitation game: ‘In the test, a human interrogator interacts with two players, A and B, by exchanging written messages. If the interrogator cannot determine which player, A or B, is a computer and which is a human, the computer is said to pass the test. The argument is that if a computer is indistinguishable from a human in a general natural language conversation, then it must have reached human-level intelligence.’ https://course.elementsofai.com/1/3, accessed 5 April 2021
relation to robots – for example, in *Blade Runner* (1982, 2017) or *Westworld* (1973, 2016) – but their appearance in relation to the alien, a living, feeling organism, highlights colonial pasts and the dehumanising discourses used to exert power over others. What makes us human is a key determinant of colonial narratives; it is how the oppressor exerts control.

The impossible dehumanisation of the oppressed, on the other side of the coin, becomes the alienation of the oppressor… since he denies humanity in others, he regards it everywhere as his enemy… In short, he must dehumanise himself, as well

Jean-Paul Sartre 20

Pan-humanism, from Dawood’s anthropomorphised perspective, is inclusive of the alien as a human being even if it is not biologically classified as such. In psychological terms, the alien is a *person*, and experiences *personhood* much the same as we do: through emotional subjectivity. This emotional capacity for human affect is strong enough to override the aliens’ own consciousness and allow them to forget themselves as alien, in a similar but more extreme way to how émigrés alter their names in order to complete the assimilation process, effectively erasing their former identities. This part-human, part-alien mutant is exactly the kind of *métissage* Dawood is interested in and hints at the possibility of total miscegenation.

In his discussion of ‘people between cultures’, Renato Rosaldo creates a dialectic of cultural visibility and invisibility that is structured around hegemonic and countercultural positioning. Rosaldo argues that because the hegemonic majority engulf the social sphere, they can control power through the articulation of customs that, objectively, are neither normal nor abnormal but, rather, mere preference. The occupier, through normalising their own customs, subjugates those customs seen as normal and accepted in the eyes of the other as they are different. Customs become a battleground in colonisation, the source of ‘inequality, power and domination’, despite being exclusively subjective.

James Clifford puts it nicely in his discussion of Marcel Griaule:

Griaule never presented fieldwork as an innocent attainment of rapport analogous to friendship [*as Dawood attempts to do*]. Nor did he naturalise the process as one of education or growth (child or adolescent becoming adult), or as acceptance into an extended family (a kinship role given to the ethnographer). Rather, his accounts assumed a recurring conflict of interest, an agonistic drama resulting in mutual respect, complicity in a productive balance of power. 23


22 Ibid: ‘Cultural boundaries are saturated with inequality, power, and domination.’

23 Friendship here is similar to trade, one as a prerequisite for the other; see James Clifford, ‘Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation’, in *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, George W Stocking, ed, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, p 140
The same concerns are also discussed in the speech in front of the Council of the 100, thirty minutes into *Piercing Brightness*. A reflexive democratic vision is a twenty-first century concept. To progress beyond conflict, a bipartisan agreement is needed in which ‘both parties actively engage in the interpretation of cultures, rather than being perspectival, inscribed from within a single point of view’.24

*Piercing Brightness* is an excellent format in which to view positioned subjectivities, allowing us to see simultaneously the subject positions of alien and human: when they align, and when they contradict. Dawood highlights discrepancies, public and private, in group identities, by placing them in forums and showing the private arguments that are held behind closed doors. This shows that disagreements are not brought about exclusively by the presence of different species or races, but that they occur naturally within any formation, whether familiar or not so.

‘The undocumented have been absorbed into the mainstream.’25 Rosaldo’s illegal aliens are just like Dawood’s: ‘For all their cultural differences, they have shared a semi-secret life in their chosen land, forming a kind of shadow economy and culture which any day could end in arrest and deportation… the shared experience of living the “same” secret lives works to homogenise the new immigrants.’26 They PASS but in doing so ‘they simultaneously accede to and resist cultural homogenisation’.27 In a process of ‘absorption and rejection… the undocumented both comply and deviate, bobbing and weaving between both assimilation and resistance’.28 They neither remain as alien, nor are they completely absorbed into the culturally transparent human; they occupy the border territory, semi-acculturated; they are Dawood’s mutants.

Human cultures are neither as coherent nor as homogenous as our typifications presume them to be, and this is certainly the case for the ‘alien’ in Dawood’s methodology. The aliens have *polis*; they have *polity* and *politics*. Like humans, they are a political entity and deserve to be respected and engaged with as such. As we have not yet got to the stage of intercultural borrowing and lending, the aliens are still invisible. There are a great deal of interactions between alien and human, but not on equal terms as only one side is aware of them.

The notion of culture is conflated with the idea of difference. Cultural distinctiveness, as Rosaldo sees it, leads to ‘isolation, insulation, and subordination’.29 The aliens are on foreign soil, but, like an embassy, it is their territory. They inhabit a kind of quarantine space of self-policing cultural containment, protecting their own culture from the natural assimilation (identity confusion) that goes with living in the host’s domain. ‘Either join the mainstream or stay in your ghettos, barrios, and reservations.’30 (Interestingly, the word *ghetto* is derived from

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25 Ibid, p 210
26 Ibid, p 210
27 Ibid, p 211
28 Ibid, p 211
29 Ibid, p 199
30 Ibid, pp 206–207
the Yiddish gehektes, meaning enclosed.) They do not see themselves as invaders; they are not even here by choice. It seems they were chosen, as if by lottery, highlighting the fortuity by which some migrants find themselves displaced by either natural or man-made disasters. Crisscrossed by multiple identities, whose flux is not under their control, the aliens become mestizos (persons of mixed ancestry), but they have not yet developed a tolerance for their own contradictions. Again, to use Dawood’s terminology, they are mutants; Dawood uses the glitch to illustrate these contradictions visually.

However, despite all their similarities the doctrine Rosaldo outlines would appear to be in opposition to the new more liberal schema that Dawood promotes. Somewhat cynically, he argues that we can never be as liberal or as unbiased as we aim to be. “The myriad modes of perceiving and organising reality are culture specific, not panhuman.”31 He shares the realism/pessimism (delete as appropriate) of Griaule; perhaps anthropology is a practical rather than an academic exercise after all.

Dawood prefers to embrace a hopeful, theoretical naïveté. In the film, his optimism veneers over humans’ true nature, but on paper things look a little different: we are reminded of humanity’s predisposition for genocide and subjugation. Note that in the film the aliens leave hastily and appear to show no emotions towards the humans; there is an indication here that

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31 Ibid., p 197
they share our human faults. But we should be reminded that there is a difference between guilty knowledge and wilfulness. ‘Actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea.’\textsuperscript{32} It is their customs that separate them, the humans and the aliens; they share a common goal.

In conclusion, what we are presented with in Dawood’s practice are multiple dialectics of difference and similarity. The polyglot omnipresence of multiple languages encourages translations as a way of understanding discontinuous narrative multiplicities, as a way of applying meaning to syncretise the concurrent with the disparate through both diffusion and osmosis.

If borders are a membrane to be permeated, have the aliens done so successfully? Can one only integrate fully with the present if one hides its past? The aliens present the human with an illusion of choice as to the conditions of their acceptance. But it is a false acceptance. If they make themselves visible, which they have not, they will be found out and experience true contestation. Theirs, at least for the time being, remains a shadow occupation. Returning to Griaule, for whom immigration is ‘a recurring conflict of interest, an agonistic drama resulting in mutual respect, complicity in a productive balance of power’,\textsuperscript{33} in the case of the aliens in Preston the rebalancing of power has not yet been resolved, or perhaps has not even begun to have been addressed.

What Dawood’s film does, however, succeed in achieving is the depiction of multiple subject positions within the same narrative. When watching the film, we listen to and acknowledge the existence of multiple narratives and recognise that the ‘other’ is not homogenous. This is important, as people tend to group groups together, and believe that the characteristics of an individual are reflective of the group as a whole, or that group belief is equivalent to personal belief. In psychology this is known as the ‘Group Attribution Error’. This can be damaging when people are grouped together politically – for instance, in a political party – but even more so if they are grouped together ethnically, where individuals’ views could be much more disparate. When the film is shown in Preston, the town in which it is set and to which belongs the fastest-growing Chinese population in the country, the story becomes a fable, its narrative instructional and its teachings moral. For us/those in London, it’s ‘Theory’. But in Lancashire, it takes on a new meaning: Practice.

What we think is less than what we know: what we know is less than what we love: what we love is so much less than what there is… We are so much less than what we are.

R D Laing\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} ‘An act does not make a person guilty unless the mind is also guilty’. A fundamental principle of Criminal Law is that a crime consists of both a mental and a physical element. Mens rea, a person’s awareness of the fact that his or her conduct is criminal, is the mental element, and actus reus, the act itself, is the physical element.

\textsuperscript{33} Clifford, ‘Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule’s Initiation’, op cit, p 140

Dawood’s practice aims at preparing us to inhabit an increasingly global, multilingual and multicultural environment, which if we do not go forth and meet in the middle will come at us with unequal weight. He demonstrates that neutrality is a myth, and encourages his viewer to be more expressive and honest about their interests and intentions.

As domains of experience become more alien to us, we need greater and greater open-mindedness even to conceive of their existence.

R D Laing

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35 Ibid, p 9