



NEW RELEASES

Sky Peals

Sky Peals

Directed by: Moin Hussain
©: Birchanger Ltd., Channel Four Television Corporation, The British Film Institute
Production Company: Escape Films
Presented by: Film4, BFI, Screen Yorkshire
International Sales: Bankside Films
Executive Producers: David Kimbangi, Kristin Irving, Caroline Cooper Charles
Produced by: Michelle Stein
Co-producer: Jennifer Monks
Production Manager: Rachel Kelly
Unit Manager: Matthew J. Scott
Location Manager: Joe Gradwell
1st Assistant Director: Marco Petrucco
Script Supervisor: Ciara McIntyre
Casting Director: Heather Basten
Script Editor: Kate Leys
Written by: Moin Hussain
Director of Photography: Nick Cooke
Stills Photography: Lisa Stonehouse
VFX: Covert
Graphics: Paula Jones
Editor: Nse Asuquo
Production Designer: Elena Muntoni
Art Director: Victoria Richards
Set Decorator: Elle Prudence
Costume Designer: Sophie O'Neill
Hair and Make-up Designer: Martin McClean
Main and End Titles by: The Morrison Studio
Colourist: Tom Cairns
Composer: Sarah Davachi
Music Supervisor: Phil Canning
Sound Designer: Paul Davies
Production Sound Mixer: Kirstie Howell
Re-recording Mixer: Steve Single
Publicist: Zoe Flower
Digital Intermediate: Dirty Looks
Cast:
Faraz Ayub (*Adam Muhammed*)
Natalie Gavin (*Tara*)
Claire Rushbrook (*Donna*)
Simon Nagra (*Hamid*)
Steve Oram (*Jeff*)
Jeff Mirza (*Hassan*)
Bill Fellows (*Terry*)
Teresa Mondol (*grandmother*)
Adrian Hood (*Raymond*)
Maizie Wickson (*Steph*)
Junaid Arshad (*Asif*)
Lynne Payne (*supervisor*)
Alan Cammish (*Reece*)
Vicki Hackett (*group leader Linda*)
Christian Foster (*estate agent*)
Fiona Egan (*doctor*)
Bhasker Patel (*Bilal*)
Shareesa Valentine (*receptionist*)
Andy Moore (*attendee 1*)
Angela Christofilou (*attendee 3*)
Sarah Oldknow (*concerned bystander*)
Kyle O'Gara (*colleague 1*)
Alyce Liburd (*colleague 2*)
Kelly Munro-Fawcett (*family member*)
Will Tristram (*lorry driver*)
Bryony Miller (*customer*)
Sophie Lucas (*nurse*)
Ruthie Evans (*injured customer*)
UK 2023©
91 mins
Digital

A BFI release

Moin Hussain's highly anticipated feature debut blends realist drama with a playful suggestion of otherworldly science-fiction. Adam works nightshifts at a motorway service station and lives a life of isolation feeling he doesn't belong. Upon hearing that his estranged father, Hassan, has died, he finds himself in search of answers. Piecing together a complicated image of a man he never knew, Adam starts to become convinced he descended from an alien race. And his mind is drawn to the strange episodes he has been having, in which he blacks out, beautiful lights appear, and voices beckon him closer. Thinking about his inability to communicate and connect with people, Adam begins to wonder if his father might actually have been a being from another place. And if he was, what does that make Adam? Moin Hussain's intriguing debut feature (that premiered in BFI London Film Festival) is unsettling and effective, and sprinkled with deadpan humour.

Julie Pearce, Head of BFI Distribution

The hero of *Sky Peals* feels unable to fit in with the world around him; Moin Hussain's first feature is similarly an outsider within contemporary British art cinema. This is a profoundly ambivalent, fragmented narrative that resists easy resolution, that hovers on a shifting border between psychologically grounded everyday realism and science-fiction unearthliness.

Sky Peals is about a loner who suspects his father was a man who fell to Earth – and whose own life appears to be a state of perpetual free fall. The film could be read as a depiction of mental disturbance, or as an allegory of conflicted racial and cultural identity. But to pin it down to either would be to diminish its originality – not just as a portrayal of alienation, but as a vividly evoked experience of it in a broader sense.

Adam (Faraz Ayub) is the son of a white English mother and a long-absent Pakistani father. But his mother is moving south with her new partner, leaving Adam alone in an empty house that he is due to vacate; instead, he stays put, in anxious retreat, uncertain what to do next. By night, he flips burgers in the fictional *Sky Peals* service station, a name suggestive of the celestial signals that Adam seems to receive.

In reality, nowhere is home for him, and no place is stable: Nse Asuquo's editing is constantly displacing Adam, and the viewer, with unnerving abruptness. At work, he hovers like a ghost among co-workers; at home, he seems stranded and dwarfed within the now empty house. But the world, or the universe, seems to want to make contact with Adam: towards the start of the film, he receives a phone message from his long-absent father Hassan, who wants to meet. Soon after, Adam learns from his uncle Hamid that Hassan has been found dead in his car. Visiting Hamid's mosque for the funeral, Adam is a fish out of water: a stranger to the many cousins present, and clearly unfamiliar with Muslim culture and his own Pakistani origin (Hamid knows him by the name 'Umer').

Hamid tells Adam that Hassan just 'appeared' in his family, and that Hassan himself was convinced he was from 'somewhere else', that he 'wasn't human'. What, then, would that make Adam? Musing over Hassan's nature, Adam

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examines a cache of family photos and assembles his father's clothes on the floor, like an identikit portrait of a body.

Displacement is the keynote. Hassan's red Volvo seems to materialise of its own accord, sometimes outside Adam's house, sometimes at the services – a site itself unearthly, like an abandoned space station. Inside this desolate edifice, at once futuristic and 20th-century archaic, the burger takeaway is just one module connected by corridors and walkways to others, including a soulless business hotel where Adam manages to mystify the participants in a New Age conscious-raising circle. The hotel is also the venue for a team-building jolly-up arranged by Adam's new boss Jeff that is anything but jolly.

Essential to the film's visual language is the security footage that Adam scans obsessively for contradictory evidence: Hussain's use of CCTV imagery recalls both Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* and Chris Petit's hybrid study of surveillance culture *Unrequited Love*, both from 2006. Running throughout Nick Cooke's 35mm photography are sequences that suggest glitches in the universe, or in Adam's mind: a very DIY evocation of sensory derangement in which patches of glitter represent stars that merge with the flash of passing traffic, as seen through a Vaseline blur.

The connecting thread throughout *Sky Peals* is the extraordinary lead performance – almost anti-performance – by Faraz Ayub. Soft-spoken, recalcitrant, at times even childlike, his Adam is all inwardness, as if folding in himself, imploding slowly into a black hole of self. His Adam may not himself be an alien, but in Ayub's performance, he is alienation embodied.

Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, September 2024