

SXSW Film Review: ‘First Light’

A close encounter of the third kind sparks a star-crossed teenage romance of the bland kind in Jason Stone's sci-fi drama.

[Peter Debruge](#)

“First Light” begins with a cluster of UFOs flying low over a stretch of central California sky and ends with a shot that suggests writer-director Jason Stone has a much more ambitious project up his sleeve, if only someone will give him the money to direct it. For audiences, it can be frustrating to realize you’re not watching a movie so much as a glorified audition piece — although that strategy did wonders for Gareth Edwards, who parlayed his alien-invasion melodrama “Monsters” into bigger things. If producers are willing to hand first a “Godzilla” movie and then a “Star Wars” spinoff to such a director, then Stone’s calling-card stunt ought to generate its creator some kind of opportunity.

Still, the question remains: What, if anything, does Stone have to add to the already oversaturated UFO genre, which had been pretty much exhausted by the time “The X-Files” went off the air nearly 16 years ago? Apart from the uncommon notion that these mysterious visitors may actually mean us well, the film seems a little too comfortable with clichés, right down to the men in black who show up mid-movie to ruin everybody’s fun.

To Stone’s credit, compared to the gimmicky found-footage projects that have nearly run the genre dry, “First Light” is a real movie, with a proper script and **elegant cinematography**. He even makes relatively novel use of drone footage — another overused device in indie movies today — stalking his characters from above early on, and later hovering at the level of alien ships. (He leans on the technique a bit too heavily, perhaps, but it’s a tool that previous extraterrestrial stories haven’t had: shooting with cameras that

could themselves be mistaken for UFOs.)

Maybe the fact that the central characters in “First Light” are teenagers will help, serving to attract an audience young enough that such a story will seem novel. Our protagonist is a tall, gangly teen named Sean (Canadian actor Théodore Pellerin), who might have been the bully in a more stereotypically cast film. When not taking care of his kid brother and nearly catatonic grandmother, Sean lurks near the keg at a bonfire party out at the quarry, staring creepily at Alex (Stefanie Scott), the childhood friend he hasn’t mustered the courage to speak to since they started high school.

And so Alex disappears with another guy (James Wotherspoon), wandering off to go skinny dipping. We’re made to believe that Sean is somehow the better gentleman, that if he got Alex alone, he would respect her so hard, she’d never fall in love — or something — but no one here has any kind of chemistry, so we just go along with the movie’s own idea of its characters. While Sean is sulking, something happens to Alex in the water: A series of lights appear overhead. She isn’t abducted, but rather imbued with an otherworldly energy. The next thing Alex knows, she’s walking down a dirt road in her undies, her mind blank.

A wild-eyed guy (Saïd Taghmaoui) who spends his evenings chasing after the UFOs in his pickup truck spots the lost teen and drives her into town, where she calls Sean. Now’s his chance, he figures, and Sean proceeds to prove what a devoted partner he would be, sticking by her even after she starts to exhibit creepy new powers — like folding cars and levitating in mid-air. It’s fun to watch a teenage girl manifest such physically impossible feats with her mind (shades of “Stranger Things,” Stephen King, and “Starman” all in one), but less amusing to follow the movie into familiar territory once the authorities manage to track them down.

Are they a 21st-century Romeo and Juliet, pried apart because he’s from the wrong family and she’s ... an alien? Is this a case of another filmmaker exploiting our inherent distrust of the government, which is always sticking

its nose in ... teenage romance? “First Light” doesn’t invent anything new, per se, but somehow, in splicing elements from other movies, it fails to achieve the emotional core of its own formula. The last couple scenes ought to be epic (certainly, that’s the intention in using “Outro” from M83’s “Hurry Up, We’re Dreaming” album), but instead feel rather obligatory, teasing the movie that “First Light” could have been.

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Reviewed at CAA screening room, Los Angeles, March 6, 2018. (In SXSW Film Festival — Visions.)
Running time: 91 MIN.

PRODUCTION: A Fortitude Intl., Kirin Media, Exhibit, Shanghai Longzhilin Culture Investment Partnership, Automatik presentation, in association with Entertainment One, of an Oddfellows, Bunk 11 Pictures production. Producers: Chris Ferguson, Michael Baker. Executive producers: Patrick Roy, Christina Kubacki, Ben Silverman, Lisa Wolofsky, Brian Kavanaugh Jones, Jeff Chao, Jianjun (Leo) Zheng, Justin Begnaud, Fernando Loureiro, Roberto Vasconcellos. Coexecutive producers: Giuliana Bertuzzi, Marlaina Mah, Andrew Levine, Rian Cahill. Coproducer: Aaron Barnett.

CREW: Director: Jason Stone. Screenplay: Stone; story: Stone, Andrew Cerin. **Camera (color, widescreen): David Robert Jones.** Editor: Gregory Ng. Music: Edo Van Breemen.

WITH: Stefanie Scott, Théodore Pellerin, Saïd Taghmaoui, Percy Hynes White, Jahmil French, James Wotherspoon, Kate Burton.