Not your Dad's Dystopia: A review of Zenith

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"The zenith is the highest point in the sky, directly above the head of the observer." Dystopia has been a popular place for decades, particularly in science fiction. In a narrative refreshingly free of exposition, *Zenith* makes excellent use of the pre-existing canon to drop us right into the middle of our hero's life and times without so much as a by-your leave. Rooms full of re-purposed discards, deals taking place in seedy back rooms and alleyways, the world being cleanly divided into the haves and the have not's and underlying it all, the feeling that the universe has crossed a line somewhere and rather than head into the shining hope of the future, things are on a downward spiral.

It's into this gritty future that we follow not one but two stories split between two different times. Ed Crowley (Father) and Jack Crowley (Son), each obsessively following their own quest to make sense of their lives and misfortunes; timelines linked by a series of videotapes that have taken on a cult significance of their own. While both characters, the Father through his videotaped adventures and the Son through the eye of the camera, are seemingly questing after different issues, they both ultimately arrive at the same tragic endpoint, faced with a classic "deal with the devil". A deal that seems to turn out very differently for both.

For lovers of psychological science fiction, this film is going to rank up there with indie mind-bending powerhouses like *Primer* and *Being John Malkovitch*. No flashy special effects, no rayguns, spaceships or glittering cities of the future. Instead, like all great science fiction, *Zenith* hits us with a powerful series of "what ifs" that take the world as we expect it to be and give it a short, sharp turn on its ear. There are nods to classic science and speculative fiction buried in here, a nod to *Fahrenheit 451* in the idea that certain words and concepts have fallen into disuse, though whether through deliberate censorship or callous social disregard is never quite made clear. A touch of the *X-Files* in the mysterious conspiracy that seems to be all in the mind of the beholder until it jumps you in a dark alleyway. Some of these are classic tropes given new life in a new setting, while some are new ideas couched in the speech patterns of an unreliable narrator.

The sets and locations are surprisingly detailed for an independent production. Layers of time and errata can be found through all of the primary locations, indeed the sparseness of the environments in the Father's story (told through the videotapes) and the lushness of the environments in the Son's world serve as a clear visual element to give us a sense of the passage of time. The world has gravitas, rather than feeling as if it has just been crafted and is awaiting disassembly at the end of the shot. Couple this with an experienced eye behind the camera and you have a high quality product in a market that is often populated with rookie plots and cookie-cutter camerawork.

I would be remiss if I didn't bring into focus this films Transmedia element as well. Both as a part of its pre-release, and its ongoing storytelling, *Zenith* has taken the step of jumping into not only live performance through tagged protests and flash-mob type exposure, but into web as well, telling additional story elements through several different websites devoted to the characters and events. The largest issue at stake, I feel, is the entry point for the participant. The relationship between all of these disparate elements is not always clear, and finding out about them after the fact does leave one with the feeling that they might have missed something important that will tie the entire experience up into a coherent whole. It makes the participant feel like they have come into a series with Book 2 instead of starting at the beginning, even though the film itself does an excellent job of standing alone. The transmedia elements are "added value" rather than essential elements.