

THE Hollywood REPORTER

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When a film's director is billed in the opening credits as its "Experiment Supervisor," you know you're in for a different sort of cinematic experience. Such is the case with Vladan Nikolic's "Zenith," a futuristic thriller whose intriguing premise is undercut by a gimmicky execution that encourages its viewers to fill in the numerous narrative gaps by logging onto to a variety of websites. Simply watching the movie makes you feel practically lazy.

The film, set in the year 2044, depicts a society in which unhappiness has been genetically removed from people's make-ups, resulting in a population that is not so much euphoric as simply numb. So numb, in fact, that a thriving black market exists for pharmaceuticals whose negative side effects are seen as desirable. Oh, and for some reason the ability to fully understand language has been partially removed in the process. The anti-hero, Jack (Peter Scanavino), is a former doctor who now illegally deals such substances. But when he is exposed to a videotape made decades earlier by his father (Jason Robards III) warning of the vast conspiracy responsible for society's current messy condition, he becomes obsessed with investigating the mystery, the secrets of which apparently are revealed on a series of missing tapes.

That's when the viewer must get to work, as to fully solve the puzzle -- or, as the media notes put it, the "transmedia storyline" -- one must go online to a series of websites including YouTube.

Frankly, it's all too much work, and one comes away wishing that more effort had been spent on the actual film, which tends to overly meander owing to its endless series of explanatory monologues. (A few sex scenes in which Jack engages with a beautiful but mysterious prostitute, played by Ana Asensio, help to alleviate the boredom.)

Still, there's no denying that the writer-director displays some real conceptual imagination, and the barren, postapocalyptic landscape, shot in rundown New York neighborhoods, has an all-too-convincing feel. "Zenith" probably won't achieve the cult status to which it aspires, but its creator is a talent to watch.

Opened: Friday, Oct. 1 (Surla Films)

Production: Solo Films

Cast: Peter Scanavino, Jason Robards III, David Thornton, Ana Asensio, Raynor Scheine, Jay O. Sanders, Bernie Rachele, Arthur French, Zohra Lampert

Director/screenwriter/director of photography: Vladan Nikolic

Producers: Vladan Nikolic, George Lekovic, Jason Robards III

Executive producers: Eric Werthman, Tim Biancalana, Duke Greenhill

Editor: Milica Zec

Production designer: Brian Goodwin

Costume designer: Vera Chow

Music: Luigi Colarullo

No rating, 93 minutes