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FILM **Filmmaker and New School Prof Vladan Nikolic Talks About *Zenith*, His New Outer-Boro Dystopic Thriller**

Posted by Mark Asch on Thu, Jan 20, 2011 at 12:51 PM

zenithgraffiti.jpg

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Zenith, a lo-fi dystopic thriller billing itself as *"a lost object from the future,"* was conceived and directed by **Vladan Nikolic**, a filmmaker and Media Studies professor at the New School; the film is currently playing at the **Kraine Theater**, below the KGB Bar. We—I do actually mean "we," Ben Sutton and Henry Stewart contributed to this interview as well—emailed back and forth with Nikolic about the film's vision of the future, shooting in Brooklyn, and the film's extended online universe.

Your previous film was a documentary (2007's *The City*), and before that two fiction films (2005's *Love* and 2001's *Burn*); do you find it difficult as a writer, editor and director, to go back and forth between these two modes of filmmaking? Are there ways in which they inform each other?

The films deal with similar themes and were inspired by stories of people who came to NY—in *Burn* the film dealt with immigrants from the former Yugoslavia, in *Love*, the protagonist were from all over the world, who cross each other's paths by chance, and in *The City* I tried to find people as different as possible —in terms of background, social
status, work—and see if there are common threads of why they have come and stayed in this city—what are their shared experiences. The background of all these stories came out of my encounters, experiences and fascinations with NYC. In terms of form, I find the documentary to be more liberating—and rewarding, because of the people one gets to know, and share their lives for a while. I think it's good to go back-and-forth between these forms, as these stories inform and inspire each other.

The casts, stories and timelines of your fiction films are very disjointed: you work with very international casts, often dealing with issues of displacement, immigration and diaspora, and your films are organized in a non-linear narrative style. Are these choices of aesthetic, casting, editing and storytelling complimentary? Do you think there's a way in which the disconnected timelines in your films provoke a sense of confusion and disorientation for

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viewers that is similar to the cultural displacement experienced by some of your characters?

I did try to reflect the characters' stories in the form and timeline of the film. It's also about trying to show different points-of-views; I like to see a film that makes me work as a viewer and stays with me after it's over—but I also like genre and entertainment, so I'm trying to mix all that together, and make it coherent and interesting—as much as I can.

The world of the film spills over to a number of websites (many more linked to here), which reminds us of what scholars have said about cult films and TV shows: that they become so because they create fully fleshed-out alternate universes for fans to imagine themselves into. And indeed, both indie and studio films (often through merchandising tie-ins) are increasingly invested in creating "'verses" that are extensions of their films. Do you expect *Zenith***'s online world to take on a life beyond the film? Did you develop all the sites yourself?**

The trans-media aspect of *Zenith* was always a part of the overall project—because of its themes and structure, I thought this would be the perfect film to try to expand the storyline and audience interaction beyond the film. While I had this basic concept and wrote the script years ago, it just so happened that everything came together at the right time—with social media, the web etc. and everybody now talking about this type of audience engagement—but this means different things to different people. In *Zenith*, the film intentionally leaves space for the viewer to interpret the story in his or her own way. Entering the online world is not necessary to understand the film, but it can add other layers to the story, and hopefully it will be interesting enough to continue to live beyond the film.

As for making the actual sites, all I can do is a simple wordpress blog, but I have a team of incredible collaborators—Ken Anderson, Jenn Begeal, Melissa Hudson, just to name a few key people—who have done incredible work and created the online world.

Screening the film in the KGB Bar complex is an appropriately dystopic retro-futuristic touch —is there anything different about watching a film there? Was Soviet culture an influence on the film?

We're planning a whole "experience," including live performance, shorts, in-theater trans-media etc—it's an unusual film and we thought this venue would fit it perfectly: Soviet culture was not a direct influence for the film, but it provides a nice back-drop.

Some of the film's conspiracy theory content reminded one of our writers of Jared Loughner, such as the focus on using language as a means of control, or the suggestion that conspiracy is the purview of the mentally unbalanced. Have you made any of those kinds of connections in the wake of the incident?

It's eerie how reality can sometimes resemble fiction. These themes have been around for a while, but with the web they have become ubiquitous. The concept of language as a tool of control or manipulation has become well-known through at least two dystopian classics—Orwell's *1984*, and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, have been around seemingly forever, but nowadays we have this phenomenon that even the most far-flung conspiracies have entered the mainstream. Sociologists say that people usually embrace conspiracy theories more when they feel powerless to change things—I think now we have also the problem that, although we live in this hyper-communication society, many people have lost any sense of community and empathy; they have become desensitized—so you have someone sinking into delusional states of mind, and only after something terrible happens, people remember that he had problems for a long time.

One of our writers recognized Sunset Park; where else in Brooklyn did you shoot? How did you find the locations? Did you have to do any work to make the outerboroughs look like a dystopic future? Are the outerboroughs really so despairing?

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We shot most of the film around Brooklyn's Sunset Park, Gowanus, a bit in Williamsburg, and in Queens—these were just areas that had that perfect "post-industrial" backdrop, where you have these amazing semi-decrepit, semi-abandoned buildings, but they still carry all that history of a past era. We also wanted to shoot inside Domino's in Williamsburg, but they wouldn't let us. To me, these places are really not despairing, they have character—and I wish they would keep them and use them for something creative, like they did in Berlin initially, where they gave artists these huge abandoned buildings in former East Berlin to make shows and performances, instead of tearing them down and building these weird steel & glass atrocities.

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