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The Film *Zenith* Bends Both Reality and Your Suspension of Disbelief

AY-LEEN THE PEACEMAKER



Zenith is a movie that plays tricks with its audience. Nothing is what it seems to be with this movie, including its promotional tactics. I'm not just talking about the extensive J.J. Abrams-esque cult of [enigmatic blogs, websites, and YouTube videos](#) that floated around for six months leading up to the film's premiere. Describing itself as a "retrofuturistic steampunk thriller," *Zenith* has flagged attention from curious art-house critics and the steampunk community alike, jumping on film festivals for both. Watching, *Zenith*, however, was a bit of a deceptive experience. No airships, no sepia-tones, no gears or tactile technology or mad scientists (though these were plenty of off-kilter people, and one strange British accent).

So, did *Zenith* live up to its hype? Retrofuturistic—okay. Steampunk—not at all. Thriller—sure, at least I was entertained.

Hatched out of the imagination of filmmaker Vladan Nikolic, *Zenith* is set in a dystopian world in the near future, focusing on a wayward doctor-cum-drug dealer named Jack (Peter Scanavino). The worldbuilding reads straight from Philip K. Dick story: everyone is genetically wired to feel happy, and so now people take expired medication as a recreational drug in order to feel pain. Jack, our rough-and-tumble pain dealer, spends his days recording himself on his webcam (cue in the cyberpunk, not steam) defining abstract words, since in this world people have forgotten a lot of their complex vocabulary in their state of simplified bliss.

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kotaki7 from Kekai Kotaki's gallery

Then, one day Jack gets a VHS tape dropped off at his doorstep (cue in the retrofuturistic technology). The tape is a recording of his long-lost father, Ed Crowley (Jason Robards III), a man investigating something big having to do with this mysterious Zenith organization. And that leads Jack on the search to find his father.

The film jumps back and forth to the journeys Jack and Ed each take, investigating layers of obfuscation, confronting fedora-wearing thugs, and entering underground parties reminiscent of the Lower East Side club scene.

Tropes lurk about in his shady world of grey morals. Besides the various [Black Men Who Die First](#) (the fate of every one except for a hospital orderly), Jack is saddled with [The Cookoolander Was Right](#) in the form of foul-mouthed Oberts (Jay O. Sanders), a bookseller whose accent travels up and down the length of England and Lisa (Ana Asensio) as [The Hooker with the Heart of Gold](#), while Ed's neighbor Dale (Raynor Scheine) becomes his reluctant cameraman. Sandwiched between numerous artistically done sex scenes, drugged out surrealism, and Ed's investigative vids, is a threadbare, cohesive plot. Eventually, Jack and Ed run into a somewhat-surprising [Temporal Paradox](#) that makes everyone question reality. The performances were all a bit over the top but some are considerably creepy, particularly David Thorton's portrayal of Lisa's deceptively benign father.

The ending can cause viewers to scratch their heads in wonderment about who is Jack, who is Ed, and what is the reality they both live in. Some might crack it up to be just another sci-fi trope, but for this viewer, perhaps the film suggests something more.

On the train home after the film screening, I watched a hipster wearing a patchwork scarf and a houndstooth coat practice acrobatic moves on a nearly empty subway car. This surreal experience seemed to echo the impression I got from *Zenith*—a weird reflection of current reality, and despite being an odd example of artsy obscura, it was nonetheless an experience not quickly forgotten.

Zenith is currently playing at various film festivals across the country; the most current listing can be found [here](#).

Ay-leen the Peacemaker is the founding editor of the multicultural steampunk blog [Beyond Victoriana](#). She lives and works in New York City, which at times feels very much like life in a Philip K. Dick novel too.

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