

## IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL VALUES IN THE SCREENPLAY OF *ZATHURA: A SPACE ADVENTURE* (2005)

Aidelwaiss Ulfatul Kamilah<sup>1</sup>, Arsyi Azwar<sup>2</sup>, Jasmine Flora Nirwana<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, <sup>3</sup>Universitas Indraprasta PGRI

Corresponding email address: [adel.aidelwaiss@gmail.com](mailto:adel.aidelwaiss@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This study examines *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2005), based on the screenplay by David Koepp, as a work of popular literature that grounds a fantastical cosmic journey in the "quotidian realities" of a fragmented family. By analyzing the script's portrayal of sibling rivalry and the logistical stresses of a "three-day Dad week," the research explores how fantasy serves as a vehicle for identity negotiation. Utilizing Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework, the narrative is traced from the "Departure" in a cemetery to the "Initiation" through trials—such as the attack of a "defective robot"—culminating in a "Return with Change" where the house is "perfectly restored" and the brothers are psychologically transformed. Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory is applied to analyze how Walter and Danny move beyond fixed labels of "baby" and "older brother" to negotiate a new, unified identity through shared crisis. The script transmits core cultural values—empathy, responsibility, and solidarity—exemplified in domestic scenes like Walter's attempt to cook "macaroni and cheese" for Danny while adrift in space. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that *Zathura* transcends its sci-fi spectacle to function as a cultural artifact that facilitates critical reflection on family connection and the "journey home" toward emotional maturity.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, *Zathura: A Space Adventure*, hero's journey, family dynamics, Koepp screenplay

### INTRODUCTION

Films serve not merely as sources of visual entertainment but also as complex cultural artifacts that convey messages, social values, and symbolic meanings reflective of the societies in which they are produced (Boggs & Petrie, 2008). Among various genres, adventure films hold a distinctive place in facilitating learning by taking audiences on multifaceted journeys—both physical and emotional—that transcend the mere pursuit of tangible goals such as places or treasures. Instead, these narratives often explore deeper themes like identity formation and the search for life's meaning. Within this framework, *Zathura: A Space Adventure* (2005), directed by Jon Favreau, emerges as a compelling subject for analysis. The film chronicles the unexpected space voyage of two brothers triggered by a mysterious board game, embedding a science fiction and fantasy spectacle within a narrative rich in realistic family dynamics, including sibling conflict,



the isolation experienced by children from fragmented families, and the challenges of maturation through extraordinary circumstances (Favreau, 2005).

*Zathura* transcends its surface elements of rockets, aliens, and cosmic phenomena to reveal a layered story about children's self-understanding and interpersonal growth. The brothers' space expedition metaphorically parallels the internal journeys of many children navigating complex family roles, often marked by instability and emotional upheaval. The film's portrayal of these experiences emphasizes values such as responsibility, courage, and solidarity, not through overt didacticism but via the natural unfolding of events and the characters' consequential decisions. This narrative strategy aligns with the capacity of popular literature—including films, novels, and other media—to bridge quotidian realities with imaginative storytelling, thereby making cultural values accessible to broad audiences (Storey, 2009; Damono, 2002).

While popular literature is sometimes marginalized as less intellectually rigorous than "high" literature, it nonetheless wields significant influence in shaping social norms and personal identities. This study undertakes an analysis of *Zathura* through the lens of popular literature to demonstrate how adventure narratives can serve as effective mediums for value transmission and identity construction. Employing Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework, the research traces the protagonists' developmental arcs and the unfolding conflicts within the film, while Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory provides a critical tool for examining the fluid and negotiated nature of identity as shaped by social interactions and lived experiences. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: How does *Zathura* contribute to the understanding of children's identity formation within contemporary family contexts? And, in what ways are cultural values such as responsibility, cooperation, and maturity articulated within an engaging and accessible adventure storyline?

By dissecting the narrative and symbolic dimensions of *Zathura*, this paper aims to challenge reductive perceptions of children's adventure films as merely entertainment devoid of intellectual substance. Instead, it posits that such works encapsulate rich cultural, ideological, and psychological content warranting rigorous academic scrutiny. Through its imaginative space adventure, *Zathura* offers an alternative representational world that illuminates the realities of family life, the complexities of growing up, and the universal human experience. The screenplay of film thus functions as a cultural text that not only entertains but also facilitates critical reflection on identity and social values, underscoring the educational potential embedded within popular media. This research integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives—Popular Literature, The Hero's Journey, and Cultural Identity Theory—to provide a holistic analysis of *Zathura* as a cultural artifact. Together, these approaches enable a nuanced exploration of how the film's narrative structure, character development, and thematic content coalesce to portray the intricate processes of identity formation and value internalization in children. This multifaceted framework not only enriches the understanding of *Zathura* but also contributes to broader discussions on the role of popular media in shaping cultural meanings and individual subjectivities.

According to Storey (2009), popular literature includes works that are easily accessible and enjoyed by the wider public, reflecting collective values and imagination. Films as a product of popular culture act not only as entertainment, but also as a medium for conveying moral values and social representation (Gelder, 2004). In *Zathura*, elements of space adventure, sibling conflict, and compelling visuals are used to frame messages about family relationships, responsibility, and maturity.

Joseph Campbell (2004) developed a character journey pattern known as The Hero's Journey, consisting of three main stages: Departure, Initiation, Testing and Transformation, and Return with Change. In *Zathura*, Walter and Danny's journey follows this pattern, where the conflicts and challenges they face become a means to strengthen the brotherly bond and bring out a more mature and understanding version of themselves.

Stuart Hall (1996) explains that identity is not something fixed, but rather dynamically formed through experience and cultural representation. In the movie *Zathura*, the transformation of the relationship between Walter and Danny shows the process of children's identity formation in the face of family division. Through extreme experiences in the game, they learn to recognize each other's roles, feelings, and needs as individuals and brothers.

This research adopts a descriptive qualitative method, which focuses on providing a systematic and factual description of the identity construction and cultural values presented in the screenplay of *Zathura: A Space Adventure*. This approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings, perceptions, and experiences of the characters, specifically how Walter and Danny navigate their sibling relationship within a fragmented family context. Qualitative research is prioritized here not for hypothesis testing, but to understand the social meaning and context inherent in the narrative events.

As defined by Moleong (2017:6), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena experienced by subjects—such as behavior, motivation, and action—holistically through descriptions in words and language. This methodology is particularly suited for analyzing the screenplay by David Koepp (2003), which serves as a complex cultural artifact conveying symbolic meanings reflective of societal dynamics. The research employs textual analysis of the script's dialogue and stage directions to identify how the protagonists mature through extraordinary circumstances, moving from "emotional invisibility" and rivalry to mutual understanding.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The movie *Zathura* (2005) presents the story of two brothers Walter and Danny who accidentally get involved in a space game that takes them to extreme experiences. Behind Campbell the action-packed and fantasy plot, there are family and psychological dynamics that illustrate the emotional journey of children in dealing with inner tension and disharmonious family relationships. This analysis will be divided into three main theoretical perspectives.

### A Fantasy Close to Reality

As a piece of popular literature, *Zathura* masterfully combines the excitement of a space adventure with the nuanced emotional dynamics of sibling relationships. The film's straightforward plot and engaging visuals serve as an accessible entry point for younger audiences, while its exploration of common familial struggles—such as feeling misunderstood, sibling rivalry, and coping with parental divorce—resonates deeply on a personal level. By embedding these realistic emotional conflicts within an imaginative outer space setting, the story creates a compelling contrast that highlights the universality of family challenges, regardless of the extraordinary circumstances. Moreover, *Zathura* effectively conveys important values like courage, responsibility, and forgiveness through a narrative that balances lightheartedness with emotional depth.

**WALTER** : I didn't get my whole turn!

**DAD** : Yeah, I counted, that was twenty-five.

**WALTER** : That's not fair!

**DAD** : No, three-day Dad week. Four-day last week, four-day next week, three-day this week.

**WALTER** : That's not fair!

**DAD** : To anybody.

(Koepp, 2003, p. 22-23)

The dialogue above explains that the film connects its space adventure story to everyday life by showing common family problems, like parents and children having disagreements. The dialogue shows Walter and his dad arguing about how much time Walter gets to speak, with Walter feeling it's unfair because his dad limits his turns to certain days. This example highlights the realistic family tension within the larger adventure story.

This approach allows the film to function not only as entertainment but also as a subtle educational tool, fostering emotional learning without appearing didactic or condescending. The characters' journey toward mutual understanding and empathy exemplifies how popular media can bridge the gap between fun storytelling and meaningful life lessons, making it a valuable resource for children navigating similar real-world experiences.

### Departure

*Zathura's* narrative structure closely follows Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey framework, unfolding through three primary stages that mirror both literal and symbolic transformations experienced by the protagonists, Danny and Walter. The first stage, Departure, commences when the brothers initiate the *Zathura* game, inadvertently propelling their home into outer space. This event marks the threshold of their adventure

and the beginning of their transformative journey, setting the stage for subsequent trials and self-discovery.

**WALTER** : "Meteor shower, take evasive action."

**DANNY** : What's "evasive action?"

**DANNY** : IT IS METEORS!

**WALTER** : H-how'd it get so dark so fast? It's nighttime already!

**DANNY** : It's not night, Walter. It's outer space.

**WALTER** : Yeah, right. Outer space. What are you talking about?

(Koepp, 2003, p. 68-69)

The dialogue suggests that the film deliberately incorporates everyday, relatable experiences—referred to as "quotidian realities"—such as the complexities and tensions within family relationships, to create a grounded and believable context for its space adventure narrative. One clear example of this is the depiction of fragmented family dynamics, where the characters Walter and his dad engage in a realistic argument over how much time Walter is allowed to speak. Walter complains, "I didn't get my whole turn!" to which his dad responds by counting Walter's speaking time as twenty-five units. Walter insists this is unfair, but his dad explains the schedule of a "three-day Dad week," detailing how the turns are divided over different weeks. This exchange highlights the everyday frustrations and negotiations typical in family life, illustrating how the film uses such interactions to anchor the more fantastical elements of the story.

Following this, the narrative transitions into the "Hero's Journey: Departure" stage, marking the moment when Walter crosses from the normal, familiar world into the extraordinary realm of the game. This shift is shown through dialogue where Walter commands, "Meteor shower, take evasive action," prompting his brother Danny to question the meaning of "evasive action." Danny's exclamation, "IT IS METEORS!" and his observation that it is suddenly nighttime, which Walter initially doubts by saying, "Yeah, right. Outer space. What are you talking about?" further emphasize the contrast between their ordinary reality and the new, adventurous space environment they are entering. This stage illustrates the transition from everyday family disputes to the unfolding excitement and challenges of the space adventure, blending the mundane with the extraordinary to create a compelling and relatable story arc.

## Initiation

**ROBOT** : ALIEN LIFE FORM. ALIEN LIFE FORM.

**WALTER** : Okay, very funny, Robot, don't make me come over there and kick your—

**DANNY** : RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!!!

**ROBOT** : ALIEN INVASION. MUST DESTROY.

**DANNY** : WALTER! WHAT DO I DO?!

**WALTER** : I'm stuck!

(Koepp, 2003, p. 106)

It involves the characters facing significant challenges that test their strength, adaptability, and growth. In this dialogue, the characters encounter trials symbolized by a defective robot, which serves as a catalyst for their resilience and maturation. The robot repeatedly announces the presence of an “ALIEN LIFE FORM” and declares an “ALIEN INVASION,” creating a sense of urgency and danger. Walter reacts with frustration and attempts to assert control, telling the robot not to provoke him. Meanwhile, Danny responds with panic, shouting warnings and asking Walter for guidance in the face of the threat. Walter finds himself trapped, highlighting the characters’ vulnerability and need to overcome obstacles together.

This sequence reflects a critical phase in the narrative where the protagonists must confront unexpected difficulties that challenge their problem-solving skills and emotional endurance. The defective robot’s erratic behavior symbolizes the unpredictable nature of the trials they face on their journey, forcing them to adapt quickly and support each other. Through these interactions, the characters begin to develop greater maturity, teamwork, and courage, essential qualities for progressing further into the adventure. This stage emphasizes the transition from initial excitement and curiosity to the deeper, more demanding aspects of the Hero’s Journey, marking a pivotal moment of growth and self-discovery.

During the Initiation phase, Danny and Walter confront a series of escalating challenges, including meteor showers, malfunctioning robots, alien encounters, and even an encounter with an adult version of Walter. These trials serve as critical tests of their resilience, character, and evolving relationship. Throughout this phase, both characters undergo significant personal growth: Walter learns to temper his ego and embrace humility, while Danny develops the capacity for decisive action and courage. This stage encapsulates the emotional and psychological maturation that parallels the physical dangers they face, illustrating the internal struggles children often endure in complex family dynamics.

### Return With Changes

**DANNY** : I saved you, I got you back, I did it!  
**DANNY** : Oh Walter, Walter, I love you, Walter!  
**WALTER** : Love you too, you little... get off me!  
**DAD** : I love you.  
**DAD** : And I love you too, exactly the same amount.  
**WALTER** : Don’t worry, Danny. I’m right behind you.

(Koepp, 2003, p.259)

It occurs when the game concludes and their house returns to its original state. However, the brothers themselves are irrevocably changed. Their relationship evolves from one marked by blame and rivalry to one characterized by mutual understanding, empathy, and appreciation. This resolution highlights the symbolic nature of the journey,

portraying the space adventure as a metaphor for the emotional crises and growth children experience within non-ideal family environments, such as those affected by divorce or sibling rivalry. The narrative thus effectively intertwines an imaginative outer space setting with the universal themes of familial conflict and reconciliation, emphasizing the transformative power of shared experiences and emotional development.

This dialogue above depicts a significant transformation in the relationship between the two brothers, Walter and Danny. This stage illustrates how their earlier rivalry and conflicts have been replaced by a newfound sense of trust, closeness, and mutual support. The dialogue captures this emotional shift vividly. Danny expresses relief and pride in having saved Walter, exclaiming, "I saved you, I got you back, I did it!" This moment of rescue symbolizes not only physical protection but also the strengthening of their bond. Danny's affectionate repetition of Walter's name and his heartfelt declaration, "Oh Walter, Walter, I love you, Walter!" reveal a deep emotional connection that contrasts sharply with their previous tensions.

Walter's response, "Love you too, you little... get off me!" conveys a playful yet genuine reciprocation of Danny's feelings, highlighting the warmth and familiarity that now define their relationship. The father's interjection, "I love you. And I love you too, exactly the same amount," reinforces the theme of balanced and unconditional familial love, contributing to the sense of reconciliation and harmony within the family unit. Finally, Walter's reassurance to Danny, "Don't worry, Danny. I'm right behind you," signifies not only his physical presence but also his emotional support and commitment to stand by his brother moving forward.

This stage serves as a powerful conclusion to the narrative arc, demonstrating how the characters have grown through their shared experiences. The transformation from rivalry to trust underscores the broader theme of personal growth and the healing power of family bonds. It also reflects the resolution of earlier conflicts, bringing the story full circle by reconnecting the characters in a positive and supportive way. Through this return with change, the film emphasizes that challenges and adventures ultimately lead to deeper understanding and stronger relationships, enriching the overall message of the story.

### **Finding Oneself in the social space of the family**

Referring to Stuart Hall's theory, identity is understood as a dynamic construct shaped through ongoing social processes and representational practices. In the context of this film, the identities of Walter and Danny are intricately molded by their respective roles and positions within the family unit. Walter experiences the pressure to assume adult-like responsibilities prematurely, which imposes on him a sense of control and authority.

**WALTER** : I'm in third grade. I have a girlfriend.

**WALTER** : Things get complicated when you get older.

**WALTER** : He breaks everything!

**DANNY** : ...was an accident...

**WALTER** : He is such a baby!

**DANNY** : I'm NOT a baby!

(Koepp, 2003, P. 43-44)

The dialogue above highlights the tense interactions between the brothers. Walter asserts his growing authority and maturity by emphasizing his status as a third grader and mentioning his girlfriend, signaling a desire to be seen as grown-up and responsible. His statement, "Things get complicated when you get older," reflects an early awareness of the challenges that come with aging, suggesting a distinct shift in how he views his role within the family.

Conversely, Danny feels marginalized and overlooked within this dynamic, fostering feelings of neglect and emotional invisibility. He struggles to assert his own identity in the face of Walter's dominance. Walter's sharp criticism—accusing Danny of breaking things and labeling him a baby—underscores Danny's uphill battle to be recognized as capable. Danny's defensive responses, including his insistence that the damage was accidental and his firm rejection of the "baby" label, reveal his active efforts to negotiate his place and gain emotional acknowledgment within the sibling relationship.

This interaction captures the complexities of identity formation within family dynamics, where roles are not fixed but continuously negotiated through everyday exchanges. Throughout the narrative, external circumstances compel Walter and Danny to collaborate and confront challenges together. This necessity initiates a deeper process of identity negotiation: Walter gradually relinquishes his need for dominance and control, while Danny demonstrates newfound capability and assertiveness. This mutual adjustment catalyzes a minor but significant identity crisis for both characters, serving as a crucial turning point that leads to their emotional and psychological maturation.

Ultimately, their evolving interactions exemplify Hall's (1996) assertion that identity is not a fixed essence but rather an ongoing process of formation and reformation influenced by social contexts and relational dynamics. By portraying these nuanced negotiations amid adversity, the film adds depth to its characters and grounds the narrative in realistic emotional experiences. It effectively illustrates how children's identities are actively constructed through interactions involving conflict, cooperation, and reconciliation. This aligns with Hall's conceptualization of identity as a journey rather than a static condition, emphasizing that selfhood emerges through continuous negotiation with others and the environment.

## CONCLUSION

*Zathura* is more than a space adventure; it is an inner journey of two siblings navigating an incomplete family. The film explores themes of abandonment, the need for

significance, and the desire for familial warmth. Through a popular literature lens, its simplicity conveys deep values like empathy, courage, and emotional growth, demonstrating the meaningfulness of popular culture. Using the Hero's Journey framework, Walter and Danny's challenges symbolize personal maturation, transforming fear and anger into trust and closeness. From a cultural identity perspective, the film shows identity as a complex process shaped by conflict, cooperation, and forgiveness, highlighting children's development through interactions with peers facing similar struggles. Ultimately, *Zathura* reveals that beneath its fantasy and visuals lies a profound message about family, connection, and humanity—the greatest adventure being the journey home with a more open and loving heart.

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