

A close-up photograph of a person's torso and arms. The person is wearing a dark, possibly black, top. A light-colored, fleshy, and somewhat translucent cable is attached to the person's midsection, resembling an umbilical cord. The cable extends downwards and connects to a game console. The background is dark and out of focus.

VANISHING POINTS

ExistenZ describes a future in which game consoles are living organisms
(note that the cable resembles an umbilical cord)



Artificial paradises: the cybernetic utopia in eXistenZ*

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Translated by Paula Saiz Hontangas

“Options multiply around us.
We live in an almost infantile world where any demand,
any possibility, whether for lifestyles, travel, sexual roles
and identities, can be satisfied instantly”

J. G. Ballard

Introduction

The release of *Tron* (Steven Lisberger) in 1982 initiated the film trend of virtual reality, a trend that still holds currency three decades later. Disney's foray into this subgenre of science fiction was a box-office disappointment that probably delayed the consolidation of fiction films about cyberspace until the mid-90s, when, together with the spread of Internet, the topic was revitalised. Since Steven Lisberger's film, a considerable number of feature films aimed at mass audiences have taken up the theme of cyberspace, constituting a new movement that included films such as *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992), *Johnny Mnemonic* (Robert Longo, 1995), *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), *Virtuosity* (Leonard, 1995), *Open Your Eyes* (Abre los ojos, Alejandro Amenábar, 1997), *Nirvana* (Gabriele Salvatores, 1997), *The Thirteenth Floor* (Josef Rusnak,



Anachronistic and *low-tech* settings. Gas inserts the illegal bio-port into Pikul at his dilapidated petrol station

1999), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) and *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999), to which should be added the two sequels that complete the trilogy, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003)¹. Most of these films present pessimistic urban visions from which people want to escape through immersion in a virtual realm. The rejection of a world viewed as inhospitable makes it desirable to embrace a customised cybernetic fantasy. Virtual reality is thus depicted as a sort of technological utopia that allows users to free themselves from the boredom of daily life.

The production of futuristic films showed little change in the mid-90s until the appearance of *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*, two films released in the same year which moved away from the established conventions for the recreation of virtual scenarios². This article focuses on *eXistenZ* and its proposal of an alternative way of imagining the future that goes beyond the hackneyed view of previous science fiction films and which earned the Berlin Festival's Silver Bear for "outstanding artistic contribution". The main innovation of *eXistenZ* was that the recreation was based on a video game aesthetic. Unlike *The Matrix*, with which it was inevitably compared, Cronenberg's film attracted limited critical attention³. It did not generate a sequel, nor has it been hailed as the archetypal virtual scenario, although it does have the added value of positing a positive interpretation of virtual reality, and also of offering a lucid reflection on the role of the artist in contemporary society.

In comparing the scenarios of *eXistenZ* to those of earlier films, I will analyse the elements that have traditionally characterised virtual scenarios and, at the

same time, I will note the innovations included in this film. To this end, I will begin with an outline of the aesthetic and narrative models which have been used to define the cities of the future in films about virtual reality, and then identify the elements that make *eXistenZ* an original art work that avoids countless clichés.

Rain, neon and darkness

In 1984 William Gibson published *Neuromancer*, a seminal work of cyberpunk literature. In cinema, this movement had a belated flourishing in the mid-90s with a series of films that reproduced the dystopia—or inverted utopia—characteristic of cyberpunk literature. Late in that decade, the expression cyberpunk was being applied to a wide variety of disciplines. According to Lia M. Hotchkiss, the concept was identified with the hacker universe and, stylistically, took some of its references from film noir, to which it added "the decaying cityscape, rain-slicked streets, electronic music, and wired minds and bodies" (HOTCHKISS, 2003: 19).

In film studies it is quite generally agreed that *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) is the main point of reference for depictions of a virtual city—see, for example, Bukatman (1997: 41) or Lacey (2000: 67). Although in narrative terms it could never be classified as cyberpunk because there is no mention of virtual reality in the film, there is no doubt that Ridley Scott's picture has played a key role in the construction of the cybernetic city. Its interesting mixture of genres—film noir and science fiction—and, in particular, its vivid personal style, have greatly influenced this new film movement. In iconographic terms, its importance lies in its depiction of a future of architectural ruins and urban decay. The story is set in the year 2019 in the city of Los Angeles, conceived as an asphyxiating metropolis supersaturated with all manner of visual stimuli. Instead of the sunny US city named in the opening title, the image shown on screen is that of a dark, dimly lit, chrome-surfaced, post-industrial megalopolis, quite different from the hygienic cities of the future depicted in previous science-fiction films. Cloaked at ground level in a dense haze, above which an intermittent drizzle falls, it is hard to recognise the original city of Los Angeles.

The influence of *Blade Runner* would be especially palpable in films made in the late 90s that explore virtual universes. *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Strange Days*, *Virtuality*, *Nirvana* or *The Thirteenth Floor* unashamedly imitate the film's setting. Production designer Nigel Phelps would thus note the difficulty of getting away from this image, when he lamented that "Any time a futuristic street is shown at night, washed in rain and neon, the instant pigeon-hole is *Blade Runner*" (JONES,

1995: 30). Consequently, by the late nineties, films about cyberspace had become bogged down in clichéd archetypes, both in visual and in narrative terms⁴.

Videogames as a stylistic model

Regardless of their chronology, with the exception of *Cypher* (Natali, 2002) and perhaps *Total Recall* —although its calculated ambiguity precludes any definitive appraisal— cyberpunk films express a more or less explicit rejection of the alterations to reality offered by technology, arguing for controlled use of virtual immersion. Looming over their stories is a shadow of fear that the user of this new form of consumerism may transform an innocent pastime into a refuge that will turn him into a social misfit. In contrast, *eXistenZ* defends its use as a form of escape, even when the virtual world replaces reality.

The film is set in a future where videogame designers are considered artists. The protagonist, Allegra Geller, is a well-known designer whose last work, *eXistenZ*, has achieved for her the Wagnerian dream of creating a total artwork: a videogame so realistic that the virtual is indistinguishable from the real world⁵. In what would be David Cronenberg's second original screenplay, the uniqueness of *eXistenZ* lies in the fact that it posits a new, radically different way of approaching the topic of virtual reality. The film very accurately recreates the appearance of a videogame to the film screen, for which Cronenberg relied on some of his usual collaborators: Carol Spier (production designer), Howard Shore (composer), Peter Suschitzky (director of photography), as well as his sister, costume designer Denise Cronenberg. The gloomy lighting, the stylisation of the colours, the dull costumes, the austerity of the sets, and the unsettling music all contribute to evoking the universe of the video console. The result is an atmosphere that reinforces the feeling of a self-contained world, prompting Steve Keane to question whether the film had really been conceived for the movie theatre at all, as it “works better on the small screen — the natural home of videogames” (KEANE, 2002: 154). Cronenberg himself confirmed that they had intentionally tried to replicate the visual style of videogames: “If you want a character to wear a plaid shirt, it takes up a lot of memory, so it’s much easier if he has a solid beige shirt” (quoted in RODNEY, 1999: 8).

One of the most surprising aspects of the film is the absence of the excessive use of special effects — a hallmark of much science fiction— and an effort, on the contrary, to steer clear of the spectacular (FISHER, 2012: 70). The camera movements, framing and editing also contributed to the replication of a videogame aesthetic. Mark Browning notes the preference in *eXistenZ* for the use of low angle shots —noticeable in the shots of the church or the Chinese restaurant—

which imitates the framing of certain computer games (BROWNING, 2007: 162). The transitions from one location to another also resemble those of a videogame, simulating the player’s passage to the next level of the game (KEANE, 2002: 152). The film unhesitatingly breaks other conventions too, such as the sudden interruption of the action when the character of Ted Pikul, overwhelmed by what is happening, calls for a pause that brings him back from the virtual fiction back to the real world (POIRSON-DECHONNE, 2007: 453)

The way the director came up with the idea for this film undoubtedly contributed to the decision to avoid the repetition of previous models. In the spring of 1995, the Canadian journal *Shift* asked Cronenberg to interview Salman Rushdie, an author threatened with death by Islamic fundamentalists after being accused of apostasy by the Ayatollah Khomeini for the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 (CRONENBERG, 1995). After meeting Rushdie, the director had the idea of making a film in which the protagonist, in addition to being a videogame designer, as he had originally thought, would also be in danger for defending his art. This was the inspiration behind the plot of *eXistenZ*, in which the shy Allegra Geller is attacked by a realist fanatic —opposed to videogames because they alter the world as we know it— in the first public presentation of her new creation. Ted Pikul, an employee with the toy company Antenna Research, which owns the rights to *eXistenZ*, accompanies her when she flees the scene, and while they try to escape from their persecutors, they connect to the new game to ensure that it has not been damaged in the incident.

Allegra plays with a two-headed creature. The presence of this mutant suggests that the characters may be inside a video game





The avatars of Pikul and Geller are bolder and more sexually active than they are in the real world

The setting of the film is very different from that usually found in futurist projections dealing with the specific theme of virtual reality. Nirvana, *Strange Days*, *The Matrix* and *Johnny Mnemonic* established a clearly defined type of urban setting in which the technological aspects were highlighted. They located the action in crumbling worlds inhabited by computer experts, hackers, brutal law enforcers and ambitious businessmen, amid a motley collection of gigantic TV screens, computers and all kinds of tech gadgets that feed the viewer's imagination of a technologically overwhelming future. In contrast, *eXistenZ* posits a different view of the future, based on the premise that technology is developing in an increasingly biological direction.

A biodegradable future

The setting of *eXistenZ* is unique in its presentation of virtual reality located outside a big city, completely rejecting a post-apocalyptic future and expressly distancing itself from the traditional cyberpunk scenarios. The story is set in the country to avoid the convention of locating the action in a big megalopolis reminiscent of *Blade Runner*⁶. It also omits any critique of the brutality of law enforcement agencies, the invasion of privacy or the unbridled consumerism of our times, which are central motifs in earlier science fiction films.

The future depicted in *eXistenZ*, as opposed to the previous examples, looks a lot like the present. The buildings retain a certain retro quality that could be interpreted as a type of traditional architecture preserved in rural areas, or as the product of an architectural revival. Filmed mainly at night, the buildings in *eXistenZ* are modest and antiquated: semi-abandoned petrol stations, small-scale factories, isolated cabins in the woods... The oppressive agglomeration of an

overpopulated city has given way to a small rural community where technology is integrated into the environment but does not overwhelm the viewer. The farm where strange bugs cultivated in a hatchery are produced and processed, the Chinese restaurant where the special menu features mutant creatures derived from genetically modified reptiles and amphibians, or the hypoallergenic weapons assembled from the waste of these creatures, contribute to the depiction of a disturbing visual universe. However, if there is anything truly alarming about this future it is the complete absence of environmental awareness. The forests and rivers are crawling with the strange mutant creatures, apparently harmless, which reproduce freely with no one seeming to be concerned about their presence. Some of them are the product of genetic engineering geared to human consumption; others simply live in harmony in the new ecosystem. In other words, there is no contrast between the natural and the manmade, as the two have become completely integrated. Significantly, the natural surroundings are depicted as anything but a beautiful Arcadia that can serve as a refuge from technology, as suggested at the end of the original cut of *Blade Runner*, when Deckard runs away in a car with the cyborg Rachel, heading towards a visibly wooded area. In *eXistenZ* there is no need for reconciliation with the natural world because the biological and the technological coexist in perfect symbiosis.

High tech industry doesn't operate in big cities but in small towns, where the tasks are distributed in manual factories spread around the countryside and with a limited number of employees. The scene showing workers on their way to their work stations is revealing. The workers act like zombies, forming an orderly line that advances in time and without a word exchanged between colleagues. Inside the factory, their work is repetitive and dull. In this near but temporally unspecified future—the anachronistic locations prevent us from locating it chronologically—the apathetic looks of the characters contrast with their passion for the virtual world. In this quiet world where nothing happens, in a society that has replaced the mechanical with the biodegradable, its inhabitants dedicate their free time to the escapism of games that can transform their existence into an exciting adventure. Everyone prefers to stay home to enjoy his fantasy rather than go out and confront a far from stimulating reality. The appeal of cyberspace is that it offers a freedom that cannot be found in the real world, depicted as a dull place with little room to move. To counteract such a dreary way of life, virtual simulations provide the opportunity to experience an adventure in which the user is the indisputable protagonist.

In *eXistenZ*, immersion into artificial paradises is a way of coping with a dull existence. A representative example of this is Gas, the character played by Willem Dafoe, who operates a petrol station only (as he puts it) “on the most pathetic level of reality”, as once he started playing videogames his life began to have a purpose. In a dialogue that reveals Cronenberg’s view of the role of art, Gas is established as a fervent advocate of virtual immersion which, he claims, has given him moments of such intensity that they have changed his life. Against those who seek to restrict the option of exploring new situations and identities, David Cronenberg, through this character, defends the freedom offered by the use of this technology. In a film where the protagonist is a videogame designer elevated to the status of artist, the value given to the creation of fictitious worlds could not be higher. Indeed, *eXistenZ* is replete with allusions both to the creative process and to the obstacles that every creator faces because of the dogmatism of a few. Allegra Geller, persecuted for her work like Rushdie, reflects in one scene on how “people are programmed to accept so little” whereas the act of creation has endless possibilities.

Cronenberg, whose career has been marred on numerous occasions by censorship —*Crash* (1996) being the best-known example— would undoubtedly agree with his alter ego Allegra⁷. On the subject of his conflicts with censors, he was once asked whether the artist had a moral or social responsibility for his creations. Cronenberg categorically denied such an obligation, a position that would be expressed years later in *eXistenZ*:

As soon as you talk about social or political responsibility, you’ve amputated the best limbs you’ve got as an artist. You are plugging into a very restrictive system that is going to push and pull and mold you and is going to make your art totally useless and ineffective. (BRESKIN, 1992).

***eXistenZ*alism and free will**

The title of the film pays tribute to existentialism, which postulates a life in which, as Sartre famously described it, “man is condemned to be free”, which presupposes decision making without the supervision of a protector God. In *ExistenZ* the artists of the future are brought down from the privileged position they held traditionally — accentuated in times of historic genius— that required them to be beacons of light upon a new world. In the videogame designed by Geller, the artist is no longer responsible for guiding the audience because, thanks to interactivity, the viewer abandons his passive status and takes part in the action. In this way, the game acquires a more democratic nature in which the player is on the same level as the creator of the videogame⁸.

In his adaptation of the William Burroughs novel *Naked Lunch* (1991), Cronenberg begins the film with Hassan-i Sabbah’s quote “Nothing is true, everything is permitted”, which the Canadian director interpreted from an existentialist perspective:

Because death is inevitable, we are free to invent our own reality. We are part of a culture, we are part of an ethical and moral system, but all we have to do is take one step outside it and we see that none of it is absolute. [...] And you can then be free. Free to be unethical, immoral [...]. Ultimately, if you are an existentialist and you don’t believe in God and the judgment after death, then you can do anything you want (BRESKIN, 1992).

Videogames —often criticised for encouraging pernicious behaviour— are the ideal scenario for Cronenberg’s creation in *eXistenZ* of a kind of separate world which, as a kind of testing ground, is free of the usual constraints of society. The behaviour of the players is thus subject to their own judgment. In the film, the goal of the videogame is open; it is not defined because it has not been imposed by its creator, and what makes it interesting is that this goal depends entirely on the activity of the players themselves. Geller warns the novice Pikul that there are no pre-established rules; in other words, “you have to play the game to figure out why you’re playing the game”. It will be the individual decisions that determine the outcome. Consequently, in the game every player creates his own character, characterised by an accent, a personality and a particular way of dressing. In other words, he creates his own history, but also his own identity⁹. Thus, the insecure Geller is transformed in *eXistenZ* into a voluptuous young woman who always takes the initiative. Her hair becomes curly, like that of many action heroines, and her breasts are bigger, reminding us of the type of audience that most videogames target. Instead of his own harmless appearance, Pikul

Gas kneeling before his goddess, the artist Allegra Geller



will sport a toupee and an open shirt, and begin imitating the gestures of the most stereotypical heroes. In short, in selecting the attributes of their avatar, the characters they create for themselves in the videogame will generally reveal what they want to be. It is of course a free choice, although, obviously, one that is not immune to being coded by the standards of a consumer society. The user of this technology reaffirms his capacity to choose, as this kind of entertainment allows the consumer to select the adventure that he wants to have. The film thus defends the use of virtual reality as escapism taken to its ultimate consequences, even as a substitute for the outside world.

The fact that the characters end up behaving like the violent and sexist characters typical of videogames has led Alexia Bowler to question whether free will really does exist in the videogame (BOWLER, 2007: 110). But Cronenberg is highlighting the apparent contradiction between the freedom offered by virtual reality and the use that the characters make of it, mostly aimed at satisfying reprehensible desires. However, the construction of an identity based on ideologically objectionable archetypes is also a form of freedom if it provides entertainment (FISHER, 2012: 72). In fact, many of the nods made in the film are related to the way we allow ourselves to be seduced by the banality of the products offered by the consumer society, even when we are able to detect their controversial

component. Thus, Geller is aware that the game leads her character into sexual relations with Pikul and recognises this impulse as a “pathetically mechanical attempt to heighten the emotional tension of the next game sequence.” In other words, not even the creator is free from the narrative determinism of the plot logic of videogames, the biggest entertainment industry of the not-so-distant future. While acting as a critique of a society where the only freedom we can enjoy is that which has been previously made available to us by the entertainment industry, these jokes do not deny free will, but they do reveal that its field of action is just as limited as it is in the real world.

The perception of virtual reality as a liberating technology is maintained throughout the film. This is evident in the fact that Cronenberg shows little sympathy for the realists, whom he portrays as dangerous religious fundamentalists. Although worshipped by their acolytes, the demiurges he proposes —Allegra Geller or Yevgeni Nourish, the designer of *trasCendenZ*, a game that all the film’s characters seem to be playing in the last scene—adopt a more balanced position towards their audience and thus participate as just another player, without imposing what is or is not socially admissible, in the demonstration of their respective games. The film lacks closure and, rather than proposing the reestablishment of order through the return to the real world, leaves open the possibility

Virtual reality as an escape route from the monotonous real world



of the player deciding on the level of reality (or, more accurately, of fiction) to remain in. As Mathijs puts it: “it is in this sense that *eXistenZ* is existentialist: in stressing the moral responsibility of the individual, and the impossibility of finding ‘greater’ knowledge outside oneself” (MATHIJS, 2008: 211).

Conclusions

“Censors tend to do what only psychotics do:
they confuse reality with illusion.”

David Cronenberg

Immersion in electronically generated paradises is presented in this film as a revolutionary form of escapism that enables people to experience emotions so intense that they lose interest in the real world. However, this should not be understood as an alienating side effect. The society described in *eXistenZ* denies any possibility of choice. Its inhabitants, who are completely apathetic, have no ability to choose. They live in a safe world, free of worries, where everything is already done for them. They are bored because they lack a will of their own but they see themselves as incapable of changing their situation. The world supported by the *realists* limits the options, the possibility to choose or to develop as an individual. On the other hand, the virtual reality defended by artists enhances the possibility of choice. It is not an opium of the people because it helps the dissatisfied to carry on. On the contrary, virtual reality, as a new means of creation, forces them to make tough decisions, to take risks. And it even goes one step further because in virtual reality even our most questionable acts form part of the choice. The role of the artist as the designer of this technological escape route consists of ensuring that his creations continue to serve individual emancipation rather than the interests that others try to forcibly impose upon us. Art opens possibilities of imagining a free universe, penetrating into our way of understanding the world, questioning it, and inviting us to participate in the decision-making process necessary for change.

In short, if *eXistenZ* defends free will, it is because it aspires to safeguard art, and with it the worlds imagined by the artists. The emulation of a videogame aesthetic in *eXistenZ* is in effect a declaration of intention. Distancing itself from the hackneyed codes of representation of the cyberpunk films, it simultaneously and consciously reinforces the illusory character of the scenarios and events described. In this way it claims for its characters and thus for us, the viewers, the freedom of movement and the creative licence that Salman Rushdie (or, to a lesser extent, Cronenberg himself) has had threatened. Like any di-

rector, Cronenberg thus constructs an artificial paradise which, with its express aim to transcend reality, comes up against the resistance of the sanctimonious, those who do not accept that what is valid in fiction does not necessarily have to correspond with what is admissible in the real world.

The ultimate aspiration of the artists of every era is to create a work that absorbs all the perceptions and emotions of the viewer by immersing him in a spectacle that isolates him from the outside world —the “total artwork”. The idea that videogames will become works of art some day is, therefore, not so outrageous.

Notes

* The author would like to thank Valeria Camporesi for her remarks about the draft version of this paper. The research for this article has also benefited from funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Education, through the 2008-2011 R&D&I National Plan for Human Resources Mobility.

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1 The beginning of the new millennium saw the release of the Hollywood remake of *Open Your Eyes*, *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), as well as *Paycheck* (John Woo, 2003), *Cypher* (Vincenzo Natali, 2003), and, more recently, the sequel to *Tron*, *Tron: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, 2010), followed by the new version of *Total Recall*, directed by Len Wiseman.

2 David Lavery compared the two films in Lavery (2001: 150-157).

3 A lack of attention partially rectified by Hotchkiss (2003), Bowler (2007), Poirson-Dechonne (2007), Wilson (2011) and Fisher (2012).

4 On this question see the article by Claudia Springer (1999: 203-218).

5 Richard Wagner (1813-1883) coined the term *gesamtkunstwerk* in his essay *The Artwork of the Future* (Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, 1849).

6 David Cronenberg expressed his intention to avoid the comparisons with *Blade Runner* in Grünberg (2006: 165) and Rodley (1999: 10).

7 In this respect, see *The Crash Controversy* (BARKER, ARTHURS and HARINDRANATH, 2001).

8 “There is the notion,” explains Cronenberg, “perhaps antiquated, that an artist is a person with vision who leads his audience into a universe that the receiver cannot control by himself. But if there was real interactivity, and the audience was able to make their own decisions, the game would become something like a democracy and would lose the autocratic character of art, which comes from the tyrannical power of the artist.” Quoted by Antonio Weinrichter (RODLEY, 1997: 296).

9 This need to invent oneself has been interpreted by William Beard as a characteristic of the existentialism defended in *eXistenZ* (BEARD, 2006: 430).

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