

eXistenZ by David Cronenberg: cyber-fictions for a post-humanity



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Abstract:

This article analyses David Cronenberg's film, *eXistenZ*, with the aim of establishing comparative territory with the world of new, electronic text forms. A second objective is to examine the enormous, creative possibilities that can already be seen within our contemporary, literary panorama yet which demand a change in sensibilities in order to adjust them to the needs of the new paradigm. It constitutes a reflection on the transformation of certain cultural habits which may allow us to develop new critical tools for analysing and comprehending this new literary step into the digital environment.

"The world of games is at a point of inflection. People are programmed to accept very little, yet the possibilities are so great..."

Allegra Geller



Figure 1. *eXistenZ*

These revealing words are spoken by Allegra Geller, the hyper-popular game designer, acclaimed by her audience as an authentic superstar in the future represented in *eXistenZ* in its first appearance on screen. Starting from this affirmation, perfectly transferable from the world of games and virtual reality to the current state of electronic literature, I would like to work through a comparison between the questions and challenges presented in this work by Cronenberg and electronic literature and the challenges we face in trying to establish whether, as was claimed years ago, a new time for a new literature has finally arrived. The voices of the prophets and cries announcing the final apocalypse have been ringing in our ears for some time, but we should be conscious of the extent to which the cultural practices conforming our world can be changed.

1. *eXistenZ*: games between reality and fiction

The concepts revealed as problematic in the film scenario conceived by Cronenberg are those of "nature" and "reality" and, in a sense, new literary forms also precipitate us into a distinction between "natural" reading practices and new reading practices.



Figure 2. Title screen from *eXistenZ*

In the form the writer and director presents them to us, they are nothing more than illusions but I fear that within the literary environment, we can pretend they are illusions; however, increasingly, hyper-textual and cyber-textual textual practices become less of an artifice and

form a firmer part of our reality (if, in addition, one works, as I do, at a virtual university and creates hyper-textual materials for one's students, then the question becomes absolutely inescapable.) David Cronenberg manages, within *eXistenZ*, to tantalise, that is, to torment once more to the point of agony, the complex, polemical relationships between humanity and machines. The thirteenth film by the Canadian director, in my view, sets a new benchmark in his career—now quite substantial—^[1] by definitively trying to cloud, subvert and even eradicate the boundaries between organic and inorganic matter, a fantasy-future and immediate reality.



Figure 3. Title screen from *Matrix*

Since *eXistenZ* appeared almost simultaneously alongside *Matrix*, it has often been compared with the latter. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the treatment of a shared landscape: that of the mixture and confusion between the "natural" and "artificial" worlds. In *Matrix*, we are shown a future where artificial intelligence has taken over the world and machines feed on the bio-energy of humans, who are maintained in a kind of larval/coma state, plugged into a computer-generated, dream world where life continues exactly as before. Keanu Reeves, along the lines of *Mnemonic*, is a kind of *terminator* recruited by underground *guerrillas* who are fighting a desperate war against machines of human appearance via opportune appearances and disappearances using keyboards and telephones. He must save the human species from total and absolute extinction as an intelligent creature within a scenario of higher artificial intelligence. Keanu Reeves, therefore, must, metaphorically, wake us all up, bring us out of the fiction, away from the sweet forgetfulness of candid ignorance the amiable machines have subjected us to, in a strange yet compassionate ending for us, their progenitors, the beings who have given them life and who are being taken it out from, although anaesthetically, without us being aware of it. Looked at critically, and bearing in mind that the imaginary reality of *Matrix* is hell, we may even be able to call them compassionate.

1. Ramón Freixas, in "David Cronenberg. La perversión de la realidad" [David Cronenberg: the perversion of reality], within *La nueva carne* [Fresh Meat], p.293, has described the "Cronenberg project" as a project defined by enviable cohesion, perseverance and personalisation.



Figure 4. Still photo from *Matrix*

However, if *Matrix* is, in the words of the critic Brian D. Johnson, a "special-effects extravaganza" of *Blade Runner*, *Terminator 2* and *Star Wars* with sophisticated martial arts practices mixed in, *eXistenZ*, on the contrary, is a relatively calm and cerebral film, even if the special effects have been called "repulsive effects" by some, due to their material visceral quality to which we will shortly refer. Pilar Pedraza notes that not only in *eXistenZ* but throughout all of Cronenberg's work, there are objects that appear monstrous and sinister in the sense that they exist on the border of organic and inorganic things, inanimateness and the living, and that this frontier is often crossed. They are objects, Pedraza affirms, which are "strongly sexualised, that swell and breathe, act like animals, get sick, die and even talk".^[2]

2. On bodies, *materia*, experiences and knowledge

eXistenZ is a kind of virtual reality clip that precisely questions the virtue of reality. I use the term "clip" because at the end of the film we realise that the session has lasted around twenty minutes which have felt endless because of the large amount of action that has taken place, even though, at the start, Allegra, within the game, asked for a three hour margin to test the new leisure product she has invented.



Figure 5. Metaflesh game pod introduced into the bio-port

This fugacity and intensity of time employed in the game and in the experience this provides can be seen in the light of a recent article by Umberto Eco in which he speaks of books as experiences, of narrations as experiences and knowledge. In "Algunas razones para leer"

2. Pilar Pedraza. "Teratología y Nueva Carne" [Teratology and fresh meat]. In: *La nueva carne*, p.62.

['Some reasons to read'], included in the latest report on reading (*Informe 2002*) Eco alludes to the relationship between time and action and, in the last instance, to the relationship between action and life. Therefore, when nothing happens we say time is passing slowly and when we live through exciting moments and days, we say time flies. Likewise, Eco associates reading to action because when we read, we live, even if it is living the lives of others. Definitively: we accumulate experience and wisdom. For Eco, reading gives us the raw material for recall and the Italian semeiologist aspires to a long life in which to remember "in instalments" everything which writers have had the grace to explain to him. In this manner, according to him, when we read, we are living more fully because a lot of things are happening. So we imagine ourselves within these virtual reality games where action is vivid, experiences are multiple and, what is better—or worse, I no longer know—, real...

Montserrat Hormigó claims that Cronenberg is fascinated by post-humanity; that is, by the impact of technology on the human body. In this sense, his films form part of the group of intellectual and artistic practices that rethink the human body at the same time as the latter is being reconstructed by the advances in genetic engineering and robotics.^[3]



Figure 6. The metaflesh game pod as conceived by Cronenberg

Returning to one of his perennial obsessions: study of the reaction of the organism to interference by foreign bodies, occasionally revealed as colonizer of the host body; the creator of *eXistenZ* imagines a world where games systems are directly plugged into the body through a "bio-port", a kind of orifice situated at the base of the spinal column, of a vaguely anal appearance and needing to be lubricated before inserting the cable jack.^[4]



Figure 7. Detail of the bio-port

Effectively, via an umbilical cord similar to a telephone cable surrounded by organic

3. Montserrat Hormigó. "Nuevas especies para el panteón de lo grotesco femenino" ['New species for the pantheon of the feminine grotesque']. In: *La nueva carne*, pp.136-137.

4. Pilar Pedraza. "Teratología y Nueva Carne". In: *La nueva carne*, p.69.

tissue—which we could almost describe as viscous, highly similar to real umbilical cords—the body is connected to the transgenic game pod. This is a hybrid of organic and artificial tissues made of blood and flesh, looking like a mutation produced from diverse human organs with a certain sexual aspect—and that either remind us of a foetus, a kidney, a breast, or a vagina.



Figure 8. Moment when the game pod is introduced into the bio-port

Nevertheless, in spite of its appearance, the game pod functions as if it were a control panel, in the form of a joystick, with the exception that the game pod in question has a kind of button that, unequivocally, resembles a feminine nipple.



Figure 9. The game pod as a joystick

On this subject, before continuing with the description, I would like to comment on the clearly evident assimilation of the game pod with a feminine sexual organ containing all the power (let's not forget that it contains the game) and is connected via these umbilical cords to several players, umbilical cords that penetrate the respective orifices of those aspiring to obtain pleasure and satisfaction from the game. The tenuous relationships between sexuality and maternity remain, once more, made manifest within the Cronenbergian imaginary in an especially perturbing manner. The metaphor of maternity as a parasitic disease, present in many of his films, is obsessively repeated here. It is all related to the idea of pleasure, but also to that of reproduction, even of gestation, in a vision of maternity as a strange form of technological and sexual colonisation.



Figure 10. Allegra "playing"

In this context, the instructions for use are very simple: when one presses this nipple—with a light slap, or with a pinch—the game pod, which is soft and responds to the touch, begins working. It wriggles, stretches and contracts rhythmically, a moment when the players enter a kind of apparently pleasurable, latent or hypnotic state, while they fondle the game pod as if it was a kind of dildo or pornographic toy. I insist: at all times throughout the film, this association of ideas is made between the game and pleasure, the desire for connection and sexual desire, as well as the process of stimulation in order to enter the game and the process of sexual stimulation, a game of seductions and promises to convince the other—an "other", which in this case, is the male, since the leisure nymphomaniac *par excellence* is Allegra Geller herself, the designer of the game system, who appears as a complete games addict, a hybrid halfway between nymphomania and drug-dependency.



Figure 11. Allegra Geller, ready to commence the presentation of her new game

Here, then, in this film, we have a games designer, who exclusively presents her latest product in an experimental marketing session (here the games industry operates as a satiric metaphor for the film industry, with explicit references to pre-launches and marketing campaigns).



Figure 12. The exclusive presentation of *eXistenZ*

This is a product which, beware!, is not one game, but a whole games system with myriad applications and with one fundamental difference to its precedents: in *eXistenZ* you do not so much play, as the game plays you. In other words, an annihilation of the self and of one's own identity takes place, transforming you into someone else, undoing yourself, to become one with the game. Once assimilation has occurred, one's own existence disappears and *eXistenZ* begins. The experience of *eXistenZ* is intimate and above the experience of biology itself, in the realm of perpetual ecstasy. The games master shares themselves with the game pod. There is a relationship, carnal contact and contact with explicitly sexual imagery. Within the game, player and machine become one: a live organism. This aspect of the film could be explored more deeply, to explain construction and reconstruction of our identities analogous to cyber-space, because the computer provides an environment where identity is truly that which we make of it and where stable identities are in crisis. Effectively, in the world of virtual reality, we can use digital space to recreate the identities of our real world, to experiment with new identities...^[5] This is what is proposed, in some fashion, in the background of *eXistenZ*, a work exploring the limits and possibilities between reality and fiction, or rather, reality and virtual reality, which the defenders of reality happily equate with the concept of "fiction". Meanwhile, virtual reality is so real!

3. Fleeing forwards, towards fiction

As the game begins, reality intervenes, or so it appears. In narrative terms, at the moment when Allegra prepares to download the game into the famous "guinea pigs" attending the session, an infiltrator attempts to assassinate her with a bionic pistol that has bypassed the security controls of the room. This is because it is made of human residue: skin and bones; the projectiles it uses are teeth, cavities and all! At that moment, the Byzantine odyssey begins which will lead Allegra and her supposed "protector", a marketing apprentice working as a security guard with no gaming experience, through the peculiar paths between reality and fiction.

5. What is interesting is the manner in which digital technology gives us the ability not only to represent identity, but to define and to control the ways identity is expressed. Therefore, while in the real world we have bodies and no other option, in the digital world, for example, and among other alternatives, we can choose whether we just want to exist as a voice or colour. The question is, what attributes are important to one when defining one's own identity.



Figure 13. The bionic pistol which the virtual reality detractor carried hidden in his game pod

We now see Allegra and Ted Pikul embarking on a flight which she perceives as fleeing forwards; that is, towards fiction. More worried about potential damage the game pod may have suffered in the attack,^[6] Allegra is blind to everything but the moment of connection and playing. In fact, this is what she does, even though she soon leaves the game because playing alone has no emotion, "you just feel like a simple tourist", without truly penetrating your essence; we have to understand, therefore, in the "reality" of the world she has travelled in.



Figure 14. Allegra and Ted inside the game

eXistenZ is, without a doubt, a game to be played in company, in friendly company, we are reminded by its creator at every instant. To Ted this reaction seems unlikely, taking into account that they are facing a multiple enemy—the session presenter just before agonizing had reminded him he should not trust anyone, not even the company; wise advice, above all for the times in which we live, is it not? However, it is exactly his aversion to penetration^[7]—"authentic, homosexual rape", according to Pedraza—, that gives him a continual attitude of rejection, of distance and coldness towards that happily sexual-erotic game environment.^[8] In spite of everything, finally Pikul consents, even if we can put this down to his inability to resist Allegra's seduction, since she continually oozes a sexy, narcotic sense of control from every pore. He becomes her victim, or *game virgin*, to use Brian D. Johnson's expression.

6. We should be aware that this is the original game pod, the only one carrying the installed programme, which she calls "her creature", the original on which she has been working for several years. It now appears that one of the umbilical cords has suffered a tear and furthermore, the programme, which was still not fully installed, might have become contaminated.

7. We should not forget that he is a "virgin", not having had a bio-port installed and he heatedly opposes installation.

8. We should keep in mind that this involuntary pair coupled fortuitously by destiny connects to the game while in bed, exactly as if they were about to make love.



Figure 15. Installation of the bio-port in Ted Pikul

The film develops in an ambience of sordidness and marginalisation,^[9] accompanied by strong doses of barely latent violence: the pistol shots that allow the grafting of the bio-port—William Defoe uses an enormous pistol in the film, a kind of supremely powerful mega-bazooka—, the inflammation subsequent to installation, the application of an epidural anaesthetic, exactly as if giving birth, the dialogue exchanged before they begin playing: "new ports are sometimes a bit stiff", "I don't want to hurt you"; all in all, a pervading ambience that tends to evoke an "original penetration" scenario, although played by Allegra towards Ted.^[10]

Beyond these questions, I consider especially interesting the reaction of the inexperienced player and how we can use this to stimulate discussion on new textual forms. Ted Pikul says: "What's the objective?" and Allegra's answer is quite simple: "You have to play to know what you're playing at". Then she adds: "You'll see how natural it is". The naturalness of fiction—once more wielded within this context of dissonances between frames, almost as if it was Goffman's theory^[11] we were dealing with—is not experienced in that manner by Ted. On the contrary, when, within the game, they access new game pods and successively so, in a compulsive, *en abîme* reaction, they reach a moment when they introduce themselves game pods that penetrate them through the bio-port. It is at this moment that Ted Pikul formulates the question concerning the context of virtual reality in which he is immersed and imperatively needs to resolve to understand what is happening: "I'm very worried about my body. Where are our real bodies? What's going to happen if they are hungry?" And the answer to this is: "They're where we left them, meditating, resting". Yet he refuses to abandon himself to fiction. He feels vulnerable, bodiless, disconnected from his real life. To Allegra, however, this initial psychosis appears highly recommendable because it means he has come into contact with the gaming structures. In fact, in coming out of the game, or at least in the first break, Pikul's words are revealing and place us on the line of disorientation that Cronenberg searches for insistently: "My real life seems completely unreal. I'm not sure I know where we are. This also seems like a game and you're starting to look like a character of the game too". Allegra, who wants to return to the game and is "high" begins to kiss him and asks him to return. Just by pressing the nipple once, with a pinch, they go back in.

We should notice that within virtual reality, a tremendously real virtual reality, highly real, where—in comparison to *Johnny Mnemonic*—neither sensors nor helmets, gloves, or computers are needed to gain access, it is the words, or more exactly, the dialogues, that let us know whether we are in reality or in a game. The images, derived from "phantom", are fantasy, fictions, while it is language that provides a context of truth, of reality. The same words that have served since time immemorial to create fiction, are here the only anchor to reality. However, what reality is this, if *eXistenZ* is a spying game between friends and enemies in the

9. The reaction of the gas station attendant Willem Defoe is initially one of offence, when Allegra asks for a bio-port for her companion. He reacts as if she were treating him as a drug-pusher and says: "There are quite a few fools that have them. I don't know why you'd ask me for something like that, lady".

10. The reaction after the first round of the game also maintains the erotic atmosphere: "That was great", "I feel really me", "It was mild", "It's incredible", etc.

11. Goffman, Erving (1974). *Frame Analysis. An essay on the organisation of experience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975. The implications for analysis of speech/discourse are developed into Goffman, Erving (1981) *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell. I would like to thank Joan Pujolar, my colleague in Humanities and Philology Studies at the UOC for this information. Like the development that Pujolar makes in one chapter of his doctoral thesis, the notion of the "frame" becomes interesting because, in its appropriation of the theatrical metaphor, it presents the agents as actors that are actively constructing a definition of a situation and of their implication in it outside of their own interpretative resources (Goffman, 1974).

real world^[12] against who, as Allegra says, everyone is playing and where the game is a space to hide in? The death of the game pod is the end of *eXistenZ*, death, a death that now governs everything. A game pod that, moribund, had tried to explain what was happening, and which coincides in time with the revolutionary movement against games and game pods, against artificiality, finally. In fact, in the words of Ramón Freixas, we can say that in *eXistenZ* we are watching the "litigation between 'existentialist partisans', defenders of virtual reality and the staunch defenders of the factuality of what is real (with decidedly perverse ends...)"^[13]. In sum, in the final scene, the world is in flames and victory is realism.

It was Cronenberg interviewing Salman Rushdie in 1995 for the magazine *Shift* that clearly inspired the story of a games designer who is the objective of a *fatwa*. The director then said: "I was horrified and intrigued by this situation, and the whole Burroughsian idea that if you believe something, then it can come and pursue you until it catches you".



Figure 16. The Rushdie-Cronenberg interview

In that interview Cronenberg and Rushdie ended up talking about computer games^[14] and the

12. "Now that you have shown yourselves to be true and reliable realists..." says the strange Russian worker who, in the end, is revealed as the designer of *traScendenZ*.

13. Ramón Freixas. "David Cronenberg. La perversion de la realidad". *La nueva carne*, p.307.

14. I here reproduce a fragment of the interview that you can find at http://www.davidcronenberg.de/cr_rushd.htm^[url1].

Super Mario Meets Two Great Artists

Cronenberg: Do you think there could ever be a computer game that could truly be art?

Rushdie: No.

There's a beautiful game called Myst. Have you seen that?

I haven't seen that.

They say this is democratic art, that is to say, the reader is equal to the creator. But this is really subverting what you want from art. You want to be taken over and you want to be—

Shown something.

Exactly. Why be limited by yourself? But they say, "No, it's a collaboration".

I like computer games. I haven't played many. At the Super Mario level I think they're great fun.

They're like crosswords because once you've beaten the game, you've solved all its possibilities.

There's nothing left.

Whereas this is not true of any work of art. You can experience it over and over.

And if you come back to it in five years it's a different work, it's a different thing.

There's a different thing between a puzzle and a book. These are just very clever puzzles and they are very enjoyable and they require certain skills which are quite clever, useful to develop. Sometimes they make you use your mind in very interesting ways because it requires natural steps. You have to think in ways you wouldn't expect in order to find the solution. But it's just a game.

You would say, then, that a game designer could never be an artist?

Never say never. Somebody could turn up who would be a genius. But if one thinks about non-computer games, there are many which people say have the beauty of an art form. People say that about cricket, people say about every game.

But actually, they're not art. You can have great artists playing games. You can think about a great sports figure as being equivalent to an artist. I could see that there could be an artist of a games player, a kind of Michael Jordan of the Nintendo.

They have those competitions internationally.

In the end, a work of art is something which comes out of somebody's imagination and takes a final form. It's offered and is then completed by the reader or the viewer or whoever it may be. Anything else is not what I would recognize as a work of art.

former was interested in presenting them as an emerging art form. Just as the industrial revolution gave birth to films, the new computational technology will inevitably give rise to one or two new artistic forms; that seems to be the director's reasoning. He even goes further and asks Rushdie: could a game be art, in more senses than purely the graphic aspect? Rushdie is quite conclusive. He thinks not, in the same manner that we cannot think of word games and puzzles as art, which is what he compares them to. And this is due, he justifies, to the fact that our concept of an artist is of someone who has a vision and leads his audience towards a space which they cannot enter by themselves. We should retain this reflection because it is precisely this space of freedom and action reclaimed by electronic textual forms that make passivity synonymous with textual absence, uselessness, boredom and finally, rejection. Cronenberg, even though he is not a video game addict (he affirms that he would prefer to read a book) appears to wager for a new form of democratic art.

4. The artificiality of the "new" electronic literature

If I bring the theme of artificiality onto my own turf, that of books and texts, to speak of the light and shade that the new forms of electronic textual forms are throwing on the subject, I realise that the concepts of artificiality and naturalness return again to the dichotomic terms of what is "normal" and what is "different" or, in the last instance, what we know and the unknown.



Figure 17. Letter A

We find that the text, whether printed or suspended inside the watery screen, is a powerful generator of potential worlds, interpretations, uses and experiences. In some way it is always a virtual object. Technology, regardless of this, has elevated this virtual reality to a higher level. We could say that it has fully empowered it. For this reason, I would prefer to leave aside the dialectic of confrontation which is common when a collision of diverse cultural forms occurs and analyse whether, as has been stated, it is viable to speak of the appearance of a new form of narration.

eXistenZ is the perfect excuse to be able to make the jump. Its confrontational and above all, nebulous treatment of the barriers between reality and fiction and the intrinsic struggle between the defenders of one side and the other make it possible to compare the defenders of printed text, of the book, and the prophets of a new textual form, that a very short time ago we had to think of as hyper-textual and which now appears to be surpassed by even more powerful cyber-textual concepts. Whatever the case, what is most evident is that electronic textual forms have once again made some old questions manifest regarding the status and the function of the text. For example: is it the author's authority which constructs a text, or rather a community of authors, or of readers? How can the text change or remain the same? Can texts make mistakes? Do images change or displace the texts? How do they relate to other texts? How long can a text last? How can you read a text that is changing, in movement, of a single generation?

We will try to pose some of these questions, not so much with the object of finding an answer, but to evaluate their complexity, beyond Stanley Fish's sceptical analysis, oscillating between asking oneself what is natural in simplicity and what there is that is certain within complexity.

Simple or complex, writing and reading have always provoked suspicion, for one reason or another. The new literary products of the digital environment should be no exception, rather, on the contrary, since their "artificial" component is precisely the perfect excuse for their

condemnation. From Plato and his reticence to writing—or Socrates, who, like a good Platonist expresses his mistrust of reading because it does not teach us anything new—and even up to Descartes, who decided to do away with all that he had read and learned in books and to get out and see the world, since his readings did not help him to resolve any of the philosophical questions, reading has gone through difficult moments. This is not only a phenomenon of today's world. "It was not in books," says Victoria Camps in her latest report on reading, "but in himself that Descartes found the principle of truth. Therefore, shut up in a room, reclining in an armchair, next to the heater—*seul dans un poêle*—, he searched the interior of his mind for the first idea that might convey truth".^[15]

This description of Descartes powerfully brings to mind Allegra Geller relaxing and preparing herself "to truly live" via her game. Whoever uses one of the most common arguments employed when discussing the artificiality of this new literature that denies enjoyment of intimate, comfortable, solitary reading in any corner, from the bed to the bath,^[16] because it must be carried out in front of a computer, will soon be refuted.^[17] Possibly, Víctor García de la Concha's comments, appearing in his latest book on the state of reading, may be helpful to see how diffuse these apparent borders between "naturalness" and "artificiality" can be. I quote textually:

"To read is to break the bonds binding us to a predetermined time and space, letting us contemplate from a distance the here and now, or to travel to any place, with the capacity to transform ourselves into spectators, even into the leading roles and co-stars if we choose, of any event, or of the most amazing adventure" ("Leer para ser" [Reading to Be], p.56).

Effectively, the game conceptualised by Allegra breaks the bonds binding us to a predetermined time and space, letting us contemplate from a distance the here and now, and allows its players to travel to any place, penetrating deeper and deeper into the fiction, not only with the capacity to transform themselves into spectators, but also into authentic alter-life stars, even experiencing the pleasure of killing.

"A world reduced to the reach of one's hand: this is the book. The offer of a memory space marked out for personal enjoyment and possession" (Víctor García de la Concha).

If the person subscribing these words was not de la Concha himself, we could almost mistake this for publicity for *eXistenZ* and the game pods: a reduced world, within the reach of one's hand for personal enjoyment and possession (the *eXistenZ* marketing professionals could not have done better!) and, in passing, for the enormous possibilities of electronic textual forms.

Seriously, however, what is undeniable is that reading is an operation that for centuries was the office of merely a paltry few who knew its mechanics, just as today: very few people read fiction hypertexts or narrative cyber-texts. Reading for one's own profit was, apart from being inconvenient, reproachable. As Alberto Manguel informs us in his *Historia de la lectura* [History of Reading] or the aforementioned Victoria Camps in "La manía de leer", reading has always been seen as a sign of suspicious abnormality. For this reason, those of us who participate in this group of abnormal beings should not feel so estranged. The French pedagogue Jean Baptiste de La Salle wrote in *Las reglas del decoro en la urbanidad cristiana* [Rules of Decorum in Christian Urbanity] in 1703: "Do not imitate certain persons who dedicate their time to reading and other matters. Do not remain in bed if it is not to sleep. In this manner, your virtue will be greatly benefited". The worthy pedagogue would have never imagined that, at over three centuries' distance, he would be fighting reading and other post-humanity practices. In this order of things, it is also revealing that on the tomb of Salvino degli Armati, the supposed inventor of the reading prosthesis, glasses, there appears the following epitaph: "inventor of glasses", followed by "God, forgive him his sins". Victoria Camps sums it up succinctly:

"Associated as it was with inaction, even with laziness, as much as it was with egocentrism, or with a desire for freedom, a dedication to reading has never enjoyed recognition exempt of reticence and jealousy. The reader separates themselves from the world, feeds themselves on dead letters, interprets the results to their fancy... What can you expect of such an individual other than something inadequate

15. Victoria Camps. "La manía de leer" [The mania of reading]. In: *La lectura en España. Informe 2002* [Reading in Spain. 2002 Report].

16. It is curious how you find that there are suddenly many people, it seems, who read in the bath when trying to make one see the "perils" of electronic literature, which can even be a grave risk to life due to the possibility of being electrocuted!

17. In this area, there are already prototypes of bedside tables with wireless connections and projectors incorporated that can project the screen content onto the ceiling and which can be operated easily from bed.

for the working of the world?"

Therefore the French revolution took place, after which the reading revolution of the 18th century, known as *la folie de la lecture*, carried out by the bourgeoisie, who developed from the same, intensive readings, always of a religious nature, into reading behaviour that was "extensive", open, laic and individual: modern.

5. Reading has never been an easy operation

The Catalan writer Quim Monzó said it only a few months ago at one of the meetings that the UOC organises on their Bellaterra campus which he attended as guest writer. When he was young and read insatiably, adults—beginning with his parents—scolded him exactly the same as some time ago children who watched television obsessively were told off, and as today the same thing happens to children who play computer games compulsively, on their *Play Station* or navigate untiringly on the Internet. Our period has not escaped from the suspicion inspired by reading, fundamentally because it does not square with the most accepted life styles, those ruled by speed, sound, precipitation, stress... To common mortals, books cannot compete with a successful film, with a television programme with peak ratings, or with a live concert. Our world, as some philosophers have diagnosed, is pragmatic, hedonist, flees solitude and silence. We could also add that the law of least effort pollutes everything and, clearly, reading requires an effort. Above all, if we take into account Nabokov's comment that good readers are re-readers, and especially when focusing the literary products of modernity, or perhaps we should say post-modernity, they require even greater effort. The habit that engenders this *mania* for reading—and here Camps uses the word that the ancient Greeks used to designate erotic passion—is not instilled, she claims—I would prefer to say it is not acquired simply through preference for a less violent use of language—without effort. The habits, the customs that form character depend on what the Greeks called *ethos*, a way of being transmitted by osmosis, because it is not exclusive either to reason or calculation, but to passion and sentiment.

The new public enemy number one of reading appears to be the Internet and the reading and writing patterns it generates. De la Concha's diagnostic:

"The matter is complicated by the enslaving eruption of the Internet, from the huge mass of information provided that demands discontinuous reading practices. Having broken the barrier between virtual reality and reality, we run the risk of being trapped in a web of fragments. Dazzled by the screen and astonished by everything that flashes across it, we can forgive ourselves without embarrassment: there is simply no time to read".

What to do with this new scenario of bits and pieces? How to react?

6. A new perspective



Figure 18. A new perspective

Clearly, and in contrast to the dynamic of *eXistenZ*, what we must do is to open our eyes, to look and truly see. Open our eyes, but also change our manner of seeing, allow a fresh perspective. If we achieve it, then we will fully gain the possibility of producing a type of knowledge that learns from the endlessly enriching contact with difference. However, this mutation of our sight is not at all easy and condemned from the beginning to a thousand and one pitfalls (if by pitfall, we understand the incapacity of producing a truth that works for each context). No-one will have missed the implications for literature in the electronic environment and its impact on textual forms tends to gravitate around 3 axes: the salvation prophecies (we are entering the post-humanist epoch and our physical and mental faculties are being enhanced), the prophecies of condemnation and failure (the coming of post-humanism is inevitable, but it will mean the loss of everything worth preserving in our cultural heritage) and, since it could not be otherwise, the calls for resistance in the purest Luddite fashion (we can do something to defend our humanity against the unstoppable advance of the machine!). Baudrillard had already predicted this, respect of technology always oscillates between displacement and increase.

In spite of this, and whatever its weight, the long hegemony of the printed word is giving ground to the dynamic, textual transformations generated by the new possibilities of the digital environment. These transformations have generated—and continue to generate—a considerable linguistic and conceptual tangle because these types of texts are redefining the concept of "literature", expanding our notion of it and changing the boundaries of what is literary, meaning that a new aesthetic is required, similar to what has occurred in all those films that, like *eXistenZ*, introduce elements from a reality that is still to come and which must be staged using new language. I will not concern myself here with an analysis of these phenomena of creativity or terminological dispersion, rather simply attempting to clarify some aspects that must allow us, in the future, to continue defining this new textual scenario in which we find ourselves. Therefore, the question is possibly not whether ICT can be used to read and write literature or not (I believe it is quite obvious that they can!), but to what extent these technologies are generating a new kind of genre. It appears that this takes place on a formal level, to the extent that the fictitious story is constructed from innovative premises such as non-linearity which allow diverse reading itineraries or in the integration of the reader into the order of events, even if this is only because the act of reading takes place; on the other hand, thematically, it is undeniable that *cyberpunk* literature is one of the genres or sub-genres that has influenced this literature, while films such as *eXistenZ* or *Matrix* begin to configure a new, decisive scenario for the cultural imagination of the West.

The new horizon of narrative form opening in the wake of the literature of fatigue seems to show clearly that literature has no other option than to think for itself: to survive using its own fatigue, repeating itself, rethinking itself, re-writing itself, as authors such as Borges in his short story about Pierre Ménard, or Flaubert with *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, have predicted.

7. A sense of conclusion

This is a forcedly reductive panorama of what is happening in the world of literature in the digital ambit. On film, Cronenberg has created a world of real video games which is, in the words of Brian Johnson, a kind of metaphysical *kasbah* of spies and terrorists where there are fanatics who, suddenly, erupt onstage shouting: "Death to realism" in the same way as in the world of reality we have heard cries against those who believe in fictions and where arms turn up as part of the daily menu in sordid Chinese restaurants serving transgenic fish. In the digital environment we also hear cries for one cause or another. Just like the virtual reality detractors of *eXistenZ*, hypertext detractors have also appeared, as well as those who for almost ten years have been trying to bury the book, in the same way as previously others with homicidal vocations tried to assassinate the novel. The old catchcry of "they loved her, cared for her and she went and died on them" is repeated *ad infinitum* in reference to the mutant genre *par excellence*, in relation to the book, yet also, in relation to hypertext. Because if you think that the supposed assassin of the book would walk free, you are misguided. In effect, lately, the most authoritative voices proclaim: the hypertext is dead, long live the cyber-text! Even though important critical voices such as Katherine Hayles never tire of repeating that possibly instead of parricide, we are committing infanticide since, without even allowing time for the creature to grow, we have killed it.

We are moving through a complex world such as that presented in the new expositions of electronic literature and the universe of *eXistenZ*, where *suspension of disbelief* is not exactly an easy option, especially towards the end of the film, as game and reality develop into a kind of post-modern flight acting as a form of loop to disorientate the spectator. Is this not exactly what David Cronenberg was looking for? Perhaps as I see things, *eXistenZ* is a torpedo launched at the floatation line of such an apparently obvious distinction: the division between reality and fiction. Victoria Camps reminds us that philosophy has survived, partly due to its capacity for surprise in the face of obviousness, and in *eXistenZ* not everything is obvious. Possibly it is that reason that makes it such an interesting film.

Many jumps are made in fiction because, within the game, the protagonists connect to other game pods and, therefore, they access other games within the game—in an authentic *mise en abîme* exercise, a continual, meta-fictional process. The entertainment spiral pulls us towards an ambience that might seem unreal to us due to the historical circumstances of internal time within the film—because the film is set in an undefined future, yet which is still a future compared to our time—, but not due to the presence of mechanisms differentiating reality and fiction. It is precisely here that its danger lies, its lack of definition, the disorientating truth. How many game levels are there within *eXistenZ*? Is there a way out? If so, how do you get out? Where is the border between *eXistenZ* and true existence, reality?^[18]

Yet I have still more questions: is the medium in which these works are produced truly important, or what counts is their force, their power, the possibility they offer of generating aesthetic pleasure? This leads to the great question that Cronenberg appears to be asking us at the end of the film: are there real borders between real existence and *eXistenZ*? This, translated to our question, could be formulated in these terms: in the future, will we speak of electronic literature, or solely of literature? Perhaps life's proposal, existence, means perpetually playing *eXistenZ*...

I still do not have all the answers. I hope to spend my life reading. In the end, maybe everything is *eXistenZ*. Maybe the world is nothing more than a great simulation, and here we return to *Matrix*. If, time and time again, we see that in the cyber-fiction future, a continually less distant future, the cyber-rebels discover that the world, possibly as you, reader, will have realised, does not exist. Perhaps we are only the products of a computer dream. Who knows whether, as Sardar and Romney say, we are merely "defenceless babies attended by intelligent machines". In fact, in the same manner that a large part of our reality is made up of codes mixing 1 and 0,

18. On this point, I would like to stress that the intervention of Willem Defoe in the film points to this transcendent dimension that the creator has granted him, a simple, solitary, unwashed gas station attendant. He says to Pikul that Allegra Geller has changed his life because she has made it possible for him to live lives he could never have imagined. His real life, or at least the one he would really like to live, is the fictional one, the virtual reality. He is almost a Don Quijote or Madame Bovary, living in the 21st century.

possibly our entire reality is virtual reality, and not only that concerned with technology, but the whole of *materia* is nothing more than computer codes. Perhaps we think a book is a book because somebody is feeding us a diet of electronic impulses that stimulate us to think it is so.



Figure 19. Ted Pikul and the bionic pistol

Cronenberg, like many others, leaves the question hanging in the air twice, in a double final effect. First, when victim-turned-executioner, the assassin Allegra, cries ridiculously, obsessively: "Have I won the game? Have I won the game?" Afterwards, when the incredulous security guard—the fiction we thought was truth having ended—, with a highly disbelieving expression in response to the answer the defenders of reality give him (the respective ex-Geller and ex-Pikul) and with a pistol aimed at him with the intention of killing him, he screams desperately: "Tell me the truth: Are we still in the game?".

URL list:

[url1]:http://www.davidcronenberg.de/cr_rushd.htm

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