RECONSIDERATION **MARK FISHER**

WORK AND PLAY IN *EXISTENZ*

"Can what is playing you make it to level 2?" asked Nick Land in his landmark 1994 discussion of cybertheory, "Meltdown" (*Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, Urbanomic, 456). Land's intuition that computer games would provide the best way to understand subjectivity and agency in digital culture was also the gambit of David Cronenberg's 1999 *eXistenZ*. The film takes place in a near-future in which games are capable of generating simulated environments which can barely be distinguished from real life. Instead of computer terminals or game consoles, players use organic "game pods," which are connected directly to the players' bodies via "bio-ports" in their spines. (Cronenberg conjectures on the Momentum DVD commentary track that since people choose to have laser eye surgery, they would also be willing to have bioports installed.)

The main characters are Ted Pikul (Jude Law) and Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh). We are first of all led to believe that Pikul is a neophyte gameplayer, being reluctantly initiated into the gameworld by Geller, who at this point seems to be the designer of the game (called *eXistenZ*) which they are playing. The two are pitched into a complex intrigue: a struggle between rival games corporations, and between gameplayers and "realists"—those who believe that the games are corroding the structure of reality itself. This corrosion is performed by the film itself, with what one of the characters memorably describes as "reality bleed-through" effects, so that the reality layers—only very weakly differentiated in any case—become difficult to distinguish. By the end it seems that both *eXistenZ* the game and what we had taken to be real life are embedded inside another game, *tranCendenZ*, but by now we cannot be sure of anything. The last line of dialogue is "tell me the truth, are we still in the game?"

At the time of release, it seemed like *eXistenZ* was a late-arriving take on a series of themes and tropes familiar from 1980s cyberpunk—ideas Cronenberg had helped to shape in *Videodrome*. In retrospect, however, it is possible to see *eXistenZ* as part of a rash of late 1990s and early 2000s films, including *The Matrix* and *Vanilla Sky*, which mark a transition from what Alan Greenspan called the "irrational exuberance" of the 1990s bubble economy into the early twenty-first-century War on Terror moment. There is an abrupt mood shift toward the end of *eXistenZ*, with a military insurrection complete with heavy artillery and explosions. For the most part, though, the dominant mood is more quotidian. By contrast with the hyper-conspicuous CGI of *The Matrix*, with which it was destined to be most compared, *eXistenZ* is sparing in its use of special effects. As the director commentary makes clear, most of the CGI deployed in the film was used to produce naturalistic effects. The look is subdued, resolutely nonspectacular: there is a lot of brown. The brownness seems like a refusal of the gloss that will increasingly come to coat the artifacts of digital culture.

With its dreary trout farms, ski lodges, and repurposed churches, the world (or, more properly, worlds) of *eXistenZ* have a mundane, lived-in quality. Or rather worked-in: much of the film happens in workplaces—gas station, factory, workshop—and this dimension of the film is what now seems prophetic. Though never explicitly discussed, labor is something like an ambient theme, omnipresent but unarticulated. The key to *eXistenZ*'s self-reflexivity is its preoccupation with the conditions of its own production (and the production of culture in general). It presents us with an uncanny compression, in which the "front end" of late capitalist culture—its cutting-edge entertainment systems—fold back into the normally unseen "back end" (the quotidian factories, labs, and focus groups in which such systems are produced). The clamor of capitalist semiotics, the frenzy of branding sigils and signals, is curiously muted in *eXistenZ*. Instead of being part of the background hum of experience, as they are in both everyday life and the typical Hollywood movie, brand names appear only rarely in *eXistenZ*. The ones that do appear—most of them the names of games companies—leap out of the screen. The generic naming of space is in fact one of the running jokes in the film: a country gas station is simply called Country Gas Station, a motel is called Motel. This is part of the flat affect, the strange tonelessness, which governs most of the film. (Cronenberg says during his commentary that he made the actors wear unpatterned clothes, because patterns would consume more computer memory.)

The digitization of culture which we take for granted now was only in its infancy in 1999; broadband was a few years off, as was the iPod, and *eXistenZ* has little to tell us about the digital communications equipment that proliferated in the decade after it was released. Handheld devices

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Gaming

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do not play any major role in *eXistenZ*—the glowing phone belonging to Pikul is thrown out of a car window by Geller—and, with its longueurs, its lingering in dead time, the film is very far from registering the jittery, attention-dispersing effects of "always-on" mobile technology. The most resonant aspects of *eXistenZ* do not reside in the body horror which was then still Cronenberg's signature—although the scenes of the characters being connected to their organic game pod by bio-ports are typically grisly. Nor are they to be found in the perplexity expressed by characters as to whether they are inside a simulation or not—this is a theme that was already familiar from *Videodrome*, as well as Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, both of which (in the first case indirectly, in the second more directly) took their inspiration from Phillip K. Dick's fiction. Instead it is the idea—in some ways stranger and more disturbing than the notion that reality is fake—that *subjectivity* is a simulation which is the distinctive insight of *eXistenZ*.

This idea emerges, in the first place, through confronting other automated (or rather partially automated) consciousnesses: entities that seem autonomous but in fact can only respond to certain trigger phrases or actions that move the gameplay down a predetermined pathway. Some of the most memorable (and humorous) scenes in *eXistenZ* show encounters with these Read Only Memory beings. We see one of the characters locked in a "game loop," silently lolling his head while waiting to hear the key words that will provoke him back into action. Later, a clerk is seen repeatedly clicking a pen—as a background character he is programmed not to respond until his name is called. More disturbing than the third-person (or nonperson) encounter with these programmed drones is Pikul's experience of subjectivity being interrupted by an automatic behavior. At one point, he suddenly finds himself saying, "It's none of your business who sent us! We're here and that is all that matters" He is shocked at the expostulation: "God, what happened? I didn't mean to say that." "It's your character who said it," Geller explains. "It's kind of a schizophrenic feeling, isn't it? You'll get used to it. There are things that have to be said to advance the plot and establish the characters, and those things get said whether you want to say them or not. Don't fight it." Pikul later grimly notes that it makes no difference whether he fights these "game urges" or not.

The emphasis on the curtailing of free will is one reason that Cronenberg's claim (in an April 1999 *Sight and Sound* interview) that the film is "existentialist propaganda" seems odd. Existentialism was a philosophy which claimed that human beings (what Sartre called the "for-itself") are "condemned to be free," and that any attempt to avoid responsibility for one's actions amounts to bad faith. There is an absolute difference between the for-itself and what Sartre

called the "in-itself"—the inert world of objects, denuded of consciousness. Yet *eXistenZ*, in common with much of Cronenberg's work, troubles the distinction between the for-itself and the in-itself: machines turn out to be anything but inert, just as human subjects end up behaving like passive automata. As in *Videodrome* before it, *eXistenZ* draws out all the ambiguities of the concept of the player. On the one hand, the player is the one in control, the agent; on the other, the player is the one *being* played, the passive substance directed by external forces. At first, it seems that Pikul and Geller are for-itself, capable of making choices, albeit within set parameters (unlike in *The Matrix*, they are constrained by the rules of the world into which they are thrown). The game characters, meanwhile, are the in-itself. But when Pikul experiences "game urges," he is both in-itself (a merely passive instrument, a slave of drive) and for-itself (a consciousness that recoils in horror from this automatism).

To appreciate *eXistenZ*'s contemporary resonance it is necessary to connect the manifest theme of artificial and controlled consciousness with the latent theme of work. For what do the scenes in which characters are locked in fugues or involuntary-behavior loops resemble if not the call-center world of twenty-first-century labor in which quasi-automatism is expected of workers, as if the undeclared condition of employment were to surrender subjectivity and become nothing more than a bio-linguistic appendage tasked with repeating set phrases that make a mockery of anything resembling conversation? The difference between "interacting" with a ROM-construct and *being* a ROM-construct neatly maps onto the difference between telephoning a call center and working in one.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre famously used the example of the waiter: someone who overplays the role of waiter to the extent that they (to outside appearances at least) eliminate their own subjectivity. "Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too forward. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe" (Routledge, 2000, 59).

The power of Sartre's example depends upon the tension between the would-be automatism of the waiter's behavior and the awareness that behind the mechanical rituals of the waiter's over-performance of his role is a consciousness that remains distinct from that role. In *eXistenZ*, however, we are confronted with the possibility that agency can genuinely be interrupted by the "inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton." In any case, *eXistenZ* compels us to reread Sartre's description of the waiter in its terms, especially since one of the most horrific scenes of being-played features none other than a waiter. Pikul and Geller are sitting in a restaurant when Pikul feels himself overcome by a "game urge":

> PIKUL: You know, I do feel the urge to kill someone here.
> GELLER: Who?
> PIKUL: I need to kill our waiter.
> GELLER: Oh. Well that makes sense. Um, waiter! Waiter!
> [*She calls over waiter*]
> GELLER: When he comes over, do it. Don't hesitate.
> PIKUL: But ... everything in the game is so realistic, I—I don't think I really could.
> GELLER: You won't be able to stop yourself. You might as well enjoy it.
> PIKUL: Free will ... is obviously not a big factor in this little world of ours.
> GELLER: It's like real life. There's just enough to make it interesting.

"You won't be able to stop yourself, you might as well enjoy it"—this phrase captures all too well the fatalism of those who have given up the hope of having any control over their lives and work. Here, *eXistenZ* emerges, not as "existentialist propaganda" but as decisively *anti*-existentialist. Free will is not an irreducible fact about human existence: it is merely the unpreprogrammed sequence necessary to stitch together a narrative that is already written. There is no real choice over the most important aspects of our life and work, *eXistenZ* suggests. Such choice as there is exists one level up: we can choose to accept and enjoy our becoming in-itself, or reject it (perhaps uselessly). This is a kind of deflation-in-advance of all of the claims about "interactivity" that communicative capitalism will trumpet in the decade after *eXistenZ* was released.




Being nothing

eXistenZ. © 1999 Screenventures XXIV Productions Ltd., an Alliance Atlantis company, and Existence Productions Limited. DVD: Momentum Pictures (U.K.).

Autonomist theorists have referred to a turn away from factory work toward what they call "cognitive labor." Yet work can be affective and linguistic without being cognitive—like a waiter, the call-center worker can perform attentiveness without having to think. For these *noncognitive* workers, indeed, thought is a privilege to which they are not entitled. Writing on www.guardian.co.uk ("Why our jobs are getting worse," August 31, 2010), Aditya Chakraborty referred to a study of two of Britain's biggest supermarkets by the sociologist Irena Grugulis: "A trained butcher revealed that most meats were now sliced and packaged before they arrived in store; bakers in smaller shops now just reheated frozen loaves. In their paper, published this summer, Grugulis and her colleagues note that 'almost every aspect of work for every kind of employee, from shopfloor worker . . . to the general store manager, was set out, standardised and occasionally scripted by the experts at head office.' Or, as one senior manager put it: 'Every little thing is monitored so there is no place to hide.'" According to the labor theorist Phil Brown (as cited by Chakraborty) "permission to think" will increasingly be "restricted to a relatively small group of knowledge workers" in countries such as the U.K. and U.S. Most work will be routinized and outsourced to places where labor is cheap. Brown calls this "digital Taylorism"—suggesting that, far from being engaged in residually satisfying cognitive work, digital workers will increasingly find their labor as crushingly repetitive as factory workers on a production line. The muted tones of *eXistenZ* anticipate this digital-era banality, and it is the banal quality of life in a digitally automated environment—human-sounding voices that announce arrivals and departures at a railway station, voice-recognition software which fails to recognize our voices, call-center employees drilled into mechanically repeating a set script—that *eXistenZ* captures so well.

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COVER PHOTO Michael Fassbender as Carl Jung in *A Dangerous Method* (David Cronenberg, 2011). Photo by Liam Daniel. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

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