

1. Articles

EXISTENZ, DAVID CRONENBERG - LIQUID LIFE: A CASE STUDY

September 2013

Hanja Maksim

eXistenZ is a film that has the potential to greatly inspire research in that it frontally challenges the virtualization of our existence through technology by offering a comparison between the real world, in which we continue to live and evolve, and a world made from scratch. Only this kind of artistic support, it seems, can address this topic in such a comprehensive manner, and thus tackle social science concepts from a new angle.

"You have to *play* the game to find out *why* you're playing the game"

David Cronenberg is a Canadian filmmaker whose work most notably includes *Videodrome* (1982), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), *Crash* (1996) and *eXistenZ* (1999). His films tend to be science fiction and fantasy – genres that are particularly suited to questioning societal norms and anticipating the problems that lie ahead. *eXistenZ* did this in 1999 by offering a critique of virtualization and portraying our relationship with the body as an as-yet unshakeable link to the real world.

" I'm not taking sides. I reason like a scientist conducting an experiment " David Cronenberg on *eXistenZ* and the comparison between real and virtual (*Les Inrockuptibles* , April 1999).

eXistenZ, film, Canada/United Kingdom, 1999, 96 minutes. The film won several awards.



The film tells the story of Allegra Geller and her unprecedented video game that links the player to a virtual world via a “pod” inserted into the latter’s back and, thus, the central nervous system. But the unveiling of eXistenZ by its designer is disrupted by objectors - guardians of the real world committed to staving off the extreme virtualization and technologization the game proposes. The viewer is gradually drawn into the war between reality and virtuality within the world of the film, in which the two have become confused. This is reflected in particular by the presence of organic devices that resemble foetuses and umbilical cords.

Fiction pushed to the extreme to consider reality

The film invites us to enter a virtual reality that is so highly developed that, in many scenes, the spectator cannot discern fiction from virtuality or reality. Like many works of art from various disciplines (but unlike scientific literature, which does not allow this), the target audience for these works is mobile and either moves in the environments presented, traveling with the artist or in his or her place, or - as in the case of *eXistenZ* - between two opposing realities - virtual or otherwise. Going to this extreme of virtuality is also a way for the filmmaker to critique it and to explore our reality from a different standpoint. With this film Cronenberg challenges the ethics of the viewer, user, politician or expert that so interest research on mobility, allowing us unrestricted access to the realities of the issues that concern them, from a fresh and original perspective.

Linking past, present and future

The director offers us numerous points of comparison with the scientific literature, particularly as regards time, as the film takes place in a particular type of near (virtual) future, although the research typically conceives the present and near future based on the past - using memory, changes, former policies and historical events (including personal ones), and the effects of their materialization on spaces and mobilities as they are today. The virtualization of the future world we find in *eXistenZ* led to a plethora of special effects made for the film, which are likewise representations of imaginaries of virtual mobility and clearly differ not only from the imaginaries of the modes of travel of other artists, but also within the social sciences.

Analysis of the long term

* Analyzing the trajectories of public action in the field of mobility, among others, helps to identify changes in ways of thinking, and the obstacles to and levers for implementing measures. This historical perspective allows us to better identify changes in public action (Fontaine and Hassenteufel, 2007) and the dependency paths that result of them (Pflieger et al., 2009).

Time and mobility: the value of time

* The value of time is based on the assumption that each person has limited resources of money and time. It therefore follows that we attempt to make the best use of them (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - The Value of Time , by Emmanuel Ravalet).

* Time has gradually acquired a qualitative value that brings new perspectives to research by focusing particularly on how mobility is used (Lyons and Urry, 2005).

Motility

The concept of motility is also found here in its fullest expression. Physical movement remains in a state of potential, and mobility exists virtually without it, via technology, giving the characters a kind of ubiquity and allowing them to go from one world to another. However, by staying connected, they never leave completely, and thus reside in both.

Motility

* 'Motility is defined as the set of characteristics which enables individuals to move (namely their social conditions of access, skills and mobility projects). Motility therefore refers to social conditions of access (the conditions under which it is possible to use the offer in the broadest sense of the term), skills (those required to use the offer) and mobility projects (the actual use of the offer allowing the individual to realize them)' (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Motility, by Vincent Kaufmann).

Virtual media as a means of transport

The medium Cronenberg uses to move his characters - a video game - is rarely addressed in research on mobility: scientific literature rarely, if ever, considers this medium. Moreover, generally speaking, the objects of information and communication technologies that most interest researchers (mobile telephones, computer technology, the Internet, etc.) do not always appear as such — that is, as direct tools of and supports for mobility. In many cases however, they are clear and identifiable, though their role remains marginal. By using a video game as a support for mobility, the film proposes a return to the concept of mobility itself, which in other fields is essentially based on the use of different modes of transportation, thus sometimes isolating this variable too much.

Mobility and transportation

* Transportation studies have occasionally been criticized for being too marked by analysis of changes in transportation systems, and thus a certain technological determinism (Urry, 2007).

Mobility and technologies

* Technology plays a role in the social construction of mobility (Kesselring, 2005) in that it represents places that may be of particular importance in our daily lives and mobility.

* New forms of mobility allow individuals paradoxically to be both present and absent, present in absence, and even allow for a certain form of ubiquity, especially via information and communication technologies (Urry and Sheller, 2006).

Comparing two worlds: the real world vs. the virtual world

While these two worlds oppose one another, they also intermingle, as demonstrated by the group of participants directly connected to the virtual game. The war that takes place between supporters of this virtuality and those who object to a virtual world defined by technological determinism allows us to glimpse a critique of the important shift our societies are making toward virtualization. This same critique can notably be found when one realizes that eXistenZ participants' bodies at all times remain connected to physical reality via pods that resemble umbilical cords and fetuses, preventing the former from becoming disconnected from reality.

Physical and virtual mobility

* Researchers distinguish several forms of mobility in the contemporary world, including: the physical mobility of individuals (i.e. for work or leisure activities); the physical movement of objects (flows of economic goods, sending gifts, etc.); imaginary mobility (via images of places and people moving); virtual mobility; and finally communications-related (through messages or by phone). These different types of mobility are interrelated (Urry, 2000 and 2008).

The transition from heavy modernity to liquid modernity

Other ingredients appear in an original way in this work. One of the most obvious is the reference to a modernity that is no longer heavy (like other forms of art as well as more classic sociology), but rather liquid. In liquid modernity - as conceived by Bauman - borders shift or evaporate altogether, and movement accelerates to the point of annihilating time. Nevertheless, the fact that we often find one conception or the other, depending on the context and the fact that the two conceptions tend to ignore or oppose one another, reflects a gap between so-called post modern scientific literature. This is based on, among other things 1) the advent of information and communication technologies and the weakening of spatial dimensions and 2) territories as they are really experienced, lived and traveled, where we still observe the presence and anchoring of physical and social boundaries. In fact, many artists have begun to reconcile these theoretical approaches by showing that, in many instances, both are relevant simultaneously without being mutually exclusive.

Heavy modernity

* Sigmund Bauman (2000) talks about heavy modernity - as opposed to so-called liquid modernity - which he associates with the era of territorial conquest. It was

also the era of the domination of space by time, which can be overcome by transportation, communication and information technologies, so as to shorten distances.

Liquid modernity

* According to Bauman, liquid modernity is characterized most notably by technological development that aims to accelerate movement, resulting in the annihilation of space by time.

How the work informs research: a growing inability to live in the “real” world?

eXistenZ addresses issues that are dear to mobility research, especially those related to information and communication technology and virtual mobility. By doing so in this unprecedented way, allowing us to immerse ourselves in an environment that compares virtual reality and the physical world, the film proposes an analysis not only of concepts from the social sciences from an original perspective, but even succeeds in introducing ideas that the latter has not yet (or is just now) exploring. For instance, the film suggests the possible inability to live in what we might call the “real” world, thus leading us to question our own relationship to the body when it comes to mobility. This observation could inspire research on motricity, to name only one.

Motricity

* Motricity refers to our perception of our environment from a practical and sensitive standpoint, and to the body’s capacity for expression, allowing us to develop and in turn, improve our motor skills, which we can use to anticipate trajectories (including those of others), adapt our itineraries or activities, etc. (Thomas, 2004).

References :

Bauman Z. (2000), *Liquid Modernity* . Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fontaine J., Hassenteufel P. (2007), *Quelle sociologie du changement dans l’action publique? Retour au terrain et refroidissement théorique* , In : Fontaine J., Hassenteufel P., To change or not to change? Les changements de l’action publique à l’épreuve du terrain, Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes.

Kesselring S. (2005), *New mobilities management. Mobility pioneers between first and second modernity* . Zeitschrift für Familienforschung, Heft 2/2005, 129-143.

Lyons G., Urry J. (2005), *Travel time use in the information of age* , In: Transportation Research Part A, Vol. 39, pp. 257-276.

Pflieger G., Kaufmann V., Pattaroni L., Jemelin Ch. (2009), *How Does Urban Public Transport Change Cities? Correlations between Past and Present Transport and Urban Planning Policies* , Urban Studies, 46(7) 1421-1437.

Sheller M., Urry J. (2006), *The new mobilities paradigm* ,. Environment and Planning, Vol. 38, 207-226.

Thomas R. (2004), *Quand le pas fait corps et sens avec l’espace. Aspects sensibles et expressifs de la marche en ville* , Revue européenne de géographie, N° 261.

Urry J. (2000), *Sociology beyond Societies. Mobilities for the Twenty First Century* . London: Routledge.

Urry J. (2007), *Mobilities*. Oxford : Polity Press.

Urry J. (2008), *Moving on the Mobility Turn*. In : Canzler et al., 'Tracing Mobilities. Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective'.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[En savoir plus](#) x

The Value Of Time

The value of time in the transport economy corresponds to how willing people are to pay, in order to save time. It offers an explanation of the choices people make between different modes of transport after weighing up the financial versus time costs. It is also used to plan and to financially justify a choice of investments made on the basis of time saved by the new infrastructure.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Motility

[En savoir plus](#) x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

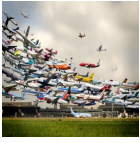
[En savoir plus](#) x

Mobilities paradigm

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Other publications



Did Covid cause public transport to grind to a halt?

Annelise Avril, David Henny



1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/value-time-594>

2 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/motility-461>