

The World Premiere of *eXistenZ*

Just prior to the Berlin International Film Festival's special screening of the powerful Holocaust memoir, *The Last Days*, executive producer Steven Spielberg stood up and told the crowd that the "New Berlin could lead the way in decency, tolerance and pluralism" in the new millennium. As he spoke, thousands of ravens that blacken the sky here in the city centre of what was West Berlin arrived for their daily 6:00 p.m. ritual. A strange and disconcerting sight—the black mass swirling as one high above the tops of the tallest buildings—and a sight not wholly in line with the optimistic tone of Spielberg's words.

That contradiction is just one of many in a city frightened by so much historical baggage. On the other hand, what better place for David Cronenberg to unleash his latest opus *eXistenZ* (egg-sis-tanzz), which received its world premier in competition on February 16. "I tend to want to create enclosed little worlds," said Cronenberg in one of the festival guides. "You gradually dream up what excites you; when it takes so much energy to make a film, it becomes actively what attracts you." The film, he goes on, "is kind of hard to describe. It has elements of sci-fi, of course, as well as spy drama and mystery. It's a kind of philosophical illustration of existentialist principles—but it's not heavy or depressing." While that summary may not lead to a run on ticket sales in some parts, it certainly didn't detract from the attention the film received from the hundreds of buyers and sellers, sales agents, festival programmers, media scribes and eager members of the public that make the Berlin festival an exhilarating and occasionally enervating 12 days.

What of the film? The opening credits—an animation reminiscent of Klimt, done by Toronto's Cuppa Coffee Animation and set to the ominous strings of Cronenberg's perennial composer Howard Shore—seem to set the tone for a *Videodrome*-like descent into madness. But just as you settle into the film, you realize what Cronenberg's aforementioned summary does not tell you: the film is fun—so much so that it could almost be categorized as a comedy. Yes, Cronenberg creates his characteristically hermetic world (here a

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By Jack Vermeé



striking combination of futuristic sci-fi and an almost Black Forest-like late Middle Ages), a world that has a strange logic at odds with "reality" and parallel to it. And yes, there are the gory special effects—a particular favourite is a gun made out of flesh and bone that uses human teeth as bullets—but instead of creating a nightmare à la *Videodrome*, Cronenberg embraces a much lighter, almost playful tone. We knew he could be funny—*The Fly* is at times a very funny tragedy—but the visual and verbal jokes in *eXistenZ* surpasses by far the comic moments in his earlier films. For example, at one point our two protagonists (Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jude Law), are on the run and in search of someone, somewhere to install a "bioport" in the spine of Law's character. He says, "I suppose we can get one at any old country gas station," and then there is a cut to Willem Dafoe's garage at night with a big sign advertising a "Country Gas Station."

Also on display is a self-reflexive script that contributes immensely to the humour and sense of play that permeates the film. As the characters delve deeper into their video-game-like reality, they are constantly questioning their actions and motives, real or imagined, in their game. "I like your script. I wanna be in it," says the Dafoe character to master game-developer Jennifer Jason Leigh mere seconds before having half of his head blown off by a bioport installation gun. The film does ask the existential questions that Cronenberg talks about, most notably, "How do we know what is real?" but the film's many pleasures can be had elsewhere. *eXistenZ* has a sexiness to it that left the audience gasping. Just wait until you see what they do with those spinal bioports. Where *Crash* explored alternative sexual practices with a cool detachment, in *eXistenZ* there is a more humane treatment of sensuality pulsating through many of the film's scenes.

Wandering back into the snowy Berlin night after the screening, looking to grab a bratwurst before heading off to another in a seemingly endless roundelay of films, parties and late nights, one can't help being struck by the fact that this isn't reality. But after seeing *eXistenZ* in the context of the controlled mayhem that is Berlin at festival time, I can't help but echo the words of Don McKellar's character towards the film's end: "Death to realism!" ●

Callum Keith Rennie