

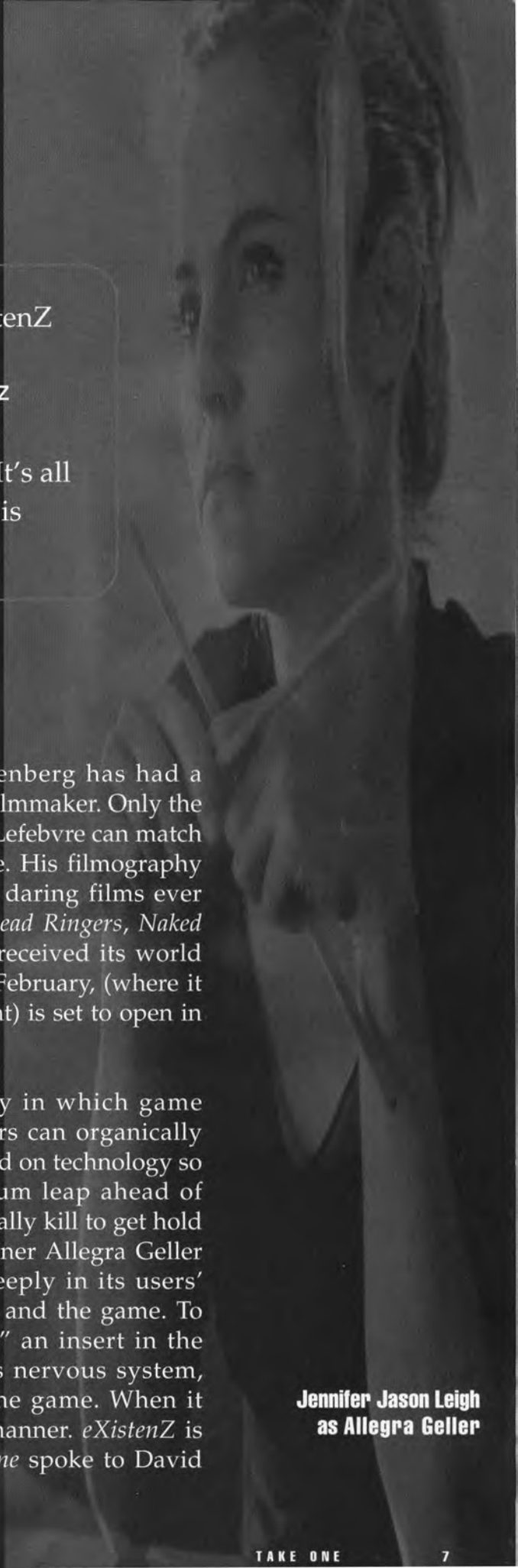


DAVID
CRONENBERG

TALKS ABOUT
existenz

and REALITY

By Wyndham Wise



“There’s an intimacy involved in playing eXistenZ that is beyond expression. It has to be experienced.” Allegra Geller, the creator of eXistenZ

“Nothing in the countryside is what it seems. It’s all appearance versus reality, and the reality here is something unique.” Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh)

Fourteen features in 20 years—David Cronenberg has had a remarkable career unlike any other Canadian filmmaker. Only the Québécois giants of Arcand, Brault, Carle and Lefebvre can match his accomplishments over a sustained period of time. His filmography includes some of the most stunningly original and daring films ever made, anywhere—*The Brood*, *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash*—and now his latest, *eXistenZ*, which received its world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in February, (where it won a Silver Bear for outstanding artistic achievement) is set to open in Canada at the end of April.

Set in the near future, *eXistenZ* depicts a society in which game designers are worshipped as superstars and players can organically enter a game. “eXistenZ” is the name of a system based on technology so advanced that it borders on biology. It’s a quantum leap ahead of anything ever imagined possible and people will literally kill to get hold of it. At the centre of the film is master game designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) whose invention taps so deeply in its users’ psyche that it blurs the boundaries between reality and the game. To play eXistenZ, a cord is plugged into a “bioport,” an insert in the player’s back at the base of the spine. The body’s nervous system, metabolism and energy is the power source for the game. When it becomes infected, realities merge in a frightening manner. *eXistenZ* is pure, unadulterated Cronenberg at his best. *Take One* spoke to David before he left for Berlin.

**Jennifer Jason Leigh
as Allegra Geller**



All photos courtesy of Alliance Atlantis Communications

What is the genesis of eXistenZ? In your notes for the film, you talk about a meeting with the British writer Salman Rushdie, who had a sentence of death placed on him by the Iranian mullahs.

It wasn't perhaps the meeting itself with Rushdie but his situation, the reality of his situation, and the strangeness of it. I was intrigued and horrified and in particular how it related strongly to the Burroughsian concept; the terror of having to live with what you have created, because it goes away and develops a life of its own and comes back to haunt you.

How did the meeting with Rushdie come about?

The editors of *Shift* magazine asked me if I would do an interview with him. I had something in the back of my mind to do something connected to his situation and what the implications were. When I spoke to him, I was thinking about games and whether or not a game creator could be an artist in the fullest sense of the word. I can't remember if it ended up in the interview but I certainly talked to him about it. By the time I got back from that interview, I had it in my head to write a character who was, in fact, a game designer and an artist who was on the run because of what she had created.

You also make mention in your notes of the fatwa, this notion of religious intolerance where someone is condemned to death for his opinions.

That's correct. In Rushdie's case it seemed to be a clash of realities. From his point of view, in the Western literary tradition of freedom of expression he had done no wrong whatsoever. He had exercised his right as a writer. From the other point of view, he had committed blasphemy and said things that were not sayable and deserved a condemnation of death as a result. But those are just two realities. Whichever one you are living in makes perfect sense and when they come together, they clash.

In eXistenZ, you've taken the creative act and made it very dangerous for the creator who seems to get lost in her creation.

That's not necessarily true. I think you get the feeling that the creator of the game *eXistenZ*, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, knows, up to a point, what is going on, and then strange interbleedings of other realities come together and interfere with her reality. Which is what happened to Rushdie. Suddenly this other reality, this other take on what he had done was completely obliterating what he thought he had done. The reality of what he had written had completely changed his life as a result. And that starts to happen to the Leigh character. Quite frankly, my first instincts were to write a script where she would never play the game.

So the game would be an abstraction?

The game would have been abstract, and you would get inklings because of people's reactions to what it was, but you would never, as an audience, get into it. But then as I was writing it, I thought we must get into this. So suddenly playing the game and the implications of that, from the inside of the game, became the controlling factor in the movie.

**At left: Jude Law,
next page (top): Willem Dafoe, (bottom): Ian Holm**

The game made flesh, which, if you'll forgive the expression, is very Cronenbergian. You have been fascinated with this concept throughout your films.

I think it all stems from my understanding of the human body—it being the primary fact of human existence, one that we flee from as soon as possible; and the reason we flee from it is because of our mortality. The body is life and the inevitability of death all rolled into one. It's quite a conundrum. I think everything that makes us human has arisen from that fact. I think all religions have risen from that and many philosophies. I keep returning to the body as the primary power source for my art. It becomes metaphorical. I'm very concerned with metaphor and the use of imagery as metaphor, which is a strange and difficult thing to do with cinema. It's not something most people, certainly most people in Hollywood, are concerned with. But I'm very concerned with it and I love the things you can do with it. The pod in the movie, which is an organ of imagination, of invention and creativity, is separate from Jennifer's body. It's a very juice metaphor.

Is eXistenZ a high-tech, computer-driven film?

It's pretty low-tech, actually. In biotechnology terms, what I'm proposing in this movie is high-tech, but the movie itself, the way it was made, is pretty low-tech. It's basically advanced puppetry and mould-making. It's very down to earth. The one movie others have referred to is *Total Recall*, which I had been involved with at one point, and is based on a book by an author I really find fascinating, Philip K. Dick. That comparison doesn't displease me, because I have some Philip K. Dick references in *eXistenZ*. For example, the take-out food comes from Perky Pats and I do have a close-up of a bag with Perky Pats on it. That's from *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* which is a Dick book. The theme of clashing realities is very much Dick, but I don't want to go to Mars, as he does. It's true there are special effects virtually on every page of the screenplay, but they're pretty invisible in a certain way. It's the first movie where I have done CGI, although that's become common these days, but there are only a couple of shots that are completely CGI. Mostly it was used to enhance things, add things, or take away things that were done on set, which is something I have been doing for years. The pod was operated by off-camera effects guys. That's really retro-technology, but it is still used all the time. You can operate a puppet with rods and cables and then remove those with CGI effects afterward. This is something that didn't exist in the old days. If you look at the *Exorcist* you can see the wires that are lifting Linda Blair off the bed. Now they can use thicker wires and not worry because they can be removed later. So, on the level of computer technology, which I think most people now regard as state of the art, the work on *eXistenZ* is very invisible. There is one shot of a creature crawling up the side of a gas pump and then sitting on top of it. The creature in that shoot is CGI. Given my emphasis on the tactile and the physical, I try to avoid, except when it's absolutely necessary, a very abstract technique whereby I can't see what's on the set, my cameraman can't really light it and my actors can't really react to it. I want what's happening to be on the set as much





Jude Law and Jennifer Jason Leigh

as possible. Obviously, if you're doing a movie like *Starship Troopers*, it's a given that you're going to have a lot of actors running around in a blue-screen studio. There, you're putting in stuff a year later, which is perhaps why I've avoided doing a movie like that. In the case of *eXistenZ*, we had a very large workshop, where we were creating the mutated creatures. At one point we had 90 people. It was done in a beautiful, huge building, full of glass and skylights. The guys were in heaven, they thought it was the best shop they had ever worked in. It had plenty of bench space, mould-making machines and a tool-making shop. The gun, for example, had to work. It had to be made from bone and gristle and it had to fire teeth.

It's a brilliant idea, where did that come from?

I don't know. One day it appeared as I was writing. If you want a gun that can get through any kind of scanner, then you have to make the weapon out of body parts and if you're going to shoot things that are hard and small, it was sort of logical, but it was very intuitive as well.

At \$31 million, eXistenZ is the most expensive Canadian feature made since Shadow of the Wolf.

eXistenZ is a very small movie in some ways. The shot was very contained. I must say *The Red Violin* sounds like a much more difficult shoot, logistically, than ours. Even *M. Butterfly*,

which doesn't count as a Canadian film, was just as expensive and much more difficult logistically because we were shooting in China, Budapest, Paris and Toronto. *eXistenZ* was shot in a studio in Toronto and on location just outside near the forks of the Credit River, around Orangeville. It was a very controllable and contained movie on that level. The money was spent on the creatures and the building of the sets. The film doesn't have a huge cast of characters and this is something I realize I have been doing for some years, which is to strip down to essentials. I'm more interested in my movies going deeper than broader. I have only 45 scenes written in the script. In a lot of other films, you'll get two or three times as many scenes. So, logistically it was not a nightmare.

The theatrical release of eXistenZ comes in April, which is a quick turn around by Canadian standards.

We could have gone to Cannes, but the distributors were so enthusiastic about it, especially the French and English that they really wanted to release it as soon as possible. And I have to say in North America, *eXistenZ* is not a summer movie, in the sense of a big-action movie. The other controlling factor is *Star Wars*. It is scheduled to be released near the end of May, in time for the Memorial Day weekend, and our movie is technically a sci-fi movie. We definitely want to be out first. So those are the controlling factors of the release. ●



David Cronenberg



Don McKellar