

A few recent films from the US, and one from Canada

By David Walsh
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I was disappointed by David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*, a film about the creator (Jennifer Jason Leigh) of a virtual reality game that plugs directly into the player's nervous system. Cronenberg, the Canadian director, has long been fascinated by the interaction between technology and the human body. Machines, implements, appliances have penetrated the flesh, and even become part of it, in a number of his films (for example, *Videodrome* [1983], *Dead Ringers* [1988], *Crash* [1996]). Humanity is violated by technology, a process often overseen by Machiavellian corporate types, but humanity—corrupted, passive and swooning before its attacker—appears all too willing to be violated.

I didn't find anything new in *eXistenZ* and a great deal that seemed tired and worn thin. The “pod” that contains Allegra Geller's new game breathes and throbs, it resembles a breast, a sexual organ. The insertion of the pod's power cord into a kind of outlet in the player's back is accompanied by a great deal of moaning and carrying on. Nothing is much made of this. Not only is the pod a living thing, its materials come from living things; far too much of the film is made up of the gruesome details of its production. The story is so weak, essentially one session of a virtual reality game, that I found it hard to believe that this was the entire film.

I say “disappointed,” and not “very disappointed,” because I have come to expect less and less from the Toronto-born filmmaker. The last film of his I admired unreservedly was *Dead Ringers*, with Jeremy Irons, and that came out eleven years ago. I didn't find anything terribly intriguing in *Naked Lunch* (1991) or *Crash*.

Cronenberg is someone with a brain, someone who feels revulsion for modern life in many of its aspects.

He has created nightmarish images in the past, working away at some of his and our best-hidden fantasies and fears (in *Rabid* [1977], *The Brood* [1979], *Scanners* [1981]). But in his obsession with the body/machine collision, he forgets that it is essentially a *social* relationship and a *social* problem, and he takes the line of least resistance in failing to investigate that side of things in any serious manner. The director seems somewhat at sea, reduced to somewhat sophomoric remarks about the difficulty of distinguishing “reality from fantasy.” His work threatens to become a cliché. It needs a new direction.

Cronenberg has many admirers, none of whom will be deterred by any critical comments. That is the definition of a cultist: the ability to rationalize any work one's idol does, no matter what its obvious weaknesses, as a further sign of genius. A worshipful and uncritical atmosphere is unhealthy for all concerned.

Tony Goldwyn's *A Walk on the Moon* threatened momentarily to be interesting, but then quietly and efficiently fell into sentimentality and a different kind of cliché. Diane Lane is a bored, slightly discontented Jewish housewife staying at a lower middle class resort in the Catskill mountains during the summer of 1969, the summer that men landed on the moon and a few hundred thousand souls gathered at Woodstock. Her husband (Liev Schreiber) away at work during the week as a television repairman, she takes up with an itinerant clothing salesman (Viggo Mortensen).

In the end, the errant wife returns to home and hearth, and everyone is just a little bit wiser and more understanding. The whole purpose of such a work becomes, although this is not conscious or deliberate on anyone's part, to drain the dramatic situation of *everything* truly painful and contradictory, *everything*

that in real life drives people to take desperate measures: either to stifle themselves, as most do, or struggle for some kind of a different existence. So we come to value the old saw: moderation in all things! Which here means that the recipe for a happy life is just the right balance, not easy to attain, of freedom and slavery. As usual, the acting is not the problem. Lane is most appealing, and Schreiber quite sympathetic.

Analyze This, directed by Harold Ramis, is a film about a New York City mobster and the psychiatrist he recruits to help him with his anxiety attacks, with Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal. Very few people write or perform comedy well at the moment. The spectator is fortunate if there are more than a few minutes of real laughs. Somebody should look into that. It would make an interesting subject for a study. Meanwhile we tolerate or suffer through one after another of these comic efforts, in which the material is not terribly funny, the timing is off and the commitment of the performers is weak.

I was entertained by *Groundhog Day*, also directed by Ramis. I think this was primarily due to Bill Murray, one of the few American performers capable of making something out of relatively little.

In *Analyze This* De Niro seems to be going through the motions, his acting reduced for the moment at least to a handful of facial expressions and odd voices; Crystal fills the screen with self-satisfaction and so leaves no room for the spectator to feel much of anything.

The Matrix is a great financial success, and any criticism will be viewed as sour grapes. Keanu Reeves and Lawrence Fishburne are both fine actors, dragooned into silliness here in a science fiction piece about computer hackers, a conspiracy involving virtual reality and a group of rebels, led by a reluctant Messiah, trying to smash things up. There are some extraordinary special effects, but why should anyone be reduced to settling for that?

As long as the characters leap and fight in mid-air they hold my interest, but then they come back to earth and there they are cool, disdainful and self-serious. The Wachowski brothers, Andy and Larry, made *Bound* in 1996 and now they've made this. I don't know that it represents a step forward. I frankly don't understand the attraction of work that pushes relations between people so far into the margins as to make them virtually

disappear. The praise for this film by critics who should know better is little more than an elaborate clutching at straws.

Some people have also praised *Never Been Kissed*. I would be happy to understand why. I like Drew Barrymore and David Arquette as performers, but this is drivel. A woman in her twenties is assigned by a Chicago newspaper to enroll in high school and report on the doings there. She has her own reasons for going back to school, to erase years of humiliation. Somehow everything turns out right for everybody. I can't remember exactly how, it's all a blank. For a more amusing "undercover" high school student film, of a different sort, take a look at *Just One of the Guys* (1985, directed by Lisa Gottlieb, with Joyce Hyser).

Go and *200 Cigarettes* are two films that follow a group of young people during the course of one night. *Go* (directed by Doug Liman) takes place on Christmas Eve in Los Angeles; *200 Cigarettes* (Risa Bramon Garcia) in New York City on New Year's Eve. The former follows a drug deal and its participants; the latter centers on a party and its eventual attendees. Jay Mohr appears in both films; in *Go* he plays Zack; in *200 Cigarettes*, believe it or not, he's Jack.

Go is nastier, *200 Cigarettes* more genial. Sarah Polley is perhaps *Go's* only bright spot; Kate Hudson, Martha Plimpton, Christina Ricci and David Chappelle (as the taxi-driver) enliven *200 Cigarettes*. The material is not very good in either film. There are perhaps five minutes of drama in *Go*, six or seven minutes of comedy in *200 Cigarettes*.

On an even gloomier note, I had the misfortune to see *You've Got Mail* recently. This is an entirely lifeless object, suitable for stuffing. The saddest thing is to see what's become of Tom Hanks, who once was lively and sympathetic. A bit grey, a bit bloated, thoroughly establishment. It's awful to see what happens to certain people when they are struck down by great success.

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