

Hannah Ovnat
Hebrew University

**Visions of Humanity in Cyberculture: 1st International Conference.
Queering the Hets: Sex Gender and Sexuality in The Matrix and eXistenZ**

David Cronenberg's eXistenZ and the Wachowski brothers The Matrix, two movies which center on virtual reality and its effects, were released in the spring of 1999. The Matrix describes a post-apocalyptic reality in which machines and computers have taken over the world. The machines rule over the human race by harnessing them to the matrix, a virtual simulation of Western life during the late 20th century. They can thus be effectively connected to incubators, which feed them as they milk them of energy. Their participation in the matrix, their formation of identity through constructed virtual reality, make them easier to objectify and control in true Foucauldian fashion. Neo, the protagonist of the movie, with some help from freedom fighters tries to overthrow the regime of the Matrix by hacking into the system to free the bodies and minds of the human inhabitants of planet Earth.

eXistenZ, which was released several weeks after The Matrix deals with the applications of virtual reality in the culture of leisure and entertainment. The movie tells the stories of characters, who build, market, and participate in interactive computer games. eXistenZ opens with the gala presentation of a new computer game, in the presence of its creator, Allegra Geller, a game developer who enjoys the status of a cultural icon in a Gibsonian and Baudrillardian hyper-real manner, and her adoring audience of computer games aficionados/participants. An attempt on her life is then made by the realist underground. The rest of the movie consists of her escape with the assistance of Ted Pykul a computer novice and marketing wannabe, and the showing of their adventures in real life and virtual reality on their way to safety. The movie is structured as a set of Chinese boxes¹ or as an infinite regress of hypodiegetic levels in a Hofstadterian manner. The use of hypodiegetic infinite regress

undermines the characters and viewers ability to differentiate reality from virtual reality, life from game.

Notwithstanding its popular culture contextualization, the consequences of virtual reality as portrayed in eXistenZ are more far reaching than in The Matrix. The attitude to virtual reality in eXistenZ is more somber and qualified than that presented in The Matrix. When the demarcation between the real and the virtual, the signified and the signifier is undermined and blurred, the characters actions carry far reaching implications vis a vis the diegetic world. The movie ends with the question of a character that is about to be killed whether he is still in the game. Conversely, even though The Matrix deals thematically with questions of the future of the human race in light of virtual techno-cultural developments, and even though it concretizes post-structuralist constructed theories of quotidian life and experience, it scrupulously maintains a clear division between the categories of virtual reality and human real experience. The Matrix does not significantly challenge the category of the authentic real.

Having stated this most critical difference between the films, I will proceed to a comparative critique of virtual reality in The Matrix and eXistenZ as seen through a gendered lens. The treatment of gender as it interacts with virtual reality in these two films will substantiate my claims regarding The Matrix's essentialist and therefore not reality challenging conceptual framework as it contrasts with the queering of heterosexuality in eXistenZ.

In both films logging on, and connecting to the computer generated virtual reality is done corporeally. In The Matrix characters connect to the matrix and other computer programs through a plug in the back of their necks. eXistenZ describes several computer games. In "eXistenZ", connection to the computer (the game pod) is

achieved using an umbicord (an umbilical shaped chord), which connects to a bioport, a surgically created orifice at the base of the spine. In a hypo-diegetic version of the game, the pod is inserted directly into the port. In an extra- diegetic game level – “tRancendenZ” – connection is achieved through simstim gloves and headgear. Players and programs unite in a cyborgian experience, which blurs distinctions between the biological and the technological, the real and the ideation. Virtual lived experiences in both films also interrogate familiar schemes and categories. They question existence, reality, imagination, essence and construct and the conventional demarcations between them.

In both films, the leakage between human and machine are the basis for confusion between reality and ideational construct. In eXistenZ, the characters are always aware of their playing status. Ted is never sure which of his actions is attributable to his role in the game, and which to his pre-game identity. He is constantly fearful for his physical well being while playing. In The Matrix, the implications of the computer program also manifest seepage into the real. If a character is beaten to death within the matrix he or she bleeds and dies in the simstim chair in real life as well.

Both films manifest a conscious playfulness with themes, images and figures from post-modern and cyberpunk culture. Neo hides his pirated discs in a hollow copy of Simulacrum and Simulacra. Baudrillard's elegy for a hollowing out and flattening world is thus parodically concretized as it is brought to mind. In eXistenZ, Ted and Allegra eat fast food from Perky Pat's while on the run, thereby evoking the works of Philip K Dick, a seminal author in the cyberpunk genre.²

Belonging to the cyberpunk genre, typified by populism verging on pulp, both The Matrix and eXistenZ are mainstream movies targeted at a wide viewership. As

such, both films manifest a heterosexual, romantic plotline. The plot of eXistenZ consists of Ted and Allegra's romance and adventure and is fuelled by their mutual attraction. The plot of The Matrix is strengthened and motivated by Neo and Trinity's falling in love. Trinity's kisses Neo toward the end of the film and brings him back to life as in a gender-reversed version of the sleeping beauty.³ The kiss testifying to their (heterosexual) love also attests to the invincibility of the human spirit and to the human advantage over machinery, however complex. The kiss also proves Neo's identity as "the One" a savior figure, and allows for the optimistic denouement of the film. In The Matrix the institution of heterosexuality and its manifestations are crucial for the re-markation of boundaries between human and machine, good and evil, real and virtual.

Notwithstanding the considerable heterosexual ideological investment in both films, connecting to computers and virtual reality cause the familiar heterosexual paradigm and its related gender roles to undergo destabiling changes. Though all attractions and romances in the films take place between men and women, and do not alienate straight viewers, expressions of sexuality and presentation of gender undergo queer transmutations. This may explain the films' popularity among queer viewers.

The heterosexual paradigm is based on a binary model, which presupposes a binary gender system. Stereotypically presented, the paradigm consists of the meeting of an active cerebral male of initiative, who contacts, brings to life and penetrates a passive, intuitive, emotional, dependent woman. The venues to virtual reality in The Matrix and eXistenZ require modifications to the mainstream paradigm. Both films are replete with images of penetrated men. Not only do men want to be penetrated through new bodily orifices, some of which are particularly visually suggestive, in

order to play, survive, influence, attain agency, or merely avoid anachronism, but once this happens, they find themselves penetrable per force as well.

In The Matrix, Neo begins his pre-diegetic existence perforated by tubes in an incubator. In the virtual reality of the matrix he is penetrated, rape-victim like, by agents holding his limbs, having shut him up by annulling his mouth. They insert a detection mechanism into his body through his naval. The mechanism at first resembles a huge sperm cell, which then develops into a cyborgian Boschian insect. Our hero, who now carries a computerized embryo in his belly, is kidnapped on a stormy night at gunpoint by members of the Zionist underground like a frightened heroin in a B movie. His captors include two androgynous looking women, one of whom bears the name switch, attesting to her limenal gendered status. These women subject Neo to yet another penetrative violation. They free him of the device by aborting it and casting the bloodied thing out on the rainy street. Later, Neo learns to connect to the matrix through the hole on his nape. Later yet, near the film 's end, Neo reverses the pattern of penetration. He performs a Foucauldian act of talking back to agent Smith, and declares his autonomous identity. Neo then infiltrates his once violator, fills him up, and explodes him to shreds from within upon exit/rebirth. Victory over the matrix (a word originally meaning womb) is achieved through a queer rough penetrative act between two virtual projections of male cyborgs, and a rebirth, or recreation unmediated by a uterus.

Penetrations into Ted's body in eXistenZ generate many comic situations based on the disruption of the heterosexual paradigm. At the start of the action, Ted does not have a bioport. His excuse is fear of penetration. Without one, he cannot participate in the game scene into which he seeks inclusion. Ted is presented as hysterical and defensive. He spends time and energy warding off invasions into his

body. Once he succumbs, He feels as if the insertion of the bioport, which should have contributed to his sense of agency, turns him into a passive invalid. The process of inserting the bioport in Ted's body also reverses gender-roles. It involves the administration of an epidural shot, a procedure associated with childbirth that paralyzes and discapacitates him. The port is created with the use of a huge phallic firearm, held at the loins of the administering mechanic. Ted's new orifice makes him vulnerable and potentially infectious. He is now exposed to inflammations, fungal infections and electric surges, which affect both his own well-being and Allegra's. Ted's orifice is the bearer of pleasure and pain, ecstasy and shame. Throughout the action Allegra is the experienced, seductive predatory partner in the relationship while Ted is the prey, the virginal scared newbie. She penetrates him. She even moistens his new narrow port so as not to hurt him, in a scene reading like a parody of a male pornographic text, involving an experienced older man and his younger scared lover (male or female).

The gender reversal aspects of Allegra and Ted's game are heightened by the quintessentially sexual connotations of both "eXistenZ" and "tRancendeZ". Even the cyborgian meta-flesh gamepod containing the game looks and sounds like a sexual organ. It is flesh colored, organic, covered with nipple like appendages, which respond to touch, it coos, purrs and undulates orgiastically. The umbicord is snake like. It is used for seduction and foreplay. Allegra uses it to tie Ted to her, bring him near in a manner suggestive of the serpent in paradise.

The game world too is fused with subversive, parodic and humorous sexuality, and contains many double-entendres capitalizing on its sexual undertones. When Allegra first introduces Ted into the game, sparks fly from it and the game is short-circuited. He experiences what she takes to be a neurosurge, a situation in which a

player tenses up and closes the gates, not unlike an inverted viginismus. Ted plays the role of the sexually dysfunctional woman in this scene, a factor that increases his discomfort and our laughter. Later, when they receive a micropd, a tiny game pod that gets sucked into the black hole of the bioport in a manner reminiscent of some of Freud's patients worst fears, Ted asks Allegra "Do you want me to do you?" the referents are both carnal and virtual.

The bioport is a neo- sex organ. It gets excited, takes control at times, is the source of heightened sensations of pleasure and shame, agency and immanence. Its shape has attracted considerable critical attention. It has been compared to a naval or an anus. Peter Travers of the Rolling Stone has gone as far as commenting on its resemblance to a vagina.⁴ In an interview with Cronenberg, when questioned about whether he is aware of the similarities between gay sex and eXistenZ sex, he replied affirmatively. He also commented on the potentials in inventing new sexual organs, and seizing evolution.⁵ Allegra, in eXistenZ also laments the fact that people have gotten used to so little, and promises players "a whole new system." Such a stance encapsulates the threatening potential inherent in the film. The bleed effect between the different levels of reality in eXistenZ challenge not only our perceptions of real vs. virtual, serious vs. play, but also affects our very perceptual constructs, including what Eve Sedgwick named as the most important paradigm of our times – heterosexuality.⁶ At first eXistenZ seems like a familiar story: boy meets girl, they have adventures, he saves her and they fall in love. While viewing the film, and even more so, during subsequent viewings, the audience experience a strong sense of unheimlich. What had seemed natural transforms in front of our exhilarated or threatened eyes into the uncanny.

Whereas gender reversals in eXistenZ tend towards the interactional and sexual and practical, while its protagonists retain hyper normative gender presentations that would befit a pulp novel, The Matrix contains a wealth of gender challenging, transgressive imagery. As stated earlier Switch is a gender blender. Morpheus and Neo wear long skirt-like leather coats. Neo and Trinity embody an androgynous aesthetic. Early in the film, when the scene of Trinity coaxing Neo to fulfill his transgressive potential fades into a scene of Neo waking up at his computer, for a split second, the viewer cannot make out which of the characters is being shown. Near the end, when they kiss, the image is androgynously unclear. It could be a straight, a gay, or a kiss between androgynous dykes. However, the wealth of androgynous imagery in the film does not come to challenge sex or sexual roles. In The Matrix we are plied with images from the worlds of gender bending, the (neo militaristic, or sadomasochistic) leather scene, politics of identity, and androgynous aesthetic in order to reify an essentialist ethos based on the superiority of the human spirit as it is expressed in the sanctified social institution of heterosexuality. Visual fetishism is used toward a fascist end.

The manner in which queering is deployed in The Matrix and eXistenZ differs diametrically. The Matrix flirts with queer visual images toward an essentialist end. The queer images in the movie form a pseudo-futuristic cover for old truisms. As soon as the protagonists learn that their world is an illusory construct they start a war in which the end justifies the means. They do not challenge constructs from within, or partake of a fluid postmodern existence, but adhere to a fascist ethos that delegitimizes the other. When Neo in his agent-like sunglasses makes his last pirate transmission to humanity and flies up to the sky, he becomes indistinguishable from the agents. In Foucauldian style, the subaltern who has talked back can become the

new oppressor. eXistenZ is more subversive and less celebratory. By the end of the film characters that do not know what level of reality they are in may be trapped in a series of games forever, but their gender roles and sexual praxis have undergone transcendence.

¹ Richard Porton. "The Film Director as Philosopher: An Interview with David Cronenberg." Cineaste, (1999: 24:4). <<http://infotrac.London.galegroup.com>> 5.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Porton (Ibid) describes it as resembling an anus. John Callhun views it in similar terms in "ExistenZ", Interiors, 1999, 158: 6, 127 <<http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com>>. Peter Travers sees the bioport as vaginal in shape. Makes one wonder whether he has ever seen one. The Rolling Stone, May 13, 1999.

⁵ Porton, 5.

⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet. Hertfordshire: Harvester, 1991, 1.