Interviewing David Cronenberg on the subject of politics is a lot like playing hopscotch in a mine field. I tried to address the subject of sexual politics, but he jumped on the issue of censorship. We tackled the ever-debatable topic of pornography, and eventually wound into a discussion about the politics of his latest film based on the novel by Stephen King, The Dead Zone. Cronenberg had initially claimed that art and politics are mutually exclusive, and that he is interested in making art. Period. One hundred and eighty degrees later, he argues that The Dead Zone is, without question, a political film. Maybe Martin Scorsese was right when he said that David himself doesn't know what his films are about!

Cinema Canada: A lot of the criticism of your films centers around the subject of sexual politics. Robin Wood has based his criticism of your films on this, as have others. Do you have a theory when you start writing a script?

David Cronenberg: No. That's the thing. For me, film is not a political statement specifically. If it is, it's partly propaganda. If you begin with a political stance and your film is an illustration of Marxist propositions or Fascist propositions or whatever political theory you happen to hold, then I think you're making a propaganda film, and to me that automatically means it cannot be art. I think that art and propaganda are poles apart, and that they don't overlap. Now this is not to say that the films that Robin Wood likes are propaganda. When I start to make a film I try to completely clear my head of all the intellectual and cerebral considerations of the times that I live in.

Cinema Canada: Do you think you can 'clear your head'?

David Cronenberg: No. Not completely. But I try to do it and get in touch with something that's more basic and then work outwards from that into the details of time and culture and so forth. I don't start with the politics, even if you end up with the politics. Did you see The Dead Zone?

Cinema Canada: Yes I did. How does this relate to Dead Zone?

David Cronenberg: Even though there's a part of the film that deals specifically with politics, it's not really about left-wing and right-wing. It deals with the possibility of political assassination as a necessity. To that extent it's politics. But even in this case, that's not where you begin. You begin with something intuitive and instinctive and you work your way out from there. And to me, any valid expression of that is legitimate art. You can't criticize Ferdinand Celine because he was a Fascist collaborator. It doesn't mean that his works...
are not great. It doesn't mean that you thought his works were great until you realized he was a Fascist collaborator and a dimwit, but this is how he is written, and therefore his books are trash.

And the same goes for me. I understand (Robin Wood's) approach and what he says, and I can agree with him up to a point. It's obviously one approach to criticism, but to me, he invalidates much of what he's good at by being so rigid. It's a Procrustean bed of applying a standard, and the things that fit are good, and the things that don't fit are bad, without reference to anything else. And to me, that diminishes him as a critic. Why should he do that or feel the need to do that I don't know, but it really is irrelevant finally. But I can read his stuff and say yes, yes, yes, that's really that truth that's out there, that's my reaction to his criticism is much the same as his reaction to my films.

Cinema Canada: So what?

David Cronenberg: I say well, so what? And then, I have a slightly depressed feeling. I don't think that films have to be political or politicized in any way. I just don't think they have to be positive. I don't think they have to be uplifting or to be valid experiences. But I don't necessarily agree with him that maybe there's something to be said about that, and it's hard. That's his own subjective response, and I wouldn't try to deprive him of his own response to my films, obviously. I think a film can be depressing and not always exhilarating and good. So the criteria that he applies to my films to invalidate them on any level are not criteria that work for me.

Cinema Canada: In the ending of your film Shivers, that you're saying that these people are going to spread venereal disease all over the world. Was this implication intended, or do you think that's a valid interpretation?

David Cronenberg: Certainly I intended to suggest that these people would be spreading their disease to make the rest of the world like themselves. It happened to be a disease-like process. But even if you wanted to look at it on a political level in a metaphorical way, you could have those infected people (if you choose) be Trotskites at a time when there weren't so many Trotskites, and they are going out to spread their disease (i.e. the doctrine of communism or socialism) to the world, and ultimately infect a large part of the world. There are metaphorical levels you could take that on. Robin Wood chooses to take it, on what is to me a very mundane level, and probably the least interesting level. If you're going to get analytical about it, as he does. I think he could be a little more inventive than he was. That's all.

Cinema Canada: Can one look at a film without being analytical about its politics?

David Cronenberg: Sure. It's not hard. I don't consider myself a very political or politicized person. It also depends very much on what you mean by politics. Let's go back to the '60s and define our terms. Are we talking about the Liberal versus the Tories in Canada? How wide are we talking? Left versus right wing? Are we talking about reactionaries versus revolutionaries? What level of politics are we talking about? Of course if you get very general then any film is political: any work of art or even any narrative is political. But you can get so general that the word 'political' loses all meaning, and you'd have to get very specific. Certainly Robin Wood does get very specific. In a very specific way, I don't think I'm very political.

Cinema Canada: Do you mean that your person or your films are not very political?

David Cronenberg: Both. I don't separate them.

Cinema Canada: Let's consider the idea that one cannot make any form of art without making some sort of political statement. If one goes to an art museum or one looks at any form of art, one will see some political statement rendered, and it seems that you are denying that.

David Cronenberg: How very French of you! The French love to see everything in terms of politics. In the '60s, the late '60s in particular, we're talking very specifically about left-wing versus right-wing and even Maoist versus other left-wing revisionism. The politics of those times were very specific, and were influenced by China and Godard's films, and Bertolucci's films, and by the events of May 1968. This was very specific stuff. Their films were full of references to all of that. To me, those are political films.

Cinema Canada: You see those films (of Godard and Bertolucci) as political because they deal specifically with the subject of politics.

David Cronenberg: No, but they did discuss politics. La Chinoise is a very political film. It's got the little red book in it. To me, unless you're talking on a metaphorical level, political film is about politics in some very specific way. It starts to lose its meaning for me when you get more general.

Cinema Canada: Do you mean that politics loses meaning for you if we try to discuss a film from a certain political viewpoint?

David Cronenberg: No. We're both trying to define what 'political' means when applied to a work of art or when applied to a film. Now why don't you tell me why Videodrome is political? Do you mean that it espouses left-wing politics? No, you don't really mean that. Does it discuss the difference between left-wing and right-wing politics? No, I don't think it does that. Does it discuss the difficulty of maintaining a democracy in a modern technocratic state? A little bit, but not exactly. You see what I mean? I think that you could do a version of Videodrome that would be overtly political and would deal with those questions, but because of my own temperament and sensibilities, it doesn't.

So that if you want to say it's political because it discusses how media changes our image of reality, then I agree. But I think that that is such a broad definition of the word politics, that the word starts to lose its meaning in terms of discussing film.

Cinema Canada: I'd like to specifically discuss the sexual politics of your films.

David Cronenberg: To me, politics is not mean sexual politics. To me, politics has to do with power struggles, and parties, and revolutions, and I think that people use the term sexual revolution in a metaphorical way. In the '60s we used to talk about the politics of experience. That was a book by R. D. Laing, "The Politics of Experience." What does that mean? It means power struggles between individuals and that's a legitimate use of the word politics. But when someone says "This is a political film," I think it has to mean something more specific. This is a really semantic thing that we're talking about. If you want to talk about sexual power-struggles and so on, then I agree with you that my films are political. I agree with you. But I don't know if the French would consider that politics, or if it's what they mean by politics. Let me give you an example. For some French critics, Shivers was criticism of bourgeois democracy because the lives of the people in Stirling Tower were very proper bourgeois, controlled, fussy little lives; all controlled and isolated without any consideration of larger things. They thought the film was the revolution against the bourgeois society that spread and destroy that. They would talk about the disease of the middle classes, that and whether I agree with that or not, I think it's a political interpretation of that film.

Cinema Canada: There is the same scenario of middle class, or even upper-middle class, in a situation of crisis in The Dead Zone. There is also a politician striving for money and power in this film.

David Cronenberg: You deal with a lead character, Johnny Smith, who used to be a member of the middle class, or more broadly, the lower-middle class. He's feeling satisfied. He works in the school system and he's a teacher. He feels secure, he is going to get married. He knows where he is going to go. He's got it all laid out ahead of him. Suddenly he finds himself by virtue of an accident that he had nothing to do with specifically! an outsider. He is an artist in the sense that he has a sensitivity to society that most people don't have. He finds it very difficult to know what to do with it. He's a revolutionary in one sense because he has visions of society (past, present, future) which he has to somehow decide to act on or not act on. So aside from the fact that one character is a politician, there are politics involved in The Dead Zone: there's no question about it. What's your interpretation?

Cinema Canada: It's "...?" David Cronenberg: You'll add it later.

Cinema Canada: Exactly. In all your films, not only The Dead Zone, your lead character starts out as a mute - and quote - unquote, Normal. How do you think about this when you create your characters? How do you make them normal? They're married and they live in a little house or apartment. When you attack it, do you think of how to define "ordinary people"?

David Cronenberg: Well, I don't exactly attack it. I think one of the things that Robin Wood dislikes about my films is that he believes that there is this real affection for middle-class normality,
**Cinema Canada: Let's talk about the representation of women in the films.**

A lot of films that deal with the middle class put women in a very cliché role; sometimes even a pornographic role.

**David Cronenberg:** To me, that's obscene. To call that pornographic is to totally misuse the word. This is to me being reactionary again. I don't think we should debase the language, in the sense that if anything we are to mean anything we have to at least agree on what our terminology means.

**Cinema Canada: How do you define pornography?**

**David Cronenberg:** Pornography is art or non-art that is specifically designed to arouse sexual desire.

**Cinema Canada: Is that not eroticism?**

**David Cronenberg:** That's not eroticism, but there is a huge overlap. For me it is what I consider a kind of a real distinction between pornography and eroticism.

**Cinema Canada: You don't make a distinction between pornography and eroticism?**

**David Cronenberg:** No. We have to discuss it as a specific thing. Pornography technically is writing about prostitutes.

**Cinema Canada: So pornography technically is writing about prostitutes?**

**David Cronenberg:** So here we are talking about the depiction of women. First of all, as a creator of characters, I believe I have the freedom to create a character who is not meant to represent all women. In other words, I can create a woman as a character who does not represent all women. If I depict a character as a middle-class dum-dum, why does this have to mean that I think that all women are middle-class dumbs? That doesn't make any sense at all. There are some women out there who say, why can't they be characters in my film? So I show Debra Harry as a character who burns her breasts with a cigarette, does that mean I am suggesting that all women want to burn their breasts with cigarettes? That's juvenile. That's ridiculous. To try to build a consensus around that (which is what some women's groups are trying to do), to give a guideline to the kinds of characters you can create, and to the kinds of acts that they could do, for me, that is obscene. Then you are heading for the police state. That's a different kind of police bureau that is controlling the world, a different kind of KGB. As an artist, it doesn't matter whether it's run by feminists or whether it's run by Brezhnev; it's still the KGB. It's still the state police. I resist all their attempts if women want to criticize what I do, or pick at my films, that's OK of course. But to actually suggest that there should be laws laid down in a bureaucratic way: this is my idea of hell; a Kafka's hell. You will kill art. There will be no art. And once again, I say, why can't I create a character who is unpleasant? It does not automatically suggest that all women are this character any more than it suggests that a character who is a very despicable man represents all men. It doesn't make any sense. I don't understand that attitude.

**Cinema Canada: When you're creating your characters, do you think about the things that you're attributing to them?**

**David Cronenberg:** I try not to. I really try very hard not to.

**Cinema Canada: Does this go for the male and female characters?**

**David Cronenberg:** Yeah, that's right. I worry about how people will respond to the characters, but when I say 'people' I'm talking about my audience. My audience will see these characters for the moment that they watch the film.

**Cinema Canada: So you think it's better if your audience responds emotionally?**

**David Cronenberg:** Cerebrally as well. You put a lot into a film, and it's very complex. There are many levels: visual images, and thought, and sound. I think they'll respond at different levels. You hope that people will respond on many levels. If one level offends them and touches a personal nerve, I'm not sure that one should respond negatively. I'm saying that they have to be aware that if they focus on that, one element of the film to the exclusion of everything else, they'll get a lopsided response to a film. For example, there's a film out, The Big Chill. A lot of people hated that film, and they hate it for political reasons. They lived through the '60s, and they feel that it was a very special time, and they feel that the film is a little too flippant, a little too slick and a little too entertaining, to coincide with their own experiences of those times. I think that's unfair.

**Cinema Canada: You think people's judgement of The Big Chill is unfair because they don't accept the film as a whole?**

**David Cronenberg:** On its own terms. You might finally decide you don't like those terms. A lot of those people liked the movie, but they hate it politically. They hate the politics of the film because it suggests that all the hippies of the '60s who were revolutionaries have sold out, except for the guy who died. They think this is suggesting something which they resent politically, even though on another level it is a very schizoid response to the film. The film goes so far and decides not to go further. OK, well let these other people make the film that goes further if they want to, but the filmmaker (Lawrence Kasdan) was very honest in how he wanted to go with what he did. At a moment when it might get a lot heavier or a lot something, he stops, but that's alright. That's his prerogative to do that.

**Cinema Canada: Was the representation of American politics in The Dead Zone intended to slander American politicians?**

**David Cronenberg:** Well yes it's a part of the book, but it's only a part of The Dead Zone as well as many other things. I have the best role. I have the best writers to write the role. The Big Chill was largely written to the screenplay.

**Cinema Canada: Are you implying that the people who see your films are people who don't think about what they're seeing?**

**David Cronenberg:** Oh no. I disagree completely. That's not what I am saying at all. What I'm saying is that I'm sending out my film as an integral, organic living thing, and the people who are my audience receive it that way. The people who object of course we pretended that this is a real character; a person who has been created during the course of making the movie. And that is my real audience, special interest groups whether they're feminists or anti-violence groups, or pro-Christian, or any other groups; they're not my real audience. They're not my real audience.

**Cinema Canada: Who is your 'real audience'?**

**David Cronenberg:** The millions of people who have seen my films, in 40 or 50 countries around the world. Most of them don't approach the films from any special political stance, or view the film only that way. They are responding to the film as a total entity.

**Cinema Canada: So they're just consumers of the image?**

**David Cronenberg:** Perhaps. That, of course, is a very sarcastic political image.

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David Cronenberg's The Dead Zone is David Cronenberg's slickest and most controlled movie to date, right in the mainstream of commercial cinema. American scriptwriter Jezz鲍姆 wrote the screenplay based on the novel by Stephen King, producing a nice tight succession of the mind. The Dead Zone's involvement makes the audience seek a good. You have to want to hide away as a reclusor, or you can't. That's immoral. That's unethical to do that. Even though the outcome of that solving the murder case is hard on him, it prepares him to take the next step (when he meets Stallion, the political candidate). He realizes he has to do the same thing all over again, that things are just going to be more painful. Basically, it's martyrdom.

So the movie does take a fairly straightforward moral stance and even the teachers of the present. Who knows? He has to kill another person. He bases this only on his vision. He has to believe in his own vision and he's going to kill someone. He has to believe in his vision under certain circumstances. It might be possible that political assassination is necessary. It can be a good thing and not a bad thing. And it uses the image of Hitler because, taking the most extreme example, one must ask: Would it be morally necessary to kill Hitler if you had the chance to do it? (But no one would want to know now!?) If you agree to that, then we've already agreed that under certain circumstances political assassination should not have assassinated Idi Amin at the height of his power? Everybody in the world wanted him to die (well no, obviously, not enough people). So once, you agree that under certain circumstances it might be a good thing (and that is a very hard thing to swallow)!... well, I think that most people would agree.

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