

If you get someone who is playing a role, which doesn't correspond to who he really is, and what he really will do when he is in power, then you have the possibility of voting for a psychotic, who will, in a psychotic rage, annihilate the world. That's very possible. It's not new obviously; it was done in *Dr. Strangelove*.

Cinema Canada: We're talking about *Doomsday*?

David Cronenberg: Yeah. To me, that is a political question, and it doesn't necessarily involve left and right. It involves questions like how does a democracy work, and can it still work, and so on and so on. And in another sense,

Dead Zone is political because it deals with a character who tries to stay uninvolved with society and begins to realize that he can't do that. The Johnny Smith character has many father-figures in the film who keep telling him that he must get involved. Once he is involved he must learn the tough realities of life, and he must stay involved. He has the Sheriff Banner character telling him that 'If you have this gift (psychic powers) you must use it for social good.' You have to use what you have to help society. Whether you want to hide away as a recluse or not, 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 Stillson, the political candidate). He realizes he has to do the same thing on a grander scale even though that is going to be more painful. Basically, it's martyrdom.

So the movie does take a fairly straightforward moral stance and even then it's complicated because for him to be moral 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. In essence, the film says, that 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 not be morally necessary to kill Hitler if you had had the chance, knowing what you know now?' If you agree to that, then you've already agreed that under certain circumstances political assassination is necessary. Who would 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 would be a good thing (and that is a very hard thing to swallow)... well, I think that most people would agree.

David Cronenberg's The Dead Zone

The Dead Zone is David Cronenberg's slickest and most controlled movie to date, right in the mainstream of commercial cinema. American script-writer Jeffrey Boam wrote the screenplay based on the novel by Stephen King, producing a nice tight (maybe even too tight) version of the story, told through the eyes of the hero. And Christopher Walken, who plays the lead role of Johnny Smith, puts on a performance that will assure him a place in the star system forever.

Johnny Smith is the usual version of Cronenberg's Mr. Normal: average looks, average income, and a predictable future as a school teacher about to marry the nice girl he loves, and settle into what might have been marital bliss; kids, dog and station wagon complete. But after a brain-damage accident, and five long years in a coma, Mr. Normal becomes a psychic capable of seeing past, present and future events. The visions of future events situate our hero in socially moral dilemmas, and after foreseeing *Doomsday* (the big bomb's big bang), Johnny Smith has to decide whether or not to save the world.

Greg Stillson (Martin Sheen) is a deranged political candidate, who sees himself as president of the United States. He wants power, and is willing to kiss any number of babies and old

ladies to get it, or kill or maim anyone who gets in his way.

The Dead Zone's other characters aren't quite as easy to categorize. One of the cops is a rapist and murderer in his spare time (and gets caught thanks to Johnny). Johnny's fiancée, Sarah (Brooke Adams), marries an up-and-coming politician while Johnny is sleeping his life away. She loves Johnny (and grants him one afternoon in bed because he deserves at least that much) but she clings readily to her secure future with husband and child. Johnny sees no reason to live, and becomes a martyr who can only find meaning in his own death.

Cronenberg's films invariably revolve around the philosophy that the powerful subconscious will erupt, catapulting Mr. Normal into reality's horror show. However, the horror shows are not horror or science fiction by conventional standards. They're more on a par with Hitchcock's *Psycho*, where the dark recesses of the mind harbour innate fears, desires and uncontrollable images; where reality and fantasy become twisted and blurred, trapping the hero in a cage of mental torture.

The Dead Zone's Johnny Smith, is imprisoned by psychic visions which he can neither deter nor escape from: his visions dominate his reality, and his day-to-day life is dictated by subconscious forces beyond his control. Max Renn, *Videodrome's* Mr. Normal, met with a similar fate when his waking and dreaming states became an interchangeable nightmare controlled by the world of video. Both films offer the gloomy resolution of

suicide with the promise of something larger than life: Max was seduced into believing in an immortal afterlife with 'The New Flesh,' and Johnny is granted the saintly acclaim bestowed upon great martyrs.

Videodrome is Cronenberg's masterpiece and while *The Dead Zone* works in the same vein stylistically, and is certainly more palatable for the audience seeking good, clean entertainment at the movies, it just doesn't command a similarly intense emotional and psychological response. *The Dead Zone* and the Johnny Smith character are just a little too 'normal' to be unpredictable, whereas *Videodrome* seats you on the edge of fear and keeps you there.

In Cronenberg's succession of films, the Mr. Normal character has become more and more deeply embedded in the middle class of North America. Architectural settings, as well as the mood created through technical details, establish the character as a comfort-seeking creature who likes stability. A feeling of safety pervades the homes and institutions of these films until the visionary powers within the hero uproot the illusion of security, and cast him into a state of self-destruction. The self-destructive and violent instincts completely dominate characters such as Johnny Smith, Max Renn, and even Rose (in *Rabid*), none of whom find pleasure in their unknown powers—only pain, suffering, disease and death.

Cronenberg's films are like omens, depicting the unconscious and the unknown as horrifying, with the underlying warning to keep that subconscious locked away where it is.

Johnny Smith's psychic talents grant him no serenity or pleasure. His life is one of sexual frustration and moral dilemmas. Tortured by his own desires, needs and insights, his fate is worse than death.

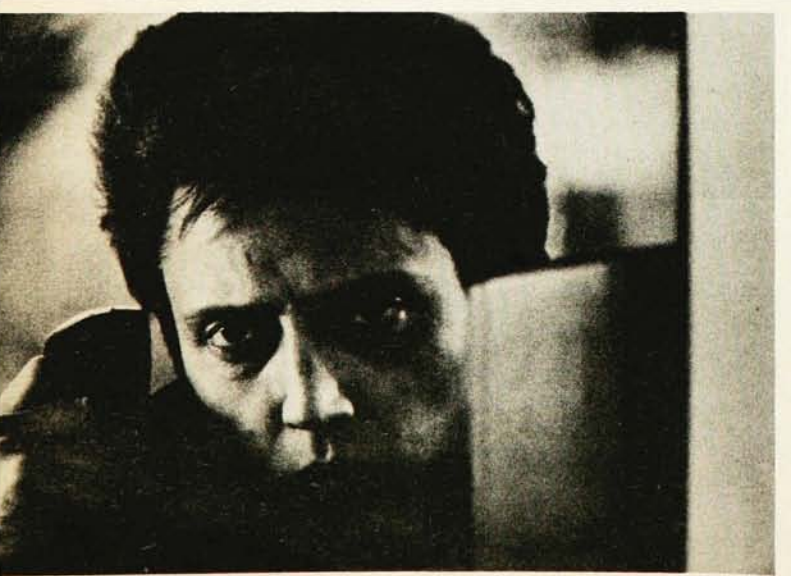
Yet *The Dead Zone* doesn't have Cronenberg's usual barrage of visual horror, though the blood and guts are right on cue: nothing is too shocking or jarring. The screenplay has condensed and simplified the book, compartmentalizing the psychic events into neat little packages and the ending of *The Dead Zone* ties up any loose pieces, safely bringing the world back to a state of normalcy.

Videodrome didn't have that same wrap-it-all-up ending. The viewer was left to question the effects of consumer images on our minds, bodies and futures. Where *Videodrome* deconstructs the idea of consumption of media and the concept of the single-handed hero, *The Dead Zone* simply restructures these illusions—at the cost of intricately developed and complex characters.

The Dead Zone is a compact, yet visually beautiful version of Stephen King's novel. Unfortunately, that's all it is.

Susan Ayscough ●

THE DEAD ZONE d. David Cronenberg p. Debra Hill exec. p. Dino De Laurentiis sc. Jeffrey Boam based on the novel by Stephen King d.o.p. Mark Irwin C.S.C. p. des. Carol Spier film ed. Ronald Sanders assoc. p. Jeffrey Chernov cost. des. Olga Dimitrov mus. comp. & arr. Michael Kamen cast. Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson, Deirdre Bowen p. man. John M. Eckert 1st a.d. John Board 2nd a.d. Otto Hanus 3rd a.d. Lydia Wazana loc. man. David Coatsworth p. coord. Philippa King sc. sup. Gillian Richardson asst. to Ms. Hill Randi Chernov asst. to Mr. Cronenberg Carol McBride 1st asst. cam. Robin Miller 2nd asst. cam. Donna Mobbs sp. efx. coord. Jon Belyeu sp. efx. foreman Calvin Accord art d. Barbara Dunphy asst. art d. Dan Davis set dec. Tom Coulter ward. master Arthur Rowsell ward. mistress Denise Woodley makeup Shonagh Jabour hair Jenny Arbour p. acct. Heather McIntosh asst. acct. Lyn Lucibello, Susan McKibbin prop. master Peter Lauterman asst. props Don Miloyevich set dressers Gareth Wilson, Gary Jack, Tom Reid sd. mix. Bryan Day boom op. Michael Lacroix re-rec. mixers Bill Varney, Steve Maslow, Gregg Landaker key grip Maris Jansons grips Christopher Dean, David Hynes, Mark Silver gaffer Jock Brandis best boy Scotty Allen gen. op. Gary Phipps elect. Ira Cohen. John Herzog extra cast. Peter Lavender unit pub. Prudence Emery asst. eds. Elaine Foreman, Michael Rea trainee ed. Tim Dunphy trainee art d. Jo-Ann Laddenheim draftsman Alfred storyboard artist Jim Craig cam. trainee David Woods underwater cam. John Stoneman stills Rick Porter p. asst. Andreas Blackwell office assts. Andrea Poulis, Carolyn McKenzie ward. asst. Maureen Gurney sp. efx. Mark Molin, Michael Kavanagh, Laird McMurray, Clark Johnson, Derek Howard, David Zimmerman, Gianico Preto, Sonan Sookad, Michael Newman, D. Harry Persad const. man. Joe Curtin head carp. John Bankson, Kirk Cheney carps. Myles Roth, Robert Wiens sc. painters Nick Kosoanic, Harry Pavalson, Janet Cormack, Steven Mell stunt coord. Dick Warlock, Carey Loftin stunts Loran Janes, David Rigby, Peter Cox, Greg Walker, Dwayne McLean, Leslie Munro, Shane Cardwell, Dick Forsayeth, Jerome Tiberghien horse wranglers John Scott, Tom Glass, Richard Cosgrove craft service Jesse Cohoon video electronic efx. Michael Lennick transp. coord. Michael Curran driver capt. Al Kosoanic drivers David Chuc, Izidore Musallam, Jerome McCann, Cactus, Alex Dawes, David Brown stillson billboard concept by Stewart Sherwood stillson photog. Steve Shapiro biomedical advisor Jeremy F. Deable weapons by Special Missions Group sup. sd. ed. David Yewdall sd. eds. Ken Sweet, Duane Hartzell, David Stone, Cary Wickman, Michael Gutierrez ed. ed. coord. Devon Heffley mus. The National Philharmonic Orchestra rec. at Eml/Abbey Studios, London, England rec. eng. Eric Tomlinson mus. sd. efx. eng. James Guthrie titles R/Greenberg Associates, Inc. Lp. Christopher Walken, Brooke Adams, Tom Skerritt, Herbert Lom, Anthony Zerbe, Colleen Dewhurst, Martin Sheen, Nicholas Campbell, Sean Sullivan, Jackie Burroughs, Geza Kovacs, Roberta Weiss, Simon Craig, Peter Dvorsky, Julie-Ann Heathwood, Barry Flatman, Raffi Tchalian, Ken Pogue, Gordon Jocelyn, Bill Copeland, Jack Messenger, Chapelle Jaffe, Cindy Hines, Helene Udy, Ramon Estevez, Joseph Domenichini, Roger Dunn, Wally Bondarenko, Claude Rae, John Koenigsen, Les Carlson, Jim Bearden, Hardee Lineham, William Davis, Serge LeBlanc, Vera Winiauski, Joe Kapnaik, Dave Rigby, dist. Paramount colour 35mm running time: 103 mins.



● A place in the star system forever: Christopher Walken in *The Dead Zone*