

The Dead Zone

US : 1983 : dir. David Cronenberg : Lorimar : 103 min
 prod: Dino de Laurentiis & Debra Hill : scr: Jeffrey Boan : dir.ph.: Mark Irwin
Simon Craig
 Christopher Walken; Brooke Adams; Tom Skerritt; Herbert Lom; Anthony Zerbe;
 Martin Sheen; Colleen Dewhurst; Nicholas Campbell; Jackie Burroughs; Ramon Estevez

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Absorbing Stephen King story of a young man who emerges from a near-fatal accident with the gift (or curse) of second sight – being able to tell a person's fate just by making physical contact. Walken's moving, heartfelt performance is the core of an involving, if sometimes meandering, movie where (despite the reputations of King and Cronenberg) the emphasis is not on blood-and-guts horror. ***"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

"Young teacher Walken awakes from a coma five years after a car accident, and proves to have developed the gift to see someone's future by touching his or her hand. One of the better filmings to date of a Stephen King novel. Anyone who's aware of the bizarre oeuvre of Cronenberg will be amazed at the subtlety of the film, but then this is also his first production from a script by someone other than himself. **1/2"

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"The survivor of a road accident discovers that he has psychic powers. Glum thriller with a fairly predictable outcome but some well-staged episodes. *"

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"An eerie, slightly disappointing translation of still another Stephen King thriller. A school teacher (Walken) is injured in a car accident, lapses into a coma. When he wakes up years later, he has developed precognitive powers which he is reluctant to use. **1/2"

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

"Stephen King's suspenseful novel has been adapted into an intermittently engrossing and eerie film. Walken plays an auto accident victim who emerges from a five-year coma with the power of second sight. His dark visions – a child in a fire, a trigger-happy US president – are numbing. Then he discovers he can use his clairvoyant powers to alter such catastrophes. Under David Cronenberg's subtle direction, the drama comes alive. Also with Brooke Adams and Colleen Dewhurst. ***"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"This numbs those nerve-ends all the other films failed to reach, but can't quite flesh out the original skeletal story (one of Stephen King's least memorable), despite Walken's haunted performance as a schoolteacher who crashes into a milk-truck and, five years later, wakes from a coma to find himself cursed with second sight. Cronenberg indulges his fondness for nightmares in a damaged brain, but forgoes his usual flesh-flinging in favour of some subtler flesh-tingling. The visceral shockerama of "VIDEODROME" has given way to a brooding atmosphere of bleak unease in snow-covered landscapes. Apart from some

brief bleeaggh with a pair of scissors, there's nothing here to send you home retching."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Christopher Walken is a car crash victim who wakes from a five-year coma to find that he had strange psychic powers and can see into the future, in this gripping psychological thriller based on Stephen King's best-selling novel. By simply touching hands with someone, he can see their fate and this helps him rescue a child from a burning house and solve a series of murders. But then he realises he has the power to change the future. When he presses palms with cynical politician Martin Sheen, he realises Sheen, as president of the US, is capable of pushing the button. Without doubt, this is the most faithful screen adaptation of a King story. Having said that, it gets bogged down a bit in the middle with the murder mystery, but picks up again in the final third and there's a nice twist at the climax. Walken, always seemingly a man on the edge, is well cast as the central character and there are fine performances from Sheen, Herbert Lom and Anthony Zerbe. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Joining the half-dozen shock-oriented directors who have filmed novelist Stephen King's horror and suspense yarns, David Cronenberg turns **"THE DEAD ZONE"** into an accomplished psychological thriller. Focus is Johnny Smith, a shy schoolteacher who snaps out of a long coma with the questionable gift of second sight.

Convincingly played by Christopher Walken, Johnny can see into anybody's past or future merely by grasping the person's hand. The "dead zone" seems to refer to the brain damage that enables him to change the outcome of events he "sees".

His first premonition enables a nurse to save her daughter from a domestic conflagration. The news of the patient's ESP spreads quickly and he experiences some pretty horrible incidents, inside and outside his head. A lot happens in the 102-minute suspenser. There's the girlfriend (Brooke Adams) Johnny loses to his near-fatal accident and regains for a while. There's also a sheriff (Tom Skerritt) who desperately needs a psychic solution to crack a murder case, and the wealthy businessman (Anthony Zerbe) who uses Johnny to tutor his problem son (Simon Craig)."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This is an exciting adaptation of the Stephen King suspense novel about a man who uses his psychic powers to solve multiple murders and perhaps prevent the end of the world. Rated "R" for violence and profanity [sic]. **** "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Of only slight interest to the archive, though much of Stephen King's output seems to involve childhood or children to some degree. Walken first grasps the wrist of a nurse from his hospital bed and sees her small daughter cowering in a bedroom ablaze, he grasps the hand of his therapist (Herbert Lom) and has a vision of him as a child being separated from his mother during WW2. The physician is astonished when Walken then announces his mother is still very much alive, and gives him her current address. Later, after being released from the clinic, he's approached by Anthony Zerbe, anxious over the well-being of his withdrawn son Chris (Simon Craig, +/-13). Walken agrees to meet the boy, and becomes his private tutor. He foresees Chris drowning in an ice hockey accident, and frantically presses the father to cancel the match. Zerbe is horrified at his outburst, and forbids him to see the boy again, but Chris is sufficiently shaken to bow out of the match, during which the ice does indeed give way. It's at Zerbe's home that Walken first meets rising senatorial candidate Martin Sheen, whom he later resolves to assassinate. Interesting to see Sheen portraying the obverse of his later TV character of the Honest President in **"West Wing"**.

Christopher Walken's potent and slightly mannered acting is frequently wasted on the films he makes, but here he delivers a highly-charged performance which compensates greatly for the

film's shortage of tension or atmosphere. Cronenberg avoids the schlock excesses of "**SCANNERS**", it's true, but exercising restraint is not quite the same as exhibiting skill. He's not helped by a script which is often facile and pedestrian, so that the avoidance of gore and set-piece shock sequences only leave the film looking lame and insubstantial. A longer running time would have been quite acceptable if that time had been spent on character development. The supporting cast are generally good, particularly Brooke Adams and Tom Skerritt in unrewarding roles, but the ending is weak and the intriguing phenomenon of

precognition itself is only skated around, not explored to any degree. Why is it, for example, that Walken only experiences flashes of grim events past and future, never life-enriching ones? How would touching the hand of the doctor, who has presumed his mother dead since childhood, enable him to know she is alive and well in another country? Does second sight have access to telephone directories? Why does he fail to foresee his own mother's death?

As he freely admits (read his survey of the horror genre "*Danse Macabre*"), Stephen King's works have not fared too well on the screen. The early 80s saw a heavy glut of them, hardly any well made, after which the adaptations returned to the small screen, where they first started with "**SALEM'S LOT**". The pacing of his novels doesn't lend itself readily to condensation to feature film length, and perhaps his kind of horror works better on the printed page. "**SILVER BULLET**" was risible, for example, and the portmanteau films – "**CREEPSHOW**", "**CAT'S EYE**" – were curate's eggs like all horror compendiums. This one, for all it is a disappointment, is still one of the better films of his writings. A director with more sense of mood and a more articulate script would have improved it substantially.

As for Simon Craig, one senses that his role was more significant in the book. He's presented as a boy with profound personal problems, takes a quick stroll round his garden with Walken and then his problems are never spoken of again. He has the look of a male Linda Blair – large sensual mouth, hamsterish cheeks and well-groomed hair. A more teasing dilemma for Walken would have been to foresee that this quiet, well-mannered boy would become an axe-murderer or a wife-strangler in later life. It is one thing for him to draw a bead on a power-hungry unscrupulous politician (whom we're shown already strong-arming a political opponent), quite another to save the world from a child who hasn't yet conceived of his own wickedness. In one conversation he asks therapist Herbert Lom if – given the opportunity and the benefit of foreknowledge – he would have killed Hitler before his rise to power, even at the sacrifice of his own life. It isn't too hard a question to answer. Quite another thing to kill Hitler while still a schoolboy with no ill will as yet toward the Jews.

See subject index under **HORROR / SUPERNATURAL** and **STEPHEN KING ADAPTATIONS**.