

# Sensory Overload: Unconscious Communication and Inter-Personal Psychosis in David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone*

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**Sensory Overload:  
Unconscious Communication and Inter-Personal Psychosis  
in David Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone***

**Mikaela Bobiy**

*The Dead Zone* (1983) is a film about unconscious communication—more specifically, it is a film about what happens when the unconscious permeates consciousness. Based on Stephen King's 1979 novel of the same name, Cronenberg's film is a triptych, a film in three parts that asks us to think about what happens when the unconscious spills out and over, creating a sensorial overload. In Cronenberg's film, this spilling over results in disturbing premonitory visions (auditory and visual) for protagonist Johnny Smith (Christopher Walken). While psychoanalytic discussions of pseudoscientific phenomena like ESP tend to focus on unconscious communication and the return of the repressed (through the guises of the uncanny or melancholy, for example), this analysis examines the film through the lens of psychosis, and more specifically, from an experiential or embodied understanding of psychosis (a reading that is further reinforced by the film's *mise-en-scène* and the actors' performances).<sup>1</sup> In *The Dead Zone*, the protagonist's visions take the shape of a psychotic break, one that is inter-personal in nature, and mirror the experience of patients with schizophrenia as it is represented in psychoanalytic literature.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, I will put the film in dialogue with Christopher Bollas' discussions of schizophrenia, as it both engages with, and diverges from, Lacan's topography of the imaginary and symbolic order. In the film we watch as Johnny tries to straddle these two orders, while committing a final act that definitively expels him from the latter. Finally, *The Dead Zone* is a film that adds to Cronenberg's cinematic project of embodied explorations of psychoanalysis, though here, it is an exploration that also leans heavily on the supernatural—

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<sup>1</sup> This in-and-of-itself will not preclude an examination of the return of the repressed, which remains important to the discussion, but my approach is from a more distinctive, and phenomenologically informed, psychoanalytic position.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Johnny is suffering from clinical psychosis, but that his visions mimic the form of psychotic breaks experienced by patients with schizophrenia.

this isn't just a breakthrough of Johnny's unconscious, but the unconscious of others as well.

### **Somatic language**

As with Cronenberg's most explicitly psychoanalytic film *A Dangerous Method* (2012), *The Dead Zone's* exploration of psychoanalysis is an embodied one.<sup>3</sup> For Cronenberg, the most compelling parts of the unconscious are those directly linked to the physical symptom, and much of Cronenberg's body horror is rooted in this visceral exploration of the symptom.<sup>4</sup> While some would argue that psychoanalysis has always been a practice rooted in the body (from the earliest discourses around hysteria), psychoanalysts like Christopher Bollas look at phenomena like psychosis as particularly embodied experiences. In *The Dead Zone*, Johnny's visions are experienced somatically—the entire body (involuntarily) participating in an experience akin to that of psychosis.

In 2015, Christopher Bollas published *When the Sun Bursts: The Enigma of Schizophrenia* which chronicled over forty years of working with people suffering from schizophrenia, both children and adults. His approach to treatment was an unusual one: rather than focusing solely on medicating the condition, which can result in a kind of overall numbness, Bollas looked to uncover the hidden logic of the psychosis, and together with the patient, through intensive talk therapy, bring the various realities and selves together.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the film, this “hidden logic of psychosis” follows certain patterns. For Johnny, his visions, triggered by touch, often anticipate violent psychopathic acts (a president with his finger on the button, a serial killer and one of his victims). It is as though there were a shared, Jungian unconscious pool of repressed violence to which Johnny's accident connects him. This is emphasized by the physicality of Johnny's condition telegraphed by Walken's physical performance (falls, limping, twitching, wincing, etc.).

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<sup>3</sup> In *A Dangerous Method*, Cronenberg examines the relationship between Sigmund Freud, Sabina Spielrein, and Carl Jung.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988).

<sup>5</sup> The goal of this essay is not to romanticize mental illness, as was often done in literature of the 1970s, with the idea that psychosis was somehow the rational response to an irrational world; rather, it should be acknowledged that schizophrenia is an illness that causes great suffering.

All of these physical acts are outward representations of a kind of unconscious sensory overload. Bollas writes: “Work with schizophrenics has taught me that when defenses against the complexities of mind break down, there can be a breakthrough of too much” (2015, 4). This idea of “a breakthrough of *too much*” refers to the schizophrenic patient’s relationship to their unconscious. In many psychoanalytic interpretations of schizophrenia, the understanding is that the patient lacks the traditional barriers or mechanisms that are set up as a defence against the bursting-through of the unconscious, and, as a result, the unconscious now permeates consciousness. This often becomes overwhelming, and the individual copes in a variety of ways—including among these, a creation of a fantastical world where the individual feels safe, with the threat of annihilation kept temporarily at bay. While Johnny creates a physical world that keeps him safe (see my later description of his apartment, and the closets and cabinets therein), it is the fantastical world that is imposed upon him by his visions that creates more of a prison cell, than a refuge. In addition to fantasy worlds, the patient may also fragment the self, projecting parts of the self into inanimate objects for safekeeping. It is worth noting the various barriers, both physical and mental, Johnny erects in order to keep his own, and others’, unconscious at bay (also discussed further below).

Whatever the case, Bollas writes:

It is [...] the loss of un-self-conscious participation in the everyday that constitutes the gravest tragedy for the adult schizophrenic. *He can no longer simply lose himself in the everyday, free to bear “the unspeaking speech that is the soft human murmuring that is in us and around us.”* Those unconscious processes of thought that have woven our own idiomatic pattern through the materials of our world now, for the schizophrenic, punch their way into consciousness—as *vivid visual images*, powerful bodily dispositions, the sound of accusing voices, or as a smelling of the world, shifting from moment to moment. (2015, 122, my italics)

For Bollas, the patient with schizophrenia exists on the “edge of perception” (4). The patient is unable to move through life unperceiving (an idling mode of low-level taking-on of stimuli—I see and hear but can tune out things that are background to me); in fact, they perceive too much and must bear the weight of perpetual, and more intensified, levels of perception. For this reason, they often try to distance themselves from the conscious knowledge of the everyday. For Bollas, “Not knowing that we think unconsciously is vital to our functioning in the world” (120); without this non-knowledge, people would suffocate under

the weight of meaning, but for the patient with schizophrenia, the unconscious is experienced consciously. If this sounds romantic, Bollas assures us that it is not—the patient suffers under this weight, as does Johnny.

### ***The Dead Zone***

*The Dead Zone* opens in a small-town Maine classroom, with high-school teacher Johnny, played by Christopher Walken, reciting poetry to his class. This scene, and the one that follows, establish the romantic relationship between Johnny and fellow teacher Sarah, and cement Johnny's role as educator, a role that will be problematized after his accident. The poem Johnny recites to the students is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845), which is often interpreted as being about one man's descent into madness.<sup>6</sup> This poem sets the tone for the rest of the film:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

This scene is prophetic and will later reflect Johnny's view toward his "gift"—it traps him in a series of unwanted visitations of a foreboding future; for most of the film he sees it as a curse, something inescapable. "The Raven" is referenced again later in the film when Johnny is reading the poem with his young student, Chris. Throughout the film, Johnny's visions hound him, as does the raven in Poe's poem.

Johnny's "gift," or what Sarah calls "second sight," doesn't surface until after a car accident, but earlier scenes depict Johnny suffering headaches, dizziness, and vertigo. In a scene where the two ride a rollercoaster at the amusement park, Johnny seems to experience pain and disorientation, symptoms suggesting a kind of pre-psychosis.<sup>7</sup> Early on, there is already a sense

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<sup>6</sup> See pages 73-74 of Daniel Hoffman's *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (1990 [1972], New York: Paragon House).

<sup>7</sup> This could relate to the fact that, in the book, we find out that Johnny had been suffering from a brain tumour even before the accident. This is not articulated in the film.

in the film that Johnny is a “highly sensitive person” who is beginning to feel the shocks of a relentless modernity.<sup>8</sup> After the accident, and a coma that lasts five years, Johnny begins having visions. Just like the patient with schizophrenia or PTSD, whose psychosis is triggered by a particular event that they can’t outlive or outrun, the car accident causes Johnny to experience a kind of unconscious-to-conscious communication. While there may be genetic predispositions to psychosis, the patient with schizophrenia usually experiences their first psychotic break as a result of a particular event.<sup>9</sup> For Johnny, this precipitating event is the car accident.

Once awakened from the coma induced by the accident, Johnny begins to experience visions triggered by touch. His first psychic vision is triggered by the touch of a nurse as she mops his brow; this mirrors the classic synthesis case of the patient with schizophrenia who reverts back to somatization, experiencing the world through the senses. It is a kind of return to the full sensorium (not just the intellect) that we tend to lose sense of after childhood. In this way, Johnny is beginning to (re)experience the world as an infant or toddler would, where the child is bombarded by the constant pressure of the external world; it is a return to Lacan’s imaginary, before the mirror stage which ushers in the toddler’s entry into the symbolic (see more extensive discussion below). In parallel, Johnny’s visions are experienced proprioceptively—that is, the visions themselves create a physical response in Johnny: gasping, pain, stuttering, gaps in speech, etc.. It is as if, for those few minutes, Johnny inhabits an alternative reality. Walken’s delivery reinforces this—his use of language, particularly the staccato-ed way he speaks; both his speech and movement seem automated or mechanical in some way—another trait of the psychotic individual. While these physical traits were observable before the accident, they are further emphasized after Johnny’s exit from the hospital, becoming almost caricatural.<sup>10</sup>

This uncanny sense of the individual as automaton can also relate to what Bollas calls “psychotic revelation,” which “involves the feeling that more truths are being expressed in the here-and-now than are uttered by normal conscious

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<sup>8</sup> Because the film strips away the brain tumor of the novel, it seems even more likely that Cronenberg and screenwriter Jeffrey Boam wanted to present Johnny as highly sensitive and therefore somehow “primed” for his new “gift.”

<sup>9</sup> Though there are some psychoanalysts, like Bruce Fink (1997), who argue that the psychotic structure has always been present in the psychotic individual.

<sup>10</sup> See the way Johnny lurches across the snow-covered lawn as he makes his way to see Sarah upon her first visit to his house post-accident.

verbalization” (2015, 117). In this sense, what Johnny is experiencing is not so much a psychic vision, as it is a psychotic revelation: “The schizophrenic sense of intuition is rather remarkable. Having reverted to sensorial proprioceptive perception, [the subject] is unknowingly making use of complex unconscious perceptions” (Bollas, 165). We can think of Johnny’s visions as a form of “unconscious sensorial communication” (Bollas, 165). Rather than having a psychic vision, Johnny is perceiving the unconscious of the other, perceiving something beyond “normal conscious verbalization” (Bollas, 117). This is something many of us do without being aware we are doing it. Over the last century, many psychoanalysts have looked into the phenomenon of unconscious-to-unconscious communication. Usually referring to the psychoanalytic dyad, these investigations beg the question: “Whose unconscious is it, anyway?”<sup>11</sup> Even Freud urged this unconscious listening: “The analyst must bend his own unconscious like a receptive organ toward the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone” (Freud 1912). While Johnny’s desire to be at the receiving end of this unconscious messaging is lacking, he can’t help but eventually act on this information.<sup>12</sup> It is for these reasons and others to follow that Cronenberg’s film is both unabashedly psychoanalytical *and* sensorial, bringing the body significantly into play in Johnny’s “psychic” visions.

If we consider Johnny’s visions as unconscious sensorial communication—or psychotic revelation—we can locate Johnny’s experience of the world in the Lacanian order of the imaginary.<sup>13</sup> The imaginary is the psychic register that has to do with fantasy and the spectral image; it is separate from language, at least in the sense of symbolic language. It is also in this register that the infant recognizes their reflection in the other (identification), thus creating an ideal that can never be attained (a form of alienation from oneself). As young children, we occupy the realm of the imaginary, and the same is true of the patient with schizophrenia. According to Bollas, “the schizophrenic child does not have a barrier between conscious and unconscious thought—” (122). This is true of children in general, and just like the child, the patient with

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Bass. “It Takes One To Know One,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, vol. 11, no. 5, 2001, p. 685.

<sup>12</sup> Johnny’s ‘dead zone’ refers to the elements of his psychic visions that are gray, murky; the ‘dead zone’ exists in the space and time in which Johnny can alter the outcome.

<sup>13</sup> Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan orders our psychic reality into three registers: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.

schizophrenia—and Johnny—live in the realm of the imaginary, with the unconscious surfacing through visual imagery and voices, as in the aforementioned discussion of Johnny’s first vision. Though this is certainly the case within Johnny’s visions, it is also the case without—Johnny experiences the word through colours, sounds, and images, as opposed to pure symbolization (and verbalization). While owing a great deal to Lacan here, Bollas also challenges the Lacanian contention that the psychotic individual is entirely removed from the symbolic. For the patient with schizophrenia, there is something like a symbolization of the imaginary, with the patient creating their own mythology through both image and word. For Johnny, this fantastical world is the world within his visions, one that is populated with images of lost and adulterated childhood.

### Childhood Revisited

It is through the realm of the imaginary *and* the symbolic that childhood is central to the film. Johnny’s first vision is of a young girl in her bedroom as it is being consumed by fire—we share Johnny’s perspective, the camera panning over melting crayons, charred stuffed animals, and a boiling fishbowl. The vision then shifts suddenly, and it is Johnny in the burning bedroom, taking the place of the child, once again bringing Johnny’s visions to a painful embodiment. Back in the hospital room, a sweating Johnny grabs the nurse’s wrist: “Amy’s screaming! Your daughter’s screaming! It’s not too late!”<sup>14</sup> Johnny’s second vision also involves a scene between a mother and child; in this instance the child is a young Dr. Weizak, Johnny’s attending physician, and we watch as his mother seems to sacrifice her life to save his own. Having assumed that his mother died in WWII, Dr. Weizak (along with the viewer) learns as a result of Johnny’s vision that she is alive and well, and locatable in the phonebook.

The theme of childhood, and a certain haunting nostalgia, persist throughout the film. Following his coma, and the death of his mother, Johnny moves back into his childhood home with his father; little Denny, Sarah’s young son, sits in a high-chair made by Johnny’s father when they visit Johnny after

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<sup>14</sup> This may be a direct allusion to the dream “The Burning Child” which is described in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1901). After falling asleep attending to his dying child, a father dreams that his child is at his bedside saying “Father, don’t you see that I am burning?”. Upon awakening, the father sees that the candles surrounding the deceased child’s bed have tipped over and the bed is on fire.



his return from the clinic. We also witness Johnny reconnecting with the world through his relationship with Chris, the sensitive young boy Johnny tutors, but the most arresting scene of childhood in the film takes place in the childhood home of deputy officer Frank Dodd.

After finally agreeing to help investigate a string of unsolved murders in Castle Rock, Johnny accompanies local sheriff George Bannerman to the home of Bannerman's deputy officer Dodd, the primary suspect in the murders. The scene that ensues is the most experimental in the film and one that constitutes a shift in the audience's relationship to the perception of space—that is, it enacts a proprioceptive reorientation. Bollas writes: “It is a common observation that, following their breakdown, schizophrenics seem highly sensitive to colour, light and sound. This is because they are now organizing reality according to a particular type of proprioceptive skill” (2015, 164) Proprioception, related to kinesthesia, connotes the awareness of one's body in space, an awareness of movement, location, and motion. It is often referred to as a “sixth sense”—a heightened awareness of your body in the world. This means the psychotic patient is experiencing and organizing the world not through their mental capacities or faculties, but rather through a more fully sensorial engagement. This kind of unconscious communication is central to the relationship between infant and caregiver, and is present in all of us, but is typically repressed to a much greater degree than in the individual with schizophrenia. This shift from a kind of cushioned to a more heightened, more fully embodied state of perception is important to note, as the scene in Dodd's house seems to be taken from another film altogether, particularly in its shift in colour palette and perspective. Up to this point in the film, the colour palette has been muted, with drained tones, punctuated only by flames in the two visions. While the visions are shot with more colour and from an almost cinematic vantage, the scene at Dodd's house seems to be shot in a funhouse, with the camera angles to match. As spectators, we experience this funhouse as Johnny does, sensorially—saturated colours, skewed perspectives. Dodd's house becomes a living, breathing monster, engulfing the viewer. The scene has all the qualities of a nightmare, much like Johnny's visions and is, unsurprisingly, the most Cronenbergian scene in the film.

The scene begins with a slow zoom-in on the house. As we approach, the white clapboard exterior offers no hint of the horrors that are to be (and have been?) committed inside; the house itself exists less as structured ties to a sense of history as we might understand it in the symbolic order—a childhood home—than as a physical, architectural manifestation of the unconscious: of repressed desires, of childhood trauma. Dodd's mother answers the door, and

as she does Johnny grabs her hand: “You knew!” he says, immediately sensing the mother’s culpability. As Johnny pushes past Mrs. Dodd and enters the house, the camera pans across collected trinkets, floral wallpaper and cracked floorboards; everything in the home is bathed in a sickly green glow. Entering Dodd’s bedroom, we lose the green luminosity, and the floral wallpaper is replaced by that of Cowboys and Indians. In some ways an echo of the childhood room of *Psycho*’s Norman Bates, the room is filled with artefacts from Dodd’s childhood: dolls, nutcrackers, pirate ships, comic books, and spinning tops. The few objects of adulthood (ashtrays full of cigarette butts, a set of weights), seem out of place and momentarily pull us out of the realm of childhood fantasy, but at the same time, their presence suggests a crossing-over of the imaginary and symbolic. We have indicators of the conscious world (cigarette butts, weights) nearly engulfed by the unconscious that dictates and dominates the “logic” of the scene: toys, violence-as-play in the wallpaper. Eventually, the camera follows Dodd into the bathroom—it is brightly lit, overly so, existing in sharp contrast to the dim glow throughout the rest of the home. The bathroom’s peeling pink paint and mildewy floral tiles add to the stark reality of the horror of Dodd’s act, as he opens his mouth and exposes his face to an open pair of scissors. Although we’re spared the act itself, the gleaming scissors, and Dodd’s later death throes, create the most horrific scene of the film. The scene also represents a turning point for Johnny—having momentarily glimpsed, and in fact experienced, all the horrors of Dodd’s unconscious, Johnny gains useful and terrifying insight. While by diegetic logic, the encounter with Dodd is accidental, by thematic-narrative logic, there would seem to be parallels. Is Dodd a manifestation of what Johnny might (have/or still) become?

As the camera moves through Dodd’s house, we experience it as Johnny does—colours heightened, voices distorted, a kind of tunnel vision.<sup>15</sup> We are left wondering whether our experience of the house can be trusted—are we experiencing objective reality or the psychotic’s reality? Regardless, the house, and more specifically Dodd’s bedroom, are manifestations of an unconscious suffused with the traumas of childhood; whether these are entirely Dodd’s

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<sup>15</sup> This tunnel vision recalls a scene just prior to the entry into Dodd’s house, where the sheriff, accompanied by Johnny, with Dodd trailing behind, stand in a cold, wet tunnel, examining a leftover cigarette packet possibly left by the killer. We can think of the tunnel imagery as an allusion to Johnny’s visions.

remains unclear.<sup>16</sup> What *is* clear is that this house triggers a bursting-through, a bubbling-over—Johnny experiences too much, perceives too much.

## Doomsday

The climactic scene in Dodd’s home concludes the second act of the film. Act three opens with a snow-filled street, white-picket fences, and snow-covered trees. It is months after the incident in Dodd’s home and Johnny has moved to a new town, one where he hopes to remain anonymous, working as a tutor. His new home consists of a small apartment at the top of a rooming house, with brightly-lit rooms filled with doors and cabinets. Johnny's new reality is decidedly even less stark in its contrasts than in the film's opening act. While partially owing to a new colour scheme, the shift in contrast also signals the degrading separation between conscious and unconscious. Months after Johnny’s initial hospitalization, Dr. Weizak comes to visit him in the new town. At first Johnny is resistant to Dr. Weizak’s visit, but eventually relents. After discussing Johnny’s bleak prognosis (as the visions become more frequent and more intense, his body begins to break down, another example of the embodied nature of his symptoms), Johnny shows Dr. Weizak a closet in which he keeps all of his correspondence, forwarded from his father. These consist of requests to find missing objects, missing pets and missing children (Johnny’s gift, now made public, has turned him into a combination of saviour and carnival curiosity). Through this change of scene and arrangement, we get a more deliberate view of the barriers Johnny erects in order to keep the “spilling over” at bay; here, Johnny has a physical barrier (the closet door), separating him from desire (the many invitations to re-enter the ‘Dead Zone’), separating the conscious from the unconscious. Johnny’s intentional isolation in this scene gives us the greatest sense of his fragmented self. The patient with schizophrenia experiences the self as fragmented—a schism between their former and current selves. This is further reinforced by reports of scattering and slippage, the feeling that the self is falling apart. Friends and family of the patient with schizophrenia often speak as though they have “lost” their loved one, and this perceived loss

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<sup>16</sup> In this way we can make a connection to Cronenberg’s earlier film *Videodrome* (1983). In *Videodrome*, Max Renn also inhabits a world that breaks down the borderlines between conscious and unconscious, often acting on impulses that may or may not be his own, but may be coming from another source (the Videodrome signal), just as Johnny's visions force themselves upon him like a signal that dictates what he sees and how he experiences and negotiates reality.

informs how the patient negotiates, and relates to, society. We can use this understanding of schizophrenia to better understand Johnny's character and his deliberate removal from society. Perhaps anticipating a society in which he is already 'lost', Johnny isolates himself in the attic. In this last scene, Johnny tells Dr. Weizak, "Nothing can touch me here. I'm alone, I'm safe."

Following the scene with Dr. Weizek, we are introduced to Johnny's new student, Chris. It is through this meeting that the final events of the film are set in motion. Johnny's first meeting with Chris takes place in Chris's bedroom—a space very unlike Dodd's bedroom. It is bathed in bright light, covered in light, bucolic wallpaper, and filled with fine furniture and model trains. However, despite the idyllic scene setting up Chris's world as that of the well-adjusted child of wealthy parents, the unconscious seeps through, in the form of a bizarre poster on the wall. The poster features a surreal scene featuring a child sitting on the bed in a bedroom much like Chris's, while bright-orange goldfish swim through the bedroom. While not articulated in the film's dialogue, the poster uncannily recalls Johnny's first vision with the boiling fishbowl, connecting the first and third acts.<sup>17</sup> Even this cozy domestic scene cannot escape Johnny's "gift." While it will eventually be the cause of his dismissal from the tutoring job, it is also Johnny's second sight that eventually saves Chris from drowning in his backyard pond.

By the third act of the film, we move closer to Johnny's most important psychotic revelation. These final scenes usher forth the main moral crux of *The Dead Zone*, in that they recall the classic moral dilemma (as related by Johnny to Dr. Weizak)—if you had a chance to kill Hitler as a child, knowing what he would later set in motion, would you do it? After meeting Greg Stillson, a candidate for the U.S. Senate for whom his former lover Sarah is campaigning, Johnny is overcome by a vision of Stillson as future American president, initiating a nuclear strike. Shot with dramatic lighting and staged like a play, this vision is comprised of three men, including Stillson and his right-hand man Sonny, standing in a room that is part-study, part-dungeon. Just as with Dodd's house, the dungeon/bunker in this final vision works as a manifestation of Stillson's bare motives and violent unconscious urges. In the vision, Stillson, as president, orders his military general to complete the sequence which would launch global missile strikes, presumably initiating the next World War.

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<sup>17</sup> One could also argue that it connects with the second act as well. In both cases we have different visions of healthy (and unhealthy), nostalgic childhoods, with each scene featuring different "bubbly-over" of certain unconscious details. These often connect across scenes.

In order to avoid this catastrophe, Johnny makes a plan to assassinate Stillson at his next political rally, therefore answering the above-mentioned moral question by making himself the sacrificial saviour. Shot during the Cold War, *Dead Zone* takes place during a period when the threat of nuclear war is ever-present in the minds of Americans; it is woven, in fact, into their symbolic framework.<sup>18</sup> Here Johnny, like the patient with schizophrenia, experiences this possibility of nuclear war through the realm of the imaginary (through visions, fantasies, and auditory cues), but the psychic pain he experiences as a result is real. This personal stake stresses the *interpersonal* nature of psychosis, as expressed by Bollas; Johnny is both integrated into, and expelled from, the symbolic order in his final act.

Ultimately, Johnny's attempt to assassinate Stillson fails, but it results in Stillson being exposed as the coward that he is—violently snatching Sarah's infant child to hold it in front of him as protection—and thus Johnny fatalistically accomplishes what he had initially set out to do.<sup>19</sup> Committing the ultimate sacrifice, Johnny finally regains the love of Sarah, single-handedly averts global disaster, and, as he lies dying, finally acknowledges that what was first perceived as a curse might actually be a gift.

What is most horrific in *The Dead Zone* is not the notion of the paranormal, or the ability to see the future (and the past), or this “dead zone,” but the breaking-through or permeation of the unconscious; Johnny is trapped in, and by, his unconscious, and the unconscious of others. The fact that this breaking through is experienced somatically, points to *The Dead Zone* as being one of Cronenberg's most embodied explorations of psychoanalysis and the symptom. This embodiment is linked to the tragedy of the film—Johnny can no longer participate unconsciously in the everyday, and, as such, this breakthrough of the unconscious, of “too much,” hounds Johnny until he is overtaken. Bollas writes: “Living in the everyday [...] is not something that the schizophrenic can do. He cannot forget his authorship and is weighed down by a world that seems constantly to demand from him some form of understanding, enlisting his anxieties, keeping him always on the edge of a

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<sup>18</sup> We can draw parallels here with the film *The Omen*, which was released in 1978, and its second sequel, *The Final Conflict* (1981), both of which abound in Cold War imagery and apocalyptic dread. Cronenberg's vision of Cold War paranoia is decidedly more embodied and personal than these other films—which turn on corporate schemes and powerplay among the elite—would have it.

<sup>19</sup> In a final vision, Johnny sees that Stillson's political career is over and that Stillson commits suicide as a result.

precipice over which he might fall into the stream of unconscious thinking” (2015, 121). This is Johnny’s lot, constantly balancing on this precipice, and like Poe’s unnamed narrator, trapped in the shadows of a space and a visitation that are both of him and outside of him.<sup>20</sup>

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

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<sup>20</sup> This essay is a revised and expanded version of a lecture given on 12 February 2019, as part of the Montreal Monstrum Society course, “A Year in Horror: 1983” (<https://monstrum-society.ca/2018-2019-courses.html>).

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