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Blow out**

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NOBODY WANTS TO KNOW: AN APPRECIATION OF DE PALMA'S BLOW OUT

Shelley O'Brien

Brian De Palma's Philadelphia-set thriller *BLOW OUT* (1981) has, over time, finally gained the reputation it deserves. Despite having a plot device which is taken from Antonioni's *BLOW-UP* (1966), being stylistically influenced by the likes of Hitchcock and Bava, and referencing conspiracy thrillers such as Coppola's *THE CONVERSATION* (1974), the film is far from a copy-cat exercise. De Palma shows his understanding and love of cinema at every turn – both visually and aurally – and delivers a masterpiece of the medium.

The plot revolves around Jack Terri (John Travolta) – a sound technician who works on low-rent horror movies. Watching the latest rushes of slasher 'Co-ed Frenzy', the director is unimpressed by the lacklustre scream of a victim and the same old predictable ambient sound. Whilst recording fresh sounds one night, Jack witnesses the assassination of a presidential candidate, as an apparent tyre blow-out plunges his car into a river. Jumping into the water, he manages to rescue a young woman trapped in the car, Sally (Nancy Allen), but Governor McRyan is already dead. It soon becomes clear that a cover-up is taking place as they are questioned at the hospital. Later on, when Jack listens back to the recordings, his highly attuned ears recognise a gunshot prior to the titular blow-out. From this point on, De Palma crafts a tense conspiracy thriller with twists, turns and tragedy.

During the frantic denouement, Jack wires Sally with a microphone to obtain evidence of the assassination. Burke (John Lithgow), the assassin, kills her before Jack can save her – although in turn Jack manages to kill Burke, ironically leaving no evidence of the conspiracy. In a final twist, Sally's screams, which have been captured on tape, end up being used for the slasher victim in 'Co-ed Frenzy'. The director, at last impressed with such a convincing sound, plays the scream repeatedly as Jack covers his ears in despair.

The plot alone is clever enough to satisfy any lover of thrillers, but what else makes *BLOW OUT* so impressive? Notably, De Palma utilises all of his stylistic trademarks to great effect and Vilmos Zsigmond's cinematography is at its finest. Set pieces featuring split-screen photography, Steadicam and slow-motion do not feel tired or tricky – they add to the overall tone of the proceedings. Several Split Diopter lens shots are remarkable (one example, featuring an owl, seems to burst from the screen in 3D), but they are never simply for show. They are also functional, aligning the spectator with Jack as a witness to conspiracy. Similarly, 360-degree panning shots and high-angle tracking all serve to reinforce Jack's paranoia, especially in a scene where he discovers that all of his tapes have been erased. De Palma wanted the spinning movement to represent the circular movement of tape reels to reinforce the discovery.

The director also manages to create high tension in sequences of Jack listening to, rewinding, cutting and splicing reel-to-reel tape recordings, and synching them to photographic evidence (alluding to the famous Zapruder footage), as he aims to provide evidence of the assassination. Cross-cutting between close-ups of the equipment and Jack desperately working on the tapes could easily have been a pedestrian attempt at generating suspense, but it's a masterclass that stands alongside the best of Hitchcock.

Another key aspect of *BLOW OUT* is performance. John Lithgow's assassin is clinical and cruel, evoking just the right amount of menace without falling foul of pantomime villainy. And Dennis Franz is suitably sleazy as Manny Karp, the photographer who, it turns out, involved Sally in the whole mess. Travolta is entirely convincing as the sound technician caught up in a political conspiracy. He is a likeable and sympathetic character, notably using his recording equipment as if it were second nature. Allen, yet again (in her fourth film with De Palma), proves what an underrated performer she is. She evokes sweetness and naivety without ever seeming fake or irritating. There is also a subtle hint of tragedy bubbling underneath the surface from the moment she first speaks to Jack at the hospital. Significantly, the burgeoning relationship between the pair doesn't feel forced. In fact, De Palma presents us with characters who we really care about, thereby making Sally's death at the end of the film a profound emotional blow both for Jack (as he cradles her lifeless body against a backdrop of Liberty Day fireworks). It's not often that a thriller is able to generate tears – as well as excitement and suspense.

These emotions, of course, would not be so powerful without the film's music score. Much has been written about the use of sound in *BLOW OUT* and rightly so, but there is little commentary on Pino Donaggio's score. Donaggio had already scored *CARRIE* (1976) and *DRESSED TO KILL* (1980) for De Palma, and his skill as a composer is in evidence yet again here. He delivers classic action cues using solo saxophone, exciting percussion, and underscores several scenes with both synths and orchestra. Most effective, though, is the beautiful melancholic love theme rendered on both solo piano and flute, which eventually crescendos using full orchestra at key moments in the film. The heightened emotion at the end is wholly reinforced and shows musical manipulation at its best. Composers often tread a fine line between genuine emotional empathy and schmaltz, but Donaggio doesn't fall into that trap. The result is extremely potent.

Despite critical acclaim on its release, *BLOW OUT*'s downbeat ending impacted negatively on audiences and it has taken many years for the film to be reappraised (and for De Palma to be given his due). There is no doubt now that it's a thriller which ticks every box and more, displaying its influences proudly (right down to appearances from B-movie posters and J&B whiskey!), but it is in every regard a Brian De Palma film and, unquestionably, one of the great movie thrillers of the twentieth century.

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