

Body Double

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BODY DOUBLE (1984)

DIRECTOR: Brian De Palma

SCREENPLAY: Brian De Palma and Robert J. Avrech

CAST: Craig Wasson (Jake Scully), Gregg Henry (Sam Bouchard/The Indian), Melanie Griffith (Holly Body), Deborah Shelton (Gloria Revelle), Guy Boyd (Detective Jim McClean), Barbara Crampton (Carol)

SPECS: 109 minutes; color

AVAILABILITY: DVD/Columbia TriStar.

Body Double is Brian De Palma's most explicit homage to Alfred Hitchcock, in particular *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958). Like those films, *Body Double* explores themes of voyeurism and obsession in its story of struggling actor "Jake Scully's" stalking of a rich Los Angeles resident, "Gloria Revelle". An erotic thriller, the film features sex, murder and elements of horror, and acted as a "template" for softcore erotic thrillers of the 1990s (Williams and Hammond 225). *Variety's* review of the film said that it "slummed in the netherworlds of perverse crime" (Cart 15), and was nothing more than low-budget pornography. *Body Double's* release subsequently generated substantial debate around issues of pornography and violence towards women in the films of Brian De Palma and Hollywood as a whole.

Scully leaves his home and partner, "Carol", after discovering her cheating on him; he walks in on Carol having sex with another man. We don't see the man naked, only Carol, who continues to have sex despite seeing Scully, who leaves humiliated and emasculated. In need of a place to stay, a fellow acting student, "Sam", befriends Scully and offers him the keys to look after a friend's home high up in the Hollywood Hills. It is at this point that the film explicitly becomes voyeuristic. Sam shows Scully to a telescope that is pointed at a

house on a street down below. Scully looks through the telescope to see a woman, Gloria (later revealed to be a body double, the porn actress “Holly Body”), dancing topless and masturbating. Sam explains that the woman puts on this “show” like clockwork every evening [00:19:57]. Scully is unable to look away and becomes preoccupied with Gloria for the rest of the night.

Dialogue in the film is kept to a minimum, with the story largely told through the camera and Scully’s male point of view. Women are reduced to objects in the film, with Gloria often being viewed by Scully through glass: either the glass lens of the telescope, or the glass window front of a shop, or the reflection of her body in a glass mirror as she tries on lingerie. This sees Scully’s view point, and ultimately De Palma’s camera, dominating women via the male gaze, one that is inextricably bound to the victimization of, and violence towards women (Wood 1986: 21). When Scully watches Gloria dancing through the telescope the scene is accompanied by Pino Donaggio’s theme ‘Telescope’ (Donaggio scored several of De Palma’s films, including *Carrie* (1976), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and *Blow Out* (1981)). The theme adds to the erotic quality of the scene, with its new wave sound and its use of a female voice that beckons siren like. The music acts to normalize Scully’s behavior and to suggest a romantic link between his voyeurism and the erotic dancing of the woman, almost as if she is knowingly performing for him. The theme recurs repeatedly throughout the film when Scully watches women, either Gloria or later Holly Body, but is inexplicably linked to this initial moment of voyeuristic behavior.

The siren like quality of the music also speaks to the way Scully has become entranced with Gloria. He follows her when he sees her leave her house in her car. His motivation in following Gloria is in believing her life is threatened by a man, the “Indian”, that he has noticed has also been watching her. Therefore, his motivation is to warn Gloria of the threat the Indian poses to her, but he repeatedly fails to do and instead merely watches her

from a distance. The Indian's face is grotesquely disfigured to suggest his monstrous character. It also plays into the expectations, both Scully's and the audience, that only such a monstrous looking individual could bring violent harm to Gloria. It does not occur to Scully that it could be his own character – good looking, good natured and charming – that is more of a danger to her life. Scully follows Gloria to a shopping mall, but rather than warn her about the Indian, watches her enter a lingerie shop and then spies on her through a gap in a changing room curtain [00:35:22]. His obsessive behavior climaxes with him later stealing the underwear he saw Gloria trying on after she throws them into a bin [00:40:20].

The male point of view of the camera, and of Scully's gaze, all work towards constructing a masculine fantasy, one in which women are presented as seductresses, with youthful, voluptuous bodies. Scully's gaze constructs a fantasy that prevents him from seeing the reality of the situation: that he is being set up to witness a murder and to present an alibi for the killer, Sam, who has disguised himself as the Indian but in fact is the husband of Gloria. Scully's fantasy, his desire to believe that the naked woman he sees dancing through the telescope is Gloria, dupes him into thinking that his growing obsessive behavior is acceptable. But the film also dupes the audience into accepting this fantasy. For example, when Scully finally picks up the courage to talk to Gloria, she acknowledges that she knows he has been following her [00:45:29]. Yet despite this, they engage in a passionate, erotic kiss. This comes after the Indian mugs Gloria, stealing her handbag [00:45:43]. Gloria is presented as a helpless woman in need of rescue by a man. Scully pursues the Indian into a tunnel but is prevented from stopping him due to his fear of claustrophobia. Gloria finally catches up with Scully and, taken by his gallant behavior, surrenders to his advances [00:50:52]. The erotic embrace sees the camera seductively swirling about the couple, with the background reduced to a blur as if they were in a dream. It is a self-reflexive moment in which the film acknowledges itself as a movie and the Hollywood male fantasy of "getting

the girl”. It is a moment later repeated when Scully meets Holly Body, a porn actress he has spotted in a pornographic movie, *Holly Does Hollywood* – the camera again swirls about him and then cuts back to the moment he was kissing Gloria [01:17:36]. He is now engaged in the fantasy of having sex with Gloria, but in reality is on a porn set having sex with Holly Body.

The centerpiece of the film is Gloria’s murder at the hands of the Indian. Once more Scully is watching Gloria through the telescope when he notices that the Indian has broken into her apartment. Rather than phone the police, Scully initially watches the unfolding violence before finally deciding to act. His delayed reaction ensures that the Indian has time to attack and kill Gloria. Scully’s gaze repeatedly traps him and leaves him impotent to react. This is seen in the opening shot of the film when filming a low-budget horror film. Scully’s character is encased in a coffin and the camera zooms in on his face. He is meant to scream, but can’t. Instead, he is frozen, his gaze into the camera leaving him passive and immobile. This same fear grips him when watching Gloria. He is momentarily gripped with paralysis as he realizes Gloria is about to be murdered and his immobility, his voyeuristic behavior, ultimately contributes to her death. The Indian murders Gloria with a drill in a sequence that reputedly led to walk outs during the preview screening of the film. And once more Scully is paralyzed from taking action; he breaks into Gloria’s house but is pounced upon by a guard dog. The dog keeps Scully on the ground, forcing him to watch as the drill comes through the ceiling and brings with it copious amounts of blood.

When later questioning Scully about the murder, “Detective McLean” directly blames him for Gloria’s death: “As far as I’m concerned, you’re the real reason Gloria Revelle got murdered. If you hadn’t been so busy by getting off peeping on her, if you had called the police about your blood brother, the Indian, Gloria Revelle would still be alive” [01:07:33]. The film therefore suggests that harm came to Gloria because Scully was voyeuristically pursuing her. His voyeurism, his male gaze, is what leads to her violent death. This is a link

that recurs throughout De Palma's filmography, as a number of critics have noted, with his films equating women with sex, and sex with murder (Eisen 30). The murders or violent outbursts are often gruesome and utilize sexual symbols: a phallic drill that penetrates Gloria in *Body Double*; the "menstrual" blood that covers Carrie in *Carrie*; the men's razor used to slash "Kate" to death in *Dressed to Kill*; or the strangulation of "Sally" in *Blow Out*.

After Gloria's death, Scully returns to the apartment he is staying at and begins to watch pornographic movies. His gaze is drawn to one title in particular, *Holly Does Hollywood*, featuring Holly Body. She performs a dance and masturbation routine that is exactly the same as the one Scully thought he had seen Gloria performing. Sensing something is amiss, Scully decides to visit the production studio that filmed *Holly Does Hollywood* to locate Holly Body. He auditions for a role in an upcoming porn film starring Holly Body. We do not see Scully remove his clothes, however, despite being asked to do so by the director of the film. In fact, we do not see any male nudity in the film whatsoever, only female nudity. This is very much a heteronormative portrayal of sex designed for the heterosexual male gaze, while Scully's move into the porn industry is a further extension of his heteronormative fantasy of watching women. He began the film by watching Gloria through the telescope, then proceeds to watch porn films, and now he is participating in an actual porn production. He begins shooting the movie with Holly Body, and in one scene of this film within a film adorns glasses (another symbol of the need to watch) and tells Holly Body that "I like to watch" [01:16:13]. Up to now Scully has been fearful of women and their sexuality: he could not confront his wife when he caught her having sex; nor could he engage in sex with Gloria, but only watch her from afar. And so with Holly Body, he can only engage in sex with her through the fantastical setting of the porn film. The female characters of *Body Double*, and De Palma's filmography in general, exude power and control over men through their

sexuality; in turn this induces male anxiety and ultimately contributes to the death of women at the hands of men in order to reassert their sexuality.

De Palma's fascination with sex and sexuality saw him devise a "Golden Rules of Shooting a Sex Scene" (De Palma), in which he suggests that eroticism is an illusion and instead the female body had to be captured on camera as if it were a painting. He emphasized that the female form had to be "exquisitely photographed" (De Palma). The rise of the so-called "movie-brats" in the 1970s stressed the idea of personal filmmaking. By implication, this means the "sexual attitudes and social viewpoints" of a director like De Palma have to be considered as part of his personal vision (Eisen 31). This is best exemplified in the closing scene of *Body Double*, in which Scully reprises his role as a vampire in a B-movie; he is in a shower with a nude woman and inserts his fangs into her neck, causing blood to flood down her body. It recalls the opening shower sequence of *Carrie*, when Carrie is in the shower and menstruates for the first time, the camera watching as the blood flows down her naked body. Both seem voyeuristic and predatory in the use of the camera. De Palma regularly places female characters in the shower, a site of predatory danger and an ode to Hitchcock's *Psycho*. If Hitchcock was obsessed with themes of the double, voyeurism, death, and sexuality (among other things), then De Palma's films, which repeatedly allude to Hitchcock, heighten these preoccupations much further. In interviews for the release of *Scarface*, De Palma insisted on describing his next feature – *Body Double* – as a "hardcore pornographic suspense film" (Collin). De Palma went so far as wanting to hire porn actress Annette Haven to play the role eventually taken up by Melanie Griffith, but Columbia executives had warned De Palma they would not fund *Body Double* if he made such a casting choice (Gerz 92).

More than anything, however, *Body Double* is a pure thriller, designed to create suspense and fear in its audience. The poster promises the audience themes of sex and voyeurism; a man peeks through blinds at a woman in only her underwear, her head thrown

back in orgasmic pleasure as she touches herself. The poster invites the audience to ‘witness’ both a seduction and a murder. The audience, then, are complicit in the film’s voyeurism, right down to witnessing a series of movies within the movie, including the filming of a pop-video by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, for their song ‘Relax’, on the set of the porn film in which Scully features. *Body Double* is all about watching, with the emphasis throughout being on “visual storytelling rather than dialogue” (Ebert). And though the film is filled with sexist, even misogynistic imagery, it is ultimately an exhilarating piece of cinema, in which De Palma, through his thrilling use of the camera, compels the audience to participate in the unfolding voyeurism.

James Fenwick

See also: Basic Instinct, Carrie, Vertigo, The Male Gaze

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