



DREAM PALACE

Blow Out

Introduction by Ben Roberts, BFI CEO (Monday 17 May screening only).

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

A great 1970s movie that came out too late to be included in the canon, *Blow Out* is a mind-blowing combination of conspiracy thriller and offbeat love story mixed with a reflection on the nature of cinema more engaging (and more profound) than the Antonioni film it references in its title. John Travolta gives one of his best performances as a movie soundman recording wind noises when he witnesses (and records) a fatal car crash. That sequence alone, with its extreme close-ups, rack-focus shots and depth of field, belongs in an anthology. Indeed, much of the pleasure in this most stylish of De Palma's films comes from Vilmos Zsigmond's cinematography and Paul Sylbert's production design, chopping the frame into vertical and horizontal grids and blocks of colour in even the most ordinary of interiors. Travolta's investigation takes him through a spectacularly grubby landscape of political corruption; the penultimate sequence, shot against Philadelphia's Fourth of July fireworks, is among the most florid of De Palma's visual flourishes; and the final scene is a killer.

Nick Roddick, *Sight & Sound*, August 2007

It's easy to believe in De Palma's reported teenage fascination with technology: his meanings, in an individual film, are most often an extension of his technical means; and his body of work, up to *Blow Out*, has an unusually systematic progression, like a series of experiments. He treats both his own previous works and the works of others (especially Hitchcock's), as research to be built upon, suggestive hypotheses to be tested and then surpassed. *Blow Out* looks like a conscious summation of De Palma's themes and techniques.

He draws his principal collaborators – actors John Travolta, Nancy Allen, John Lithgow and Dennis Franz, cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, editor Paul Hirsch, composer Pino Donaggio – from his earlier films; lays out his full array of technical tricks – 360° pans, elaborate tracking shots, split screens, slow motion; deploys all his usual themes and visual motifs – surveillance, political and sexual paranoia, doomed love, the helpless observer, blood and breaking glass; places' at its centre his autobiographical character, the technology whiz. He introduces the subject of filmmaking itself (and even includes a parody of his own work); takes another crack (after the failure of the too slavishly imitative *Obsession*) at capturing the dreamlike romantic horror of *Vertigo*. And he places it all in the narrative context of an assassination conspiracy plot that draws elements from the John Kennedy assassination, Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick scandal, the Watergate cover-up, and urban mass murderers such as New York's 'Son of Sam' and San Francisco's 'Zebra' killer, all the most powerful images of violence and corruption from the past 20 years of American history, and in the visual context of a scrupulously maintained colour scheme of red, white and blue. What De Palma was working toward all along, it seems, was this thrillerised autobiography of an American filmmaker.

The presence of an adult, rather than a teenager, at the centre of the film is the key to *Blow Out*'s form and to its meaning. *Carrie* and *The Fury* were about people experiencing events with a first-time intensity, and were structured as series of shocks, progressions from innocence to cruel knowledge; the shocks are muted here, and deeper, and the structure is circular, because *Blow Out*'s

subject is the horror of repetition, the adult experience of having seen and heard it all before, events playing and replaying in our minds in an endless loop. The film means to have this effect on the viewer's memory, to send us circling back into the past at every point, both the past outside the film – *The Fury* and *Dressed to Kill*, *Vertigo* and *Blowup*, the Kennedy assassination and Watergate, even the revolutionary history of America (the action takes place in Philadelphia during an historical celebration called 'Liberty Day') – and the past within the film as well. *Blow Out* ends where it began, in a screening room, and with the same piece of film, a shower murder from the trashy slasher movie *Coed Frenzy*; the sounds we hear in the film's key scenes – gun shots, footsteps, breaking glass, thunderous fireworks – are the same taped sounds that Jack Terry is collecting and labelling in the credit sequence; and Jack's pursuit of the killer of a presidential candidate ends in a re-enactment of the central trauma of his life, a botched surveillance operation that causes his confederate's death. Visually, the film is all circles: Jack's spinning reels of tape; the killer's garrotte.

Jack Terry's story describes an arc from detachment to involvement and back again – back to something far beyond detachment, an anaesthetised professionalism. His art as a movie sound recordist allows him a certain distance: not only can he pick up sounds from far away, he picks them up dissociated from the images they will accompany on the screen. But when he hears, and records, the blow out that killed Governor McRyan, he begins to close the gap: by playing the tape again and again; by becoming involved with Sally, the other witness; and finally by attempting to put sound and image together. He makes a flip book out of a series of cut-out magazine photos of the crash, then animates the sequence, then synchronises his tape to the animation – all the while neglecting his work on *Coed Frenzy* – and these scenes reach back, exhilaratingly, into the history of film: this jaded exploitation filmmaker is recovering an earlier, more vital self, rediscovering a reason for his art, reinventing a cinema of crude materials and passionate technique.

In the end, when Terry's new-found joy in his technique has failed him and left Sally dead in his arms, he sits on a bench and listens to her last words on tape, then the tape spins on its reels in Jack's editing room when no one's there, as if it's circling on its own, and in the screening room her recorded scream is coming from the mouth of the girl shrinking from the looming knife in *Coed Frenzy*, De Palma's camera gliding around the figure of Jack watching and listening, saying 'good scream' over and over as the film plays again, until he puts his hands to his head and covers his ears.

It's a purely harrowing scene, De Palma's greatest shock, a confessional moment rendered with an objectivity that keeps us suspended between distance and identification. We know, as De Palma does, where this horror comes from, the despair that overtakes us as we watch ourselves, technicians, cut the deepest pain out of ourselves and turn it into product, into images of violence whose triviality is surreally disproportionate to their traumatic sources. What we don't know, as De Palma doesn't, is whether this communal replay of private nightmares, the American movie, is invigorating or numbing – or, like the drugs Tony Montana deals in *Scarface* [1983], somehow both at once. De Palma's assumption of the identity of a Hollywood pro in *Scarface* is his way of exploring the last implication of the sick joke at the end of *Blow Out*, plunging himself at last into the cold heart of the American screen.

Terrence Rafferty, 'De Palma's American Dreams', *Sight & Sound*, Spring 1984

Blow Out

Directed by: Brian De Palma
Production Companies: Viscount Associates, Cinema 77, Geria Film, Inc. Filmways Pictures
Executive Producer: Fred Caruso
Produced by: George Litto
Studio Manager: George Hill
Production Manager: Fred Caruso
Production Office Co-ordinator: Shari Leibowitz
Auditor: Victor T. Salant
Assistant Auditor: Carin Grönhagen
Location Manager: Ted Kurdyla
Location Co-ordinator: Robert Rothbard
Production Consultants: Bob Lemond, Lois Zetter
Special Production Assistant: Clayton Townsend
Assistant to Miss Allen: Debbie Brenner
Assistant to Mr De Palma: Gary Hill
Assistants to Mr Litto: Gail Kearns, Linda Lee
Assistant to Mr Travolta: Joan Edwards
Production Secretary: Susan Bartholomew
2nd Unit Director: John Fox
1st Assistant Director: Joe Napolitano
2nd Assistant Director: Lewis Gould
Script Supervisor: Hannah Scheel
Casting by: Lynn Stalmaster & Associates
Bits and Extras: Joy Todd Inc., Joanna Oberman
Casting Associate: Lisa Freiberger
Written by: Brian De Palma
Director of Photography: Vilmos Zsigmond
Additional Photography: László Kovács *
Underwater Camera: Rexford Metz *
Camera Operator: Jan Kiesser
Assistant Cameraman: Michael Gershman
2nd Assistant Cameramen: Michael Green, Ken Nishino
Gaffer: Richard Martens
Rig Electrician: Larry Whitehead
Best Boy: John Kirk
Key Grip: Richard Deats
Grip Best Boy: Jim Dyer
Dolly Grip: Gary Parker
Still Photographer: Louis Goldman
Blue Screen Composites: Van Der Veer Photo Company
Process Co-ordination: Bill Hansard, Don Hansard
Special Effects Foreman: Calvin Acord

Edited by: Paul Hirsch
Assistant Editor: Gina Roose
Apprentice Editors: Mark Rathaus, Lisa J. Levine
Production Designer: Paul Sylbert
Set Designer: Jeannine Oppewall
Set Decorator: Bruce Weintraub
Scenic Chargemen: Tom Bartholomew, Christopher Sylbert
Property Master: Erik Nelson
Prop Man: Mark Hollingsworth
Lead Man: Dan May
Drapery Man: Irwin Epstein
Construction Co-ordinator: Joe Acord
Construction Foreman: Jim McGee
Set Painter: Moe Larson
Costumes Designed by: Vicki Sanchez
Nancy Allen’s Costumes Designed by: Ann Roth
Key Costumer: Sandra Berke
Costumer: Laurie Riley
Wardrobe Assistants: Claudia Everett, Elizabeth Wasielewsky
Make-up Artist: Leo Lotito
Make-up Artist for Nancy Allen: Joseph Cranzano
Hair Stylist for Nancy Allen: Lyn Quiyou
Hair Styles: Vivian McAteer
Main Title/End Credits: R/Greenberg Associates
Opticals: The Optical House
Music by: Pino Donaggio
Conducted by: Natale Massara
Music Co-ordinator: Jacquie Litto
Music Editor: Robert Q. Lovett
Music Recording Engineer: Tom Jung
Sound Mixer: James Tanenbaum
Boom Operator: Rimas Tumasonis
Re-recording Supervisor: Dick Vorisek, Trans/Audio
Supervising Sound Editor: Dan Sable
Sound Editor: Michel Moyse
Looping Editor: Lowell Mate
Negative Cutter: Donah Bassett
Sound Effects: Hastings Sound Editorial
Stunt Co-ordinator: Carey Loftin
John Travolta’s Stunt Double: Rick Avery
Technical Consultant: John Fox
Dialogue Coach: Ramona Lenny
Unit Publicist: Tom Miller

CAST

John Travolta (Jack Terry)
Nancy Allen (Sally Badina)
John Lithgow (Burke)
Dennis Franz (Manny Karp)
John Aquino (Detective Mackey)
Peter Boyden (Sam)
Curt May (Frank Donahue)
John McMartin (Lawrence Henry)
Deborah Everton (hooker)
J. Patrick McNamara (detective at hospital)
Amanda Cleveland, Roger Wilson (co-ed lovers)
Lori-Nan Engler (Sue)
Cindy Manion, Missy O’Shea (dancing co-eds)
Marcy Bigelman (ecstatic co-ed)
Ann Kelly (studious co-ed)
Dean Bennett (campus guard)
John Coppolino Jr (maniac)
Archie Lang (mixer)
Dave Roberts (anchorman)
Claire Carter (anchorwoman)
Maurice Copeland (Jack Manners)
John Hoffmeister (Governor George McRyan)
David De Felice (boy lover)
Barbara Sigel (girl lover)
Tom McCarthy, Reginald M. Wallace (policemen at hospital)
Robert L. Penrose (hospital administrator)
Larry Woody (doctor)
Dick McGarvin (TV newscaster)
Michael Borghese (newsdealer)
Rossana Fichera (receptionist)
James Jeter (film lab man)
Luddy Tramontana (Freddie Corso)

Sid Doherty (cop in car)
Milt Fields (mobster)
Bud Seese (Kennedy, corrupt captain)
Maureen Sullivan (Mary Robert, 1st murder victim)
Brian Corrigan (cop at Karp’s office)
Elaine Filoon, Robin Sherwood (screamers)
Tim Choate (sailor)
B.J. Cyrus, Dave De Angelis, Thomas Finn, Tony Devon (sailor’s friends)
Henry Cohen, Bernie Rachelle (ambulance attendants)
William Tarman (security guard)
Michael Tearson (hawker)
USA 1981
108 mins

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