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## "Blow Up" by De Palma

Less serrated than the frenzied, madcap pop-art exclamations of his youthful, more uninhibited days, Brian De Palma's self-consciously mature 1981 effort is undoubtedly a work of its time, and a statement of De Palma stretching out, if not always to great effect. This update and inversion of Michelangelo Antonioni's scintillatingly deconstructive *Blow Up* is an embodiment of the ennui-encrusted political halitosis of life in 1981, a scabrous redressing of the Reagan administration's proposition of oncoming better times.

Perhaps it was less De Palma maturing than adapting, having spent a cynical decade throwing the proverbial stylistic excrement at the fan in a flurry of toxic pent-up frustration and demented fun. Now, with the early '80s calling for a re-flourishing propaganda and jingoism, the ever-malleable, ever-angry, ever-anti-establishment De Palma swerves and gives them paranoia and an existential void. It's not unlike the director, rejecting not only the times but his own cinematic past just to stir the shit; it is what he does best, but his best had been better before. In this light, the opening of *Blow Out*, a libidinous fake-out that recalls and implicitly questions the truth-value of De Palma's earlier, more lecherous, more exploitative cinema, is also a premonition of De Palma's new, more self-consciously restrained, even pensive "director as a dramatist" role rather than the madcap, oddly philosophical maniac that was still in his heart (as *Body Double* would prove).

Rather clearly introducing us to "old De Palma", the film than swerves and proclaims the exploitation into a fakeout, a reminder of where we've been right before De Palma moves on to where we're going. Wonderful though the intro is, it is also telling that the scene which most recollects the memory of earlier De Palma is also the film's best moment. *Blow Out* then treads more nihilistic, self-reflective ground as film sound designer Jack Terry (John Travolta) thinks he hears a murder of a politician on his sound equipment and his catlike curiosity nearly ... well, you know how the story goes. Deeper themes, but the filmmaking veers toward the middlebrow after the delicious opening bit. The film deserves no ill will, nor does Pauline Kael's semi-famous endorsement of it, but De Palma's infamously harried stylistic acrobatics are simmered-down here. Not to within an inch of cinematic life, by any means, but the constantly rekindling fires of his earlier works are the unholy territory in this more tormented affair of a similar workaday film talent like Jack investigating a world devoid of life. Unfortunately, the film's humorless poker face sabotages De Palma's cartoonish zeal and provocateur's edge. Rather than transgressing the cinema of the times, *Blow Out* feels like he's submitting to it by going "serious".

Effective though it is, Terry's tale of a film worker upended by his own curiosity to investigate

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the ways of the early '80s may too poetically mirror De Palma's own folly in using *Blow Out* to explore the dour New Hollywood aesthetic (at the eve of its dissolution) rather than asserting his more own more raffish, playful style. That quibble about the film's submission to the status quo, *Blow Out* is at least fantastically submissive, a failure of ambition but not craft. It seldom exhibits the flair of De Palma's most subversive works, but you could call it a case of apples and oranges. The director's earlier, more polemical works trespass over reality with malicious intent; *Blow Out*, more of an inquisitor than a firebrand, negotiates with reality, and the preference may be a matter of taste.

Certainly, *Blow Out* is probably De Palma's most top-to-bottom cohesive work, the lone chokehold on maturity he exhibited before swiveling back to ostentatious exploitation with *Body Double* and then going Hollywood with works like *The Untouchables* that are as streamlined as *Blow Out* but not nearly as troublesome in their desire to investigate and probe. For a director playing Antonioni here, the sound design more ably recalls De Palma's earlier Hitchcock riffs, violating the diegesis and whirling around Jack like it's simultaneously suffocating him and finally revealing a new world of endless unseen possibility – of new revelations and aural perspectives – that only unearth a rabbit's hole of terror. This is obvious in the narrative – it's a story about a man climbing into a rabbit hole of paranoia with his sound equipment as his shovel – but the formal soundscape reiterates and advances the feeling of grasping for discernible, tactile sounds and having them always slide away from your ability to contain them.

Vilmos Zsigmond's black velvet beauty of a lens suffuses the film in charcoal dark nights that, again, liberate us from the confines of the brown-and-grey everyday world only to uncover an oblivion or a cavern of colorless emptiness that our minds, like Jack's, desperately strive to fill-in with knowledge and dirt. Much like the plot, the cinematography and sound suggest freedom as foreclosure, with a scraping away of the world's façade – the revelation of new sounds and visuals – demarcating how little we really know after all.

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