

## CHAPTER 14

### *Blow Out* (1981)

Starting with a blade-wielding killer who attacks a woman in the shower, *Blow Out* begins where *Dressed to Kill* ended, but only so that De Palma can distance himself from the kind of stalk-and-slash film that he has been pigeonholed as making. “I’m typed as . . . the specialist in B-movie horror,” he has said,<sup>1</sup> and so *Blow Out* begins with a scene that is gradually revealed to be from a film-within-the-film, a low-budget horror movie called *Coed Frenzy*. Made as a kind of parody of *Halloween* (according to Steadicam operator Garrett Brown),<sup>2</sup> the scene is deliberately bad, with the camera adopting the perspective of the heavy-breathing killer as he leers at scantily clad coeds before plunging his knife into one. The parody announces De Palma’s new distance from this type of subject matter, as does the Brechtian moment of the showering woman’s feebly unconvincing scream, which throws us out of the B-grade horror movie and into the more serious film that De Palma really wants to make—one where he is “dealing with a kind of material that I’d never dealt with before and trying not to pander to the bloodlust of the audience, which is what I’ve been accused of doing many times.”<sup>3</sup>

Jack (John Travolta), a soundman on cheap horror movies, is recording some nocturnal noises in a park when his microphone picks up the pop of a tire blow out, which causes a car to careen into a river. The car’s male driver drowns, but Jack is able to dive in and save the female passenger, Sally (Nancy Allen). The driver was Governor McRyan, possibly the next U.S. president, and Jack hears what he thinks may be a gunshot just prior to the tire blow out on his recording of the incident, making him suspect that it might have been an assassination rather than an accident. It turns out that a photographer, Manny (Dennis Franz), was also present on the scene, and Sally reveals that he was

there to take compromising pictures of the governor's adulterous dalliance with her. By syncing up Manny's still photos with his own audio recording, Jack is able to confirm both the sound and the bright explosion of a gunshot preceding the blow out. Thus, it is revealed that there was yet another man at the scene, Burke (John Lithgow), an operative for the opposing campaign, who exceeded his orders—which were to compromise, not to kill—and shot out the governor's tire, leading to his death. Now, to cover up all evidence of the crime, Burke impersonates a TV news reporter and meets with Sally, who brings him the synced-up film. Jack has planted a bug on Sally, enabling him to locate her by following her screams and to kill Burke just before the man is about to plunge an ice-pick into her. But it is too late: Burke has already strangled her to death with a wire. With Burke having destroyed the film, there is no longer any convincing evidence of the politically motivated crime that Jack was trying to prove. In a gesture of cynical despair, Jack dubs Sally's screams into the low-budget horror movie *Coed Frenzy*. They are very convincing.

In some ways, *Blow Out* marks a return to De Palma's earlier film, *Greetings*, where Lloyd (Gerrit Graham) is obsessed with proving that there was a conspiracy behind the John F. Kennedy assassination. Like Jack, Lloyd tries to solve the mystery by studying photos of the incident (blown-up frames from the Zapruder film). Lloyd's obsession with his investigative work also takes precedence over any relationship he might have with a woman, as when he traces bullet trajectories on the nude body of his would-be girlfriend. The danger to her that is merely implied is made manifest in Jack's case, when he persuades Sally to go alone to meet with the man who ends up being her killer. True, Jack thinks this man is a TV news reporter, not Burke; Jack has wired Sally so that he can listen in; and Jack believes that the only way both of them will be safe is if the truth about the assassination is made public, in which case there would no longer be any point in killing them to shut them up. But Jack is also hell-bent on proving that his theory about the conspiracy is correct, and in this he puts his own ego above Sally's safety. As De Palma says, "[Jack] manipulated [Sally] to prove that he is right. He didn't think that his experiment was maybe going to cost the life of the girl he loves; no, for him, the truth must be divulged, whatever the price."<sup>4</sup> In Jack, De Palma recognizes a surrogate for himself, for he, too, is prone to such an obsessive involvement in his own work that his relationship with those he loves can be imperiled: "When I'm making a film, nothing else matters to me. The outside world no longer exists. I have only one obsession: to realize the project that is in my head. I no longer pay any attention to my wife or my children and sometimes I've lost everything because of it."<sup>5</sup>

Besides the John F. Kennedy assassination, another historical influence on *Blow Out* is the 1969 Chappaquiddick affair, in which lingering questions about Ted Kennedy's involvement in an incident where his car drove off a

bridge and into the water, leaving his female companion dead, ended the possibility of his becoming president. Not only has De Palma reversed the outcome, as if to punish the man for his philandering (the politician dies while the woman survives), but with Manny there to take photographs of the man *in flagrante delicto*, De Palma seems to make another obsessive reference to that incident from his own past when he attempted to film his father committing adultery in order to obtain evidence for his mother's divorce. (Sally claims that the photos Manny took of her in bed with adulterers would be used by their wives in divorce cases.) We also know that the young De Palma tried to capture his father's adulterous conversations on tape and that he considered taking a .22-caliber rifle with him to the confrontation with his father and the mistress, so it would seem that there are additional connections between De Palma and Jack, who tapes McRyan in the car with Sally, and between De Palma and Burke, who shoots McRyan as De Palma had thought of shooting his philandering father.

It is as though De Palma had split and scattered himself across three characters—Jack, Manny, and Burke—each of whom is gradually revealed to have been present at the scene of adulterous McRyan's death: Jack listening (with his shotgun mike taping the incident), Manny viewing (with his camera shooting photos), and Burke shooting (with his rifle). Throughout *Blow Out*, Jack can be read as someone who tries to confirm his identity as a good man by differentiating himself from his dark doubles, Manny and Burke.

At first, the difference between Jack and Manny may seem clear-cut. Manny put Sally in the car with McRyan, using her to take compromising photos, and he may even have known about Burke's plan to shoot out the tire, in which case Manny would have placed Sally in danger of death. Manny flees the scene whereas Jack dives in to save her. However, there are strange similarities between the two men. The office where Manny works on his sleazy photos is located above an X-rated movie theater, and Jack is the soundman on cheap slasher films containing elements of softcore porn. Manny's photos of Sally in bed with other men make him a kind of voyeur, while Jack's phallic microphone intrudes upon two lovers in the park at night, prompting the woman to wonder, "What is he, a Peeping Tom or something?" After rescuing Sally from the river, Jack takes her to a motel where he chastely puts her to bed, but later, when he discovers Manny's photos of Sally in bed with other men *at the same motel*, Jack's attitude toward her changes from chivalrous to contemptuous, speaking to her as he would to the "tits and ass" models who feature in his softcore porn slashers: "You got nice tits. Who was payin' you to flash them for McRyan?"

Although Sally protests that she "didn't really . . . screw" her clients, Jack's view of her is now clouded, with the "good girl" shadowed by hints of the

whore. Similarly, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, after Scottie (James Stewart) saves Madeleine/Judy (Kim Novak) from drowning and puts her chastely to bed, he is disturbed to find out that she was involved with another man and part of a nefarious plot against Scottie. From the moment of that revelation, Scottie loses trust in her, suspecting her of further duplicity (like Sally, she is a shop-girl and actress associated with make-up or a possible "false front"), and his energies turn from loving her toward making sure that he is not the victim of any further plot, even if that means endangering her.

Likewise, Jack—though at one level still very much concerned for Sally—is also prey to subterranean doubts about the kind of woman she is. In one shot, Jack is backgrounded by a store window displaying a row of female mannequins whose attire alternates between bridal white and sensual red: is Sally a "good girl" he could marry or a prostitute? Red-haired Sally is dressed entirely in red in the scene where, after his flash of anger at her for her pecuniary participation in Manny's compromising photos, Jack tries to convince her not to trust Manny. Is Jack also trying to convince himself that she is not a whore but a "Raggedy Ann doll" or innocent victim of Manny's scheme? (Nancy Allen has said that she "saw 'Sally' as being some sort of rag-doll. Brian wanted me to change the color of my hair for it. So I took it deep red.")<sup>6</sup>

As with Scottie, Jack's doubts about the woman seem bound up with his need not to be victimized by other men, such as those involved in the political (Burke) or financial (Manny) conspiracy against McRyan. "I'm sick of being fucked by these guys!" Jack tells Sally, as his compassion for her as a fellow victim gives way to his desire to use her in a plan to prove the conspiracy. After wiring Sally and sending her to the meeting with the man who ends up being her killer, Jack cynically dubs her screams into the slasher porn film he is making solely for the money. In profiting from Sally's dying screams, Jack seems little different from Manny, who had sold photos of Sally as she was sinking to what could have been her death in the car with McRyan.

There are also peculiar connections linking Jack and Burke that work against Jack's attempts to establish himself as the hero in opposition to the villain. We have noted the sense in which Jack, recording sounds in the park for use in his slasher film about a voyeuristic killer, is himself a kind of audio voyeur, intruding with his phallic/shotgun microphone upon some lovers. Of course, Jack is ostensibly just doing his job as a soundman and not emotionally involved. His interest in the sounds of sex and death, such as those of the lovers or of the woman being stabbed in the shower in *Coed Frenzy*, is purely technical—or is it?

Burke, too, is supposedly just doing a job, voyeuristically stalking and stabbing women so that when he kills Sally, her death will appear to be merely one in a series of sex-murders rather than a political cover-up—but is he

really so dispassionate? Stalking his first victim in a fish market that advertises “CLAMS” in the window, Burke grabs an ice-pick next to a dead fish on the left side of the screen, while on the right can be seen his female prey. Male disgust at the female sex has sometimes been expressed in terms of its “fishy” smell. Soon after, Burke kills the woman by rolling around on top of her down the side of an excavation site and, while breathing heavily, by stabbing her repeatedly with the ice-pick—a lust-murder that seems to punish her for arousing his desire. “She made me do it,” Burke later tells the police by phone, with deep emotion in his voice but a totally blank look on his face. Consciously, Burke is merely impersonating a sex-murderer as part of his job as a political operative, but the impersonation reveals an unconscious truth about his emotional involvement in these lust/disgust killings.

Later, after watching a prostitute give a blow job to a sailor, Burke pretends to be her next client, stalking her to a restroom where, instead of receiving oral sex, he strangles her with a wire. The red-haired hooker in her red dress stands out against the white tiles and toilet in the restroom stall; in Burke’s eyes, her sexuality defiles the purity of the room. As he garrotes her, toothpaste foams near her mouth (she had been brushing her teeth), and her legs kick spasmodically as Burke punishes her with a sexualized death for the blow job she gave.

Of course, Jack—unlike Manny, who attempts to rape Sally, and unlike Burke, who stabs women—does not have sex with her or any other women in the film. Jack seems more interested in his job, in his sound equipment, than in sex, but could his profession as an audio voyeur be a cover for his prurient interest, much as Burke’s job is for *his* lust? Rather than making him out as the pure hero, Jack’s abstinence is a problematic sign of repression. It is as though he avoids sex—or expresses his desire only indirectly through his sound equipment—because he, too, has a problem with women, as when he turns contemptuously on Sally for having “prostituted” herself in the compromising photos. Jack *can’t* have sex with Sally because he is afraid that, in reaction to her sensuality, his desire might turn murderous. This potential similarity between Jack and the killer is implied in the film-within-the-film, *Coed Frenzy*, when a campus security guard, ostensibly there to protect the coeds, stands leering at them from outside a window and is then stabbed by the knife-wielding killer. Even the security guard is a voyeur and potential sex-murderer, punished for his lust by the actual sex-murderer from whom the security guard failed to differentiate himself.

Jack’s struggle to differentiate himself from Burke runs into similar trouble. Following Sally’s screams, which he hears from the bug with which he has wired her, Jack makes a heroic run to rescue her, but he arrives too late. Why? Jack’s run is presented in slow motion, as if he were fighting against

something that compromises his ability to save her. Could it be that Jack does not have enough faith in Sally's or his own goodness and that this psychological weakness slows him down, fatally impairing his capacity to arrive in time to rescue her?

When he does finally get there, Jack prevents Burke from stabbing Sally by bringing Burke's hand with the ice-pick down into Burke's chest. Since Jack is standing behind Burke during this action, it looks as though Jack is also stabbing himself. In this way, Jack attempts to kill the "Burke" within him, to destroy the lust-murderer inside himself so that his own potentially murderous desire will not hurt women in the way that Burke's has. Jack's implied self-stabbing suggests at least some degree of recognition that his failure to save Sally is partly due to his own compromised character, his too-close connection with repressed voyeurs like Burke, leading to an inability to establish his own goodness in time.

Jack's connection with Burke can also be seen in the "wire" motif that links them. Back in the days when he worked for the police force, Jack wired an informant as part of a sting operation, but when the bug was discovered by the mobster who was the target of the sting, the informant was killed by being hanged with Jack's wire around his neck. Despite Jack's remorse over the death, his own egotistical belief in his technical prowess and his own obsession with proving the conspiracy lead him to persuade Sally to wear a wire when she goes for the meeting with the TV reporter who turns out to be impersonated by the killer Burke.

In the scene where Jack is on the phone with Sally convincing her to go, we cut from the conversation to a shot of Burke listening to it on a tape recorder, for he has bugged Jack's phone, thereby gaining the information that will allow him to impersonate the TV reporter. Burke thus uses a wiretap to thwart Jack's plan to wire Sally. How different is Jack really from Burke, when both men use wires that endanger others to further their own ends? We cut back from Burke to Jack in phone conversation with Sally, which is now presented as a split-screen with Jack on the left, persuading her to go along with his plan, and Sally on the right. A split has opened up between Jack and Sally, as Burke intervenes between them, listening in, but also as the "Burke" within Jack divides him from Sally, persuading her to endanger herself in furtherance of his own ends. Like the other female victims, Sally is strangled by Burke with a metal wire that he pulls from his wristwatch, but in a sense Sally is also strangled by Jack's wire—by his sending her to that meeting wired with a bug that allows him to hear her but not to save her in time, just as he was unable to save the informant before.

*Blow Out* did not fare well at the box office. One reason for this may have been the lack of a romance between Jack and Sally when, as De Palma ruefully

admitted, “that’s what the public expects, it seems, when you have John Travolta and a pretty girl.”<sup>7</sup> “How can you put John Travolta and Nancy Allen together in a movie [and not have a romance]?” was Allen’s comment. “Everybody’s going to be expecting *hot stuff* like they had in the car scene in *Carrie*.”<sup>8</sup>

Another reason for the film’s box-office failure was almost certainly its tragic ending. According to De Palma, “When I showed it to the executives, they were like—‘cause the ending’s so shocking—they were like, ‘Oh, my God, what a downer this is!’”<sup>9</sup>; “I’ll never forget when the distributor saw it, they almost had a coronary.”<sup>10</sup> “How can John Travolta [Jack] not save the girl?”<sup>11</sup> asked Allen, noting that audiences had certain expectations of Travolta, who by that time had become a big star, which the film failed to meet. She, editor Paul Hirsch, and producer George Litto lobbied De Palma for a happy ending. As Litto recalls, “I always felt that the girl should be saved in *Blow Out* and they should go see *Sugar Babies* [the Broadway musical that Sally wants to attend with Jack], but [De Palma’s] view was different, and the film still has many admirers that way. But I was a firm believer in the Hitchcock concept: you meet two people you like; they get into jeopardy; and you root for them to extricate themselves safely.”<sup>12</sup>

De Palma has noted that Jack “finds himself in the same situation as Cary Grant in Hitchcock’s *Notorious*: after having thrown the girl [Ingrid Bergman] into the arms of a murderer, he wonders, ‘My God, what have I done?’”<sup>13</sup> Grant’s character even has the same ambivalence about the Bergman character’s overt sexuality as Jack does about Sally’s; it attracts him but also makes him suspect her of being a kind of prostitute. Yet Grant succeeds in rescuing Bergman, carrying her in his arms away from her would-be murderer, whereas Jack fails, able only to hold Sally’s lifeless body in his arms after Burke has strangled her. De Palma’s darker vision, his distance from Hitchcock, can also be seen in the fact that celebratory fireworks go off behind Jack and Sally as he cradles her corpse—an ironic allusion to the romantic scene in Hitchcock’s *To Catch a Thief* where Cary Grant’s embrace of Grace Kelly is backgrounded by exploding fireworks. (Interestingly, the novelization of *Blow Out* not only features a romance between Jack and Sally but also a happy ending in which he saves her in time.)<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the links with Hitchcock, *Blow Out* has connections with De Palma’s own films. As early as *Murder à la Mod* (Manny watches a scene from this film on TV in *Blow Out*), De Palma explored the idea of three male characters—like Jack, Manny, and Burke—who are all to one degree or another implicated in the ice-pick murders of women. In De Palma’s original treatment for *Blow Out*,<sup>15</sup> the character of Jack is called Jon—the same name as the Robert De Niro character in *Greetings* and *Hi, Mom!*, whose “peep art” camerawork, like Jack’s audio voyeurism, implicates him in lustful and potentially

murderous attitudes toward women. Jack, a tech geek, is like a grown-up version of Peter from *Dressed to Kill*, who failed to save his mother, Kate, from the killer and whose own dark desires then compromised his ability to save Liz (Nancy Allen). In *Blow Out*'s original treatment, the character of Sally (played by Allen) is called Kate and, as we know, Jack fails to save her.

Of course, De Palma himself is something of a tech geek, like his surrogates Peter and Jack. (De Palma got the idea for a film about a soundman while he was doing the sound mix for *Dressed to Kill*. Another inspiration for *Blow Out* was fellow director Francis Ford Coppola's film about a sound technician, *The Conversation*, itself based on Antonioni's *Blow-Up*.)<sup>16</sup> We have already noted how Jack's involvement with his own work, as well as his technician's obsession with using a wire to prove the conspiracy, contributes to Sally's death and serves as an object lesson for De Palma regarding his own tendency to cut himself off from the world and from human relationships when he is working on a film. Actual soundman Jim Tanenbaum described how "withdrawn" De Palma was while working on *Blow Out*: "He was wearing a Sony Walkman when we were shooting, but the bleed from the ear pieces was not acceptable so he had to shut them off."<sup>17</sup> Like Jack, who struggles to move beyond immurement in his tech world and make human contact with Sally, De Palma has encountered a similar challenge in his own life. "He appears to be aloof and caustic," says Allen (De Palma's wife at the time), "but there are always these two big soulful eyes. I saw a sensitive, vulnerable man who needed me."<sup>18</sup>

De Palma was sensitive to Allen's concern that she not be typecast in "hooker" roles, like the ones she had played in his two previous films—"We both agreed that she should follow up *Dressed to Kill* with something other than another prostitute"<sup>19</sup>—but he went ahead and cast her in just such a part again in *Blow Out*. (Granted, this was at Travolta's urging, but De Palma didn't have to consent to it.) Although Allen is "severely claustrophobic and Brian knew that,"<sup>20</sup> the part of Sally requires her to be "trapped" in the McRyan car while it fills up with water. De Palma was empathetic—"It's like the scariest moment in my life putting my wife in that car"<sup>21</sup>—and made sure that she could see the escape route, donned scuba gear himself to be with her underwater, and offered to shoot the scene with a body double for her instead. Nevertheless, to realize the project that was in his head as director, De Palma did put his wife in a fearful situation involving some danger. As Allen described it, "The car started filling up really, really fast with water, so any panic that you see, yeah, there's not much acting going on; there was real sheer terror."<sup>22</sup> De Palma had to admit—somewhat facetiously but also half-seriously—that this was "not the best thing for a marriage, I can tell you!"<sup>23</sup>

We recall that, as part of his plan to prove the conspiracy, Jack endangers Sally by sending her to meet with the man who turns out to be Burke. In



directing the scenes where Burke is manhandling the screaming Sally, De Palma “kept saying, ‘be rougher, be rougher!’ and Lithgow [Burke] would say, ‘I don’t want to hurt her,’”<sup>24</sup> according to Allen’s account of the filming. “Brian kept saying, ‘No, I really want you to throw her around.’”<sup>25</sup> It would be interesting to know how De Palma felt when he added his own wife’s scream to the *Coed Frenzy* soundtrack—“In fact, it is Nancy’s scream that we dub into the girl’s voice at the end of the movie”<sup>26</sup>—just as Jack uses the terrified Sally’s scream as the voice of the coed being stabbed in the shower.

The commercial and critical failure of *Blow Out* crushed De Palma. Apart from a rave review from the *New Yorker*’s Pauline Kael (“De Palma has sprung to the place . . . where genre is transcended and what we’re moved by is an artist’s vision”),<sup>27</sup> most critics dismissed *Blow Out* as if it were *Coed Frenzy*, the kind of cheap genre film that De Palma was trying to mock and move beyond: “It’s an unusual film, full of meaning and very carefully constructed, but it didn’t do well. I was stupefied when critics said it was a bad suspense and horror movie. Nobody understood it.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that the film recouped only \$8 million of its \$18 million investment didn’t help. “When you make a movie like *Blow Out* and the movie makes 20 cents, you’re verboten,” De Palma said. “Forget it. Despite Pauline Kael, despite anybody. You can’t get a job.”<sup>29</sup>