THE CINE-FILES

DOSSIER ON FILM SOUND

A Conspiracy of Sound: Modes of Listening in Brian De Palma's *Blow Out*

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Link to film clip at criticalcommons.org: "BLOW OUT: A Conspiracy of Sound"

Film sound personnel have a unique relationship not only to sound creation, but also to the act of listening. While collecting the raw materials for a film sound track, sound designers must consider the narrative potential of a sound by seeking to identify its onscreen corollary as well as its thematic and emotional resonance. Therefore, listening is simultaneously an act of appreciation and evaluation. The act of listening is further complicated when layers of additional meaning are added as effects are edited and re-mixed to create specific visceral intents. For this reason, the descriptions of sound effects in sound libraries often read like poetic verse: Man on Fire. Body falls on grass. Hard rain on windowsill. The entire history of cinematic genres can be found in these descriptions. But what if a character in a film is unaware of the film genre in which he finds himself? Without a specific context or narrative intent, even a trained sound designer may be listening intently to various sounds, but never really grasp their significance. Such is the case in the film *Blow Out* (1981), a thriller/mystery which upon its initial release carried the promotional tag line "Murder has a sound all its own."

The 1981 thriller directed by Brian De Palma (*Scarface*, *The Untouchables*) focuses on Jack Terry (played by John Travolta), a sound recordist and editor for a low-budget film company, who sets out to record new effects for a horror film, but ends up witnessing (and recording) a car "accident" that takes the life of an up-and-coming presidential candidate. As the story unfolds, a political conspiracy emerges. Was the "blowout" of the car's tire an accident or was it a plot to end the rise of a promising political candidate and rival to an unpopular president? In the beginning of the film, Jack Terry's relationship to his job and to the act of listening is less than laudable. He is burned out from working on a series of five horror films in two years, all of which have "blood" in the title, and during a mix session of the company's latest film, he argues with the director that the "library" effects (which are clearly hackneyed) are good enough for another film because they've used them effectively "a million times." But as the director points out, that's exactly why they won't work. For a sound designer, Jack Terry is surprisingly tone deaf.

By contrast, De Palma is hyperaware of sound and highly attentive to its ability to foreshadow narrative intents, particularly in the opening credit sequence. On display are not only various film sound practices (some accurately represented, others not so much), but also, various kinds of listening patterns, specifically distracted listening, mediated listening and reflective listening. Please click on the video link and watch the credit sequence of *Blow Out*. In the tradition of Alfred Hitchcock films (*Rear Window*, *Psycho* and *Vertigo*), the sound-image relations are highly stylized with split screens and extreme close-ups that are self-reflexive of the filmmaking process, but at the same time, they serve as a preview of the political machinations that will unfold over the course of the film. The film does not intend to present "realistic" modes of sound construction or representation; rather it is concerned with establishing its own internal logic and reading protocols through formal stylization and sound effects placement. As Jay Beck notes in his article "Citing the Sound," De Palma "is not interested in the practical function of sound but rather in how sound is used as a McGuffin to motivate the narrative." [1] From this approach, however, various modes of listening are represented as a means of building narrative tension but also subverting and at times satirizing the process of media making and meaning production.

Jack Terry begins the story as a distracted listener. During the task of transferring sound effects in his editing room, he is preoccupied by the evening news with only the gentle beeps indicating the end of a sound effects reel calling him back to his work. In representing the film sound process, the sequence details the period of sound production before digital workstations became the norm. For this reason, Jack Terry pulls reel-to-reel tapes and transfers them to magnet film stock. Later, these long strips are cut to picture using a flatbed editor and laboriously synchronized (later featured in the film). The labeling and placement in edit bins makes for quick access to the material during the editing process. Mixing occurs with the cut tracks being strung up on remixing dubbing machines and then various "stems" are folded down to create the master track, which is used to create the final optical sound track. During the process (which must occur in real time), Jack divides his listening attention between the tapes and the television news. He is ambivalent about the sound effects themselves, which are coded as stock effects—thunder rumbling, footsteps, heartbeat, ticking clock, breaking glass, gunshot, and body fall. But this is not to imply that these sound effects do not carry significant "design" value or meaning. While they lack sound perspective and aesthetic nuance as "library effects," they are inscribed with meaning by their juxtaposition against the content of the evening newscast. The montage of sound is both vertical (featuring overlapping layers of sound) and horizontal (featuring successive layers of sounds). In the progression of their presentation, these sound effects suggest a montage of murder, specifically an impending political assassination.

While this sound montage doesn't carry the expressionistic or abstract qualities of earlier examples in films like *The Conversation* (1974) or *Raging Bull* (1980), the assembled sounds do tap into the political paranoia of the period. *Blow Out* references both the Watergate break-in (which forced a presidential resignation) and the accident on Chappaquiddick Island, involving Senator Edward Kennedy and the death of his passenger when their car plunged off a bridge into a tidal pool (which thwarted a run for president). The politics of cover-ups are woven into the historical moment and carry over into the film through sound design. For example, in the news broadcast when confronted about the potential loss of the presidency (according to news polls), the president's campaign manager ominously notes that in the lead up to the primaries the electorate will come around because "a lot can happen between now and then." The challenge is satiric in its delivery, and even punctuated by a familiar sound of thunder, offering a sense of foreboding about the volatile political landscape. This emotive coding of the effect draws from well-evolved historical sound poetics from both radio and film about environmental effects, specifically that thunder means danger. The recordings of footsteps and a heartbeat follow, extending a sense of paranoia through an audio representation of the stalking of prey, which comes during the reports of the presidential run by the populist challenger. The sound of a ticking clock offers a temporal countdown to the event, a Hitchcockian strategy to establish tension through a representation of time. It is important to note that for some first-time filmgoers, the significance of these sound effects might likely be missed. In the culture of film going, credit sequences are often not regarded as significant to the narrative as they list names and position titles; however, this sound effects montage serves as an overture to the political drama that will unfold. From the kinetic typography of the opening title sequence throughout the entire credit sequence, De Palma is encouraging a reflective mode of listening by the audience, an audience that is presumably aware of the conventions of the thriller/mystery genre and the understanding that formal clues will lead to suspense, surprises and revelations of unexpected truths. The subject position is meant to be more attentive and critical, certainly more attentive than the characters on screen.

Yet another mode of listening comes as the sound-image relations present a split screen of the newscasters and of close up images of Jack logging the sounds and cuing sound reels. In this portion of the credit sequence, listening is mediated by technologies of recording and transmission to provide a sense of "liveness." Specifically, the news anchor is using her earpiece to listen to the live audio "feed" for the cue from their "eye on the city" political reporter. Listening and recording are part of the *work* of the anchor and reporter, and the audio-visual technology allows a demonstration of a sense of immediacy that is integral to both television as a medium and the news process. From this immediate transmission comes a sense of authenticity or verisimilitude, but on display is also a form of distracted listening, focused on self-aggrandizing banter ("Frank, you look fabulous") and commentary, rather than a capture of real time events or sounds. In the scene, the reporter even holds his finger to his ear to block out the noise of the ballroom and concentrate on his vocal presentation and sense of authority. His point of audition limits his ability to "hear" the room. The narrowing of focus belies a limited perspective and awareness as technology mediates the task of listening to a "news" gathering and presentation mode. Later in the film, body microphones and recording apparatus become a crucial means of gathering "evidence" about the political plot; however, the surveillance mode of "listening" is fraught with dangers as it is demonstrated as being prone to fail and is limited in its capturing context.

As the final two sound effects are transferred, only the filmgoer is now privileged to hearing the most critical juxtapositions of sound. On the left hand portion of the screen, Jack cues up a gun shot effect, while on the right, the television news camera pans across the busy ballroom and moves in to focus on the governor, targeting him much like a gun sight. On the image of the governor, the sound of the shot is heard, and as the image zooms out, the sound of "body fall" plays. Through an understanding of these layers, the filmgoer achieves a privileged narrative understanding that exceeds that of the characters within the diegesis, and this process represents one of the pleasures of the genre, specifically the collecting and assemblage of clues to understand the nuance of the mystery. The filmgoer undergoes a "subjective transformation" aligning not with the character's onscreen but with the narrator of the film. [2]

But it must be remembered that narrators like De Palma and Hitchcock are notoriously unreliable, and the fragmentation and disjunction of sound from image lead to misinterpretation of meaning and distortion of "truth." Jack Terry becomes the embodiment of this uncertainty. The arc of his character development is very much about the misalignment of modes of listening and understanding. He fails to make the connections between the sounds he is recording and the events that he witnesses. Only later in the film does he bring together the sounds of the car accident and the still images taken by a photographer to reveal that the tire of the presidential candidate's car had been shot out. When Jack begins to listen and hear in "synch," he discovers the alignment is not only dangerous, but also painful. In a further attempt to gather evidence about the cover-up, he engages the help of Sally (played by Nancy Allen), the woman who was involved in the car accident. She is wired with a body microphone, which not only captures the evidence of the conspiracy, but also the screams of her murder. The film ends with Jack using the recording of the death scream for the horror film, repurposing it to create a new disjunction and misalignment. The director of the film is ecstatic with the scream because it is something that he's not heard "a million times." But the origin of the sound leaves Jack broken. The scream is a violation of not just Sally's body, as she is stabbed, but a violation of a promise of trust and security that his expertise and audio equipment were meant to supply. These screams of desperation are sounds that were never meant to be heard; yet they haunt Jack Terry forever.

In the end, this sequence in the film offers an implicit critique of the changing modes of sound production in Hollywood from the classical to the contemporary era. The fracture of the studio system in the late 1950s fostered the rise of independent productions, franchise films (specifically horror films), and the new era of "sound design." This fostered in part a shift from the use of "library" effects to the creation and capture of unique "sound designs," which subsequently, changed how we hear films and the diegetic worlds they create. Jack Terry is forced by his director/producer to adapt to this shift in his own film sound practices, but in this search for an "authentic sound" (the scream), he is forced to engage in a world that is corrupt, dangerous and broken. Like the filmgoers, he is forced to rapidly shift his perceptual point of view (point of audition) so that he can go beyond the simple hearing of sounds to a mode of understanding the meaning and context of the sounds around him. Sadly, Jack hears the world scream in pain and confusion, and in the final images of the film, he is forced to silently join in this chorus of despair as he learns the cost of obtaining the perfect performance of the perfect sound.

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Notes

[1] Jay Beck, "Citing the Sound—The Conversation, Blow Out, and the Mythological Ontology of the Soundtrack in '70s Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Volume 29, Issue 4 (2002): 162.

[2] Barbara Flueckiger, "Sound Effects—Strategies for Sound Effects in Film," in *Sound and Music in Film and Visual Media*, eds. Graeme Harper, Ruth Doughty, and Jochen Eisentraut (New York: Continuum Press, 2009), 172.