

Horror, Crime, and War: Some Comment on the Films of Brian De Palma, 1980-1989

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Abstract

This review-essay revisits four films by Brian De Palma made between 1980 and 1989—*Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface*, *The Untouchables*, and *Casualties of War*—in an attempt to reconsider the most successful decade of De Palma’s career and at the same time to counter the received wisdom that he is somehow a “great” or “visionary” director. In fact, De Palma has built his career largely on the imitation of old movies, usually by Alfred Hitchcock, beginning with his very first film, *Murder à la Mod* (1968), and extending all the way through to *Passion* (2012).

Keywords: Brian De Palma, *Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface*, *The Untouchables*, *Casualties of War*, American cinema.

Resumen

Este ensayo-retrospectiva revisita cuatro películas de Brian De Palma realizadas entre 1980 y 1989 —*Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface*, *The Untouchables* y *Casualties of War*— en un intento de valorar la década más exitosa de la carrera de De Palma en la que se deposita toda la sabiduría recibida del de alguna manera, uno de los grandes directores y un "visionario". De hecho, De Palma ha construido su carrera en gran parte sobre la imitación de películas clásicas, generalmente de Alfred Hitchcock, comenzando con su primera película, *Murder à la Mod* (1968), y extendiéndose hasta *Passion* (2012).

Palabras clave: Brian De Palma, *Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface*, *The Untouchables*, *Casualties of War*, Cine norteamericano.

Introduction

I’d like to begin this review-essay with what, by now, sadly, is the received wisdom on Brian De Palma, from none other than Robin Wood:

The conventional dismissal of Brian De Palma—that he is a mere “Hitchcock imitator”—[is] certainly unjust . . . It seems more appropriate to talk

of symbiosis than of imitation: if De Palma borrows Hitchcock's plot-structures, the impulse is rooted in an authentic identification with the Hitchcock thematic that results in valid variations that have their own indisputable originality. *Sisters* and *Dressed to Kill* are modeled on *Psycho*; *Obsession* and *Body Double* on *Vertigo*; *Body Double* also borrows from *Rear Window*, as does *Blow Out*. The debt is of course enormous, but the power and coherence of the films testifies [sic] to the genuineness of the creativity. . . . The significance of De Palma's best work (and, more powerfully and consistently, that of Hitchcock before him) lies in its eloquent evidence of what happens when the repression [of males' feminine side] is partially unsuccessful.

De Palma is unsurpassed among film directors in portraying furies: . . . the private demons unleashed within or witnessed by "ordinary" people as well as crime kings and raving lunatics. [His] cinematic flourishes have often been called "operatic," but perhaps the better analogy is with the Lisztian keyboard virtuoso, someone who can tap profound emotional depths one moment but skitters over the surface at other times; who frequently improvises upon others' themes but is always unmistakably himself . . . (Wood, 257-258)

The biggest problem I have with the above, apart from its rank hyperbole and unabashed tendentiousness, is that it unquestionably assumes the supreme artistry of Alfred Hitchcock—an artistry about which I have lots of questions and that, in the end, I ultimately reject. That said, in what follows I shall argue against Wood's view of De Palma, and I shall do so by revisiting four films from De Palma's most commercially, if not artistically, successful decade: the 1980s.

***Dressed to Kill*, 1980**

Like nature, film criticism abhors a vacuum. What's wanted at all times is a stylist to sing about—more than one, if possible. The style itself doesn't matter—Max Ophüls or Samuel Fuller—so long as the writer can (a) concentrate on it juicily; (b) discount content; (c) discount those who consider content. The whole project becomes a means of sorting out those who can really "see" films from those who can't, those who "love movies" from those who, like myself, would be embarrassed to be under that soppy rubric. I'm always a bit relieved when I fail the test.

I failed again some decades ago in the case of the stylistic laureate Brian De Palma. His 1980 film *Dressed to Kill* was a box-office hit *and* a critical one. For anyone on the planet who doesn't know by now, De Palma specializes in scare and murder—before *Dressed to Kill* he made *Sisters* (I walked out of that 1973 picture), *Carrie* (1976), and *The Fury* (1978)—although his first released pictures were comic hijinks, *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi, Mom!* (1970). In the eighties (even up to today) the comparison most often slapped on him was Hitchcock, and in a few respects, the comparison was deserved.

For instance, *Dressed to Kill* is constructed to provide occasions for cinematic "arias," like those in Hitchcock. De Palma wrote his script around three such main sequences: a cat-and-cat game in the Metropolitan Museum of Art between a man and a woman; a scene between a hooker and a New York psychiatrist in his office during a huge thunderstorm at night; and a scare sequence at the end that has a basic resemblance to the last sequence in *Carrie*. In these three sections—and elsewhere—De Palma

certainly weaves extraordinary silk-and-polyester texture. His camera glides (much more insinuatingly than Kubrick's in the contemporaneous *Shining* [1980]), the editing is acute, the compositions are generally economical and strong. True, he overuses big close-ups right from the beginning, and he stoops to one of the dreariest of clichés—a shot with a telephone large in the foreground so that you know the character in the background is coming to pick up the phone. But it's pretty hard to fault the man's skills.

Next question: Is that enough? And further question: Does skill—the proper word for De Palma, I think, not style—justify everything? Excuse all faults? Compensate for all vacancies? Before anyone mentions the name Flaubert, I'll quote the much-quoted passage myself: “In literature there are no such things as beautiful subjects . . . one can write about any one thing equally well as about any other.” But Flaubert did not say there is no such thing as a *subject*; and he went on immediately to say: “The artist must raise everything to a higher level” (Flaubert, 189).

And what is the subject of *Dressed to Kill*? The agonies of a homicidal transvestite. (If this were a newspaper review, I wouldn't be tipping the plot—not very much. Any seasoned viewer seeing the picture for the first time will guess the key gimmick long before it's revealed, and it's revealed long before the end.) It would be ludicrous to suggest that this subject is “raised” in Flaubert's sense—it's merely exploited for sex and violence, the sex seamy and the violence unwatchable. (Razors.) Anyone still waiting for a work to reveal the connections between sex and violence—meaning anyone under the age of, say, nine—will be enlightened by *Dressed to Kill*. Otherwise it may seem, as it does to me—and as it did way back in 1980, as well—high-gloss exploitation.

The apostles have long since contended that the center of the film is the very fact that it has no plot or moral center. It begins with a well-to-do woman, maritally unsatisfied, who cruises New York to (the phrase used) get laid. Later the focus shifts to her bright teenaged son, about whom she has made a laboriously contrived sexual joke, and a hooker. The boy is monastically pure, but the hooker is stock-market mad. The detective on the case is a vulgarian. If things aren't grubby enough by then, you get a gang of black youths chasing the (blonde) hooker through the subway to rape her. And the film ends with the pure boy comforting the frightened hooker in his mom's bed, so—who knows?—he may be about to become a citizen of De Palma's centerless world, just as we fade out. But did De Palma become, with this film and the several that preceded it, a new Céline, a new Georges Bataille? I never got any such anti-conviction conviction from the film. I got only that because virtually all taboos were by then taboo, pictures like *Dressed to Kill* could be made—and would continue to be made in droves during the following decades.

Over the years, Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) has been invoked a lot in discussing this film, because of the transvestite and because there are two, count 'em, two shower scenes with naked women, start and finish. (Modesty note: In the first one Angie Dickinson caresses her body as she watches her husband shave with a premonitory open razor, and the camera snaps from face to breast and pubis. Interviews assert that only the face is Dickinson's. A nice touch: she doesn't mind our thinking that we're seeing her body as long as it's someone else's.) I'm no *Psycho* addict, but the comparison seems glib.

For one thing, the script of *Psycho*, by Joseph Stefano from a Robert Bloch novel, has a narrative and “viewpoint” center, as well as no plot holes. In De Palma's film, by contrast, how did the murderer know that the victim would forget a ring and come back upstairs? And Hitchcock doesn't use a dream for an extra dollop of thrills. Moreover, Hitchcock suggests, with dramatic music; De Palma shows, with oily music.

In the famous *Psycho* shower scene, writes James Naremore, “Out of more than fifty separate shots, only one shows a knife entering a body: . . . a tiny puncture. Even in this explicit shot, there is no blood” (Naremore, 56). De Palma, for his part, details the razoring. (Not to me. I had to look away).



The most important similarity of *Dressed to Kill* to *Psycho* I have never seen mentioned. One of Hitchcock’s biggest shocks is “outside” the film, a violation of audience confidence. When we see a star in a film, and see her early, we expect her to go substantially through the picture. One of the strongest jolts in *Psycho*, therefore, is that Janet Leigh gets murdered so soon. De Palma apes this device; he relies on us, watching his film, to supply a violable orthodoxy. Alas, the performances themselves don’t require comment.

When I first saw *Dressed to Kill* in 1980, I hadn’t been so depressed by a skillfully made film since the post-*Nashville* Altman crop in the mid-’70s. What ability De Palma had. What emptiness. What glorying in that emptiness as proof that he was a true *auteur*. Well, at least the film buffs were happy once more: they had their new “stylist.” And he’s still around.

***Scarface*, 1983**

The 1983 *Scarface* is a panderer’s picture. The original, directed by Howard Hawks and released in 1932, has been as overrated as are most good American films by rhapsodists eager to create pantheons, but, despite Paul Muni’s overacting in the title role, it was directed with cinematic imagination; and it was written in Ben Hecht’s high style—facile, flashy cynicism. The Hawks film is a relatively serious attempt by the best show-biz minds of the time to examine the criminal world of the time for its greed and bloodlust, also as a pressure cooker for sexual aberrance. Tony Camonte, based on Al Capone, burns with animal greed and brutality, and at least part of his fire is

sublimated desire for his sister. The last sequence, in which she joins him in the shootout against the police even though he has just murdered her newlywed husband, is true Hawks-Hecht: a quick skim of profundities made impressive by professional skills. To be sure, none could maintain that the 1932 *Scarface* was done without hope of profit (the co-producer was Howard Hughes); still, its various clevernesses provide the kind of pleasure that even the president of the A.S.P.C.A. might get at a bullfight by a leading matador.

With the 1983 *Scarface*, it is as if that same president were at an Elizabethan bearbaiting. The later *Scarface* seems to take its tone, stylistically and otherwise, from the very mansion in which its protagonist ends up. This time called Tony Montana, he is a Cuban sent to Florida in the Castro shipments of 1980. He rises from Miami dishwasher to the top of the drug trade in less than three years and lives in an immense house furnished like the lounges of 1920s movie palaces. That seems appropriate enough for this Tony (although there's a wee question about how he got so *much* money so quickly), but, more sickeningly, that décor seems the crystallization of the sort of filmmaking employed by the director throughout. Brian De Palma's vision of Montana's dream fits perfectly with De Palma's own view of filmmaking. All of this film, even its most squalid settings, as well as its characterizations and narrative, is as overblown and banal and vulgar as that ultimate villa.

Poor old Tony Camonte never had it so good so fast. Of course the money in the drug trade in 1980 would have been far beyond Camonte's nakedest dream of avarice. Near the end, though relatively soon after his rise to power, Tony Montana is supposed to be clearing ten to twelve million a month. He dies after some hoglike snuffling of a mound of cocaine on his desk that is worth more money than Camonte (Capone) probably ever saw. Everything here is inflated, including the size of international criminal operations and of ill-gotten gains.

The film audience's threshold of excitement had also risen by this time. Violence had become more violent, gaudiness had gotten more gaudy, characters had gotten more streamlined, cinematic style had become less subtle. De Palma and pals were out to pander to new gluttonies, and they picked the right material, both as excuse and as medium. To invoke Flaubert again, Hawks's *Scarface* treated a subject; De Palma's *Scarface* hitches a ride on its subject (as did De Palma's earlier *Dressed to Kill* [1980]). Characters in the Hawks film are written and acted with some obligation to shatter stereotypes of crime films; with De Palma, characters—and actors—get stuffed back into their stock shells. For example, the girl whom De Palma's Tony wins from his boss is conceived as, and played by, a Barbie doll; for Hawks, she was a good actress with a real face, giving life to a whole woman: Karen Morley.

When *Scarface* was announced, I remember expecting a Hawks imitation: the only surprise is that it's something of a Francis Ford Coppola imitation, reaching for the sudden eruption of blood into phony *luxe* that marked *The Godfather* (1972). But De Palma doesn't have the talent that Coppola (once) showed. Not one of the sequences or compositions in this *Scarface*, from a murder in a Cuban refugee camp, to nightclub shootouts, to luxurious circular bathtubs, does anything but *remind* us—frequently of films we wish we hadn't seen in the first place—and thereby reminds us of De Palma's bankruptcy. His idea of a “touch” is to have the camera come close to Tony's eyes, accompanied by ominous music, whenever he looks at his sister with as-yet unacknowledged incestuous lust.

At the time, the violence in this new *Scarface* was much publicized in advance through its difficulty in getting an R-rating, and if I didn't believe that the ratings examiners are honest, I'd suspect that De Palma's distributors paid for the advance fuss.

The violence is not discernibly more bloody or frequent here than in a picture I saw the night before I first saw *Scarface: Uncommon Valor* (1983), which got its R without publicity. De Palma's one notable contribution in this instance was possibly inspired (if that is the word) by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974): while Tony is forced to watch, a drug dealer torments him by amputating (off-screen) the arm and leg of a pal with a chain saw.



The story, written by Oliver Stone, is the very boring and predictable arc of a criminal's rise and fall, not new with the first *Scarface* or with the two gangster pictures that preceded it: *Little Caesar* (1931) and *The Public Enemy* (1931). Whether or not you know Hawks's film, you know, after the first ten minutes of this *Scarface*, what the outline is of the next 160 minutes. The general shape is still the Hecht shape, and a few of the details of the original are retained, like the electric sign reading "The World Is Yours," which, seen early, is seen again at the bloody end (and which I have always thought the nadir of Hecht's Broadway cynicism). Inevitably we get a few sops to "right thinking," passed off as deepening of character. This new Tony hates communists; won't murder a man by blowing up his car because the man's wife and kids are with him (though Tony blows out the brains of the man sitting next to him to prevent the "bad" murder); and spouts a fake Hamlet speech about the meaning of life. "What is a man, / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed?" (IV.iv.33-35) gets translated into the vulgate for a drunken speech by the rich Tony in a nightclub. He walks out telling the gaping patrons that they need him because he's the bad guy who makes them feel good. With this profundity—that we all rest easier because there are murderers with wealth and power—the picture leaves us to reel.

The script does make one moralistic change from Hecht, perhaps because, contradictorily, it affords a chance for sexual explicitness. In Hawks's film, after Tony guns down his best friend because he thinks the friend is shacking up with his sister, he finds out that his sister and the friend had just been married; nevertheless, during the final shootout, the frenzied sister, responding to instincts deeper than grief, helps Tony load his guns. With De Palma the same mistaken murder occurs, but Tony's sister does not forgive him or help him. Instead, when trouble arrives, she comes into his study, virtually undressed, demented, and taunts him about what he has really wanted all along

before she starts shooting at him herself. This change plays both sides of a twisty street: it keeps the sister from forgetting her murdered husband, and it also provides a little extra sexual tease. Note another, related change: in Hawks the last shootout is against the police; in De Palma that shootout is against a small army of thugs loosed on Tony by a Bolivian drug mogul whom he has betrayed. The size of that thug army, the speed with which it is summoned, the implications of international reach, the immense arsenal of huge weapons—these are all part of the tonal design that runs throughout this film and ends at Tony’s Napoleonic desk. Nothing exceeds like excess.

The last excess is the performance of Al Pacino, who plays Tony. His chief power as an actor has always been in explosive violence or the threat of it. When he gets a part that can use that power in a work of some substance—prior to *Scarface*, David Mamet’s play *American Buffalo* (1975), say, or Sidney Lumet’s film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975)—his talent gives it life and resonances. But unlike other actors of murderous roles such as James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson (from *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar*, respectively), Pacino displays no range here; he just sells violence because someone has hired him to do it, like a mercenary soldier who doesn’t care whom he shoots so long as he’s paid. It’s disgusting to see Pacino pouring the gifts he has used well elsewhere into this sewer. (He does assume a good Cuban accent, however.)

This film is dedicated to Howard Hawks and Ben Hecht, by the way. I haven’t seen a more hopeless attempt at aggrandizement-through-dedication since William Friedkin adapted his sorry *Sorcerer* (1977) from *The Wages of Fear* (1953) and dedicated his distortion to the Frenchman Henri-Georges Clouzot, who made the original.

The Untouchables, 1987

At last Brain De Palma made a good “old movie.” *The Untouchables*, derived from the TV series and some books about it, raised De Palma to the height of his moviebuff devotion, to the point where he behaved like an old-time Hollywood director reincarnated. His 1987 film resembles an early 1930s automobile restyled by a 1980s designer, with the old car quite discernible and the modernization quite snappy.

The Untouchables reached theater screens once before as *The Scarface Mob* (1958), which was a pilot film for the television series and was also released theatrically. I missed it. (De Palma’s own deplorable *Scarface*, made in 1983 four years before *The Untouchables*, had nothing to do with Capone.) For his new version, De Palma asked the theater poet of Chicago, David Mamet, to do the screenplay. This was the first piece of acute casting. It’s impossible to say how much of the handling of scenes is Mamet’s work, but surely the structure owes much to him, and of course the dialogue is his. Mamet, in a way, anticipated De Palma’s direction. The rule seems to have been: “Don’t change the old reliable Gangster Picture: just do it better.” Mamet plunged into the middle of the mainstream and succeeded. The oldtimers had more freedom than Mamet, it has to be said. Ben Hecht’s script for the 1932 *Scarface* used incest to sizzle it along. The Thew-Glasmon-Bright script for *The Public Enemy* (1931)—still my favorite gangster picture—was composed of a series of plaque-like scenes almost like a medieval mystery play. Mamet, revisiting the past, could not alter it. He sought no “angle”: he simply took the Capone-Ness story as a great chance to revel in the most conventional aspects of a genre.

Still, there are perceptible Mamet touches. Some examples: the language of a

seasoned old cop, Jim Malone, who joins Ness's small anti-Capone force (with Mamet's ear, it can hardly be an accident that Malone rhymes with Capone); the language of Scarface Al himself, which dumps on us like a truckload of rocks; a fierce hand-to-hand fight between two gray-haired men, Malone and a police captain; Ness's wry last line—the last line of the picture after the smoke has cleared from these Prohibition battles. A reporter asks him what he'll do if Prohibition is repealed, and he says, "I think I'll take a drink."

The story is simple enough, plentiful enough. In 1930 Eliot Ness, a Treasury agent, arrives in Chicago with wife and child and sets out, against odds and apathy, to nail Capone. He recruits three loyal aides, one of them Italian to show us that not all Italians are gangsters. (Racial epithets are, quite accurately for the time, part of the invective throughout.) Ness meets setbacks in tactics and in law; eventually, with the help of the Treasury accountant who is one of his team, he proceeds with the tax-evasion approach that finally puts Capone in prison. There are many gunfights; many raids; many confrontations. There's even a "Western" episode on the Canadian border—with a troop of Mounties on the skyline *à la* John Ford—as Ness and friends ride to seize a truck convoy of whiskey. (No explanation of how these city types learned to ride.) The ending is foretold not only by history but by the movies; what matters is how we get there.

This De Palma knew and relished. Many of his visual fandangos in the past, like the museum sequence in *Dressed to Kill* (1980), were film-school smart-aleckings. They're not entirely gone from *The Untouchables*: a heavy reference to the *Potemkin* (1925) baby carriage in a railroad station shoot-out; a pullback from a shot of two men talking behind a window to reveal that they are in a plane. But most of the time, this time, the subject has carried De Palma from mere showing off to some virtuosity—in other words, the showing off is done so well that it helps. He uses Panavision and justifies it in the very first shot. The wide screen is filled with an overhead view of a barber shop, looking straight down on a barber chair, its occupant's face swathed in a towel, the chair surrounded by henchmen and reporters. It is brilliantly lighted (by Stephen H. Burum), immensely detailed, loaded with promise. The split-second effect is of full-color magic archaeology: the mound of intervening years has been swept away and we are looking into the life of 1930s Chicago, the fief of Al Capone—who is the man in the chair.

Shot after shot, cut after cut, De Palma rarely falters. A bundle of newspapers plunks onto a red carpet outside a hotel, and a bellboy bustles out to get them; Ness and Malone converse in a church, and the camera looks up past them at the gorgeous ceiling; the camera tracks along the outside of a ground-floor apartment as a hit man watches his victim through the windows. And after a machine gun starts spitting, there's a shock cut to a close profile of an opera tenor in clown costume singing "*Vesti la giubba*" ("On with the motley"), from *Pagliacci* (1892). Hitchcock and Hawks are still very much at De Palma's back, but they might have approved compositions like the one in which Ness alone confronts Capone and his bodyguards on a grand hotel staircase and the action seems to pour forward onto Ness. In further deference to the past, De Palma even uses a device I hadn't seen in years. When a person falls through the air these days, we see only the start and the finish. But when one of these gangsters is shoved off a roof, we get a close-up matte shot of the falling man while the building races away behind him,

Kevin Costner, who is Ness, doesn't come on like a ball of fire, but his strength and humor keep growing. Sean Connery plays the aging Malone as if he had done James Bond and all the other roles just to season himself for this one, to make the old

cop both true and retrospective. Charles Martin Smith is right as the wistful, heroic accountant. Andy Garcia is snakelike as the fourth member of the Ness quartet. And Robert De Niro, whose first film appearance was in De Palma's *Greetings* (1968), gives Capone the clumsy theatricality of a barbarian who wants to be a ham; he also gives him the insane fury that we remember from Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), still frightening.

It used to be a critical commonplace to compare gangster films to Westerns. The comparison is now historical because Westerns have faded so badly. (Two possible explanations for that fade: space flicks now supply a setting for black-and-white morality and broad, frontier action; attitudes toward Indians have changed.) But the gangster, whatever his new name or game, is not only still present in our society, his presence is swollen—so much that the underworld sometimes seems to be the real world while the rest of us dawdle in the deer park of criminal kings.

Seventy years ago, in "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," Robert Warshow wrote: "Most Americans have never seen a gangster. What matters is that the experience of the gangster *as an experience of art* is universal to Americans" (Warshow, 100). The facts of our life and art experience, fueled additionally by television, made *The Untouchables*, in the late eighties, simultaneously relevant yet quaint. With its battles over mere booze, with Capone's brazen antics, De Palma's film seemed in a ghastly way almost innocent. By 1987 the slouching beast had already made it to Bethlehem.

Casualties of War, 1989

Through most of his career Brian De Palma has been too clever for his own good. Once, with *The Untouchables* (1987), he was clever enough. Then when he chose the largest subject of his life, he wasn't clever at all. Few would have expected that, when De Palma tackled the Vietnam War, he would address it with commensurate depth, but at least there was a chance that he might show some ingenuity. *Casualties of War* turned out, however, to be clumsy and banal. It was as if De Palma had become embarrassed about his usual slickness, in relation to this material, but then had nothing to put in its place. Still, he profited in a way by his choice of subject. Some of the press at the time apparently took his very choice of serious material as proof in itself that he had dealt with it seriously. He hadn't. He had given us a chance to look once more at a perennial and terrible subject—what happens to the humanity of relatively decent men when they are plunged into war—but he had fumbled his treatment of it.

The central act of the film is the kidnapping of a Vietnamese girl by U.S. soldiers, her rape, and her murder. The night before they go out on patrol, a squad of five men wants to go to a village near their base to visit a brothel. But passes are canceled because the Viet Cong is in the village, presumably using the brothel. Vindictively, when the squad is out the next day, the sergeant orders them to grab a girl from a village and bring her along. In time four of the five soldiers rape her. The exception is Eriksson, the newcomer in the squad, who tries to protect and free the girl, and fails. Later she is murdered, for the squad's convenience.

We then move to Part Two—Eriksson's struggle at the base camp to bring the four other members of the squad to justice. He has to fight the army's protectiveness of its own, its unwillingness to make waves, its prejudice against villagers on the suspicion that many of them are Cong supporters. But Eriksson persists, and eventually the judicial wheels roll. All this is framed by a postwar encounter in a suburban train back home when Eriksson glimpses a young Asian woman who reminds him of the

Vietnamese girl. (Eriksson must have a busy time flashing back if he sinks so completely into memory every time he glimpses a young Asian woman in America.) At the end we return to the train. The young woman understands somehow that he has been going through a mnemonic torment and assures him—either out of some Delphic power in herself or on order from the film’s producers—that the bad dream is over now, all will be well.



We never learn what this means. (Will he forget about the Vietnamese girl? Will he accept what happened to her as just one of those things? What in the world does the ending *mean*?) But this closing assurance is given to Eriksson over a swelling chorus of angelic voices that is only the last offense in one of the most ludicrous scores ever plopped onto a purportedly serious picture. It was composed by Ennio Morricone, who has drooled musically over more than 175 pictures—to judge by the ones I’ve seen, anyway—and here contributes this film’s outstanding blotch. The score under the suspense sequences sounds like the organ stuff that used to accompany suspense in silent pictures; Eriksson’s pronouncements about morality and justice are heard over horn chords; and those heavenly, redemptive voices at the end are the crowning marshmallow. Whatever the film’s claims to gravity, Morricone’s music helps to dim them. But then the director who made this hollow picture is the man who commissioned the score.

He is also the director who commissioned David Rabe to write the screenplay from a book by Daniel Lang. At the time, Rabe was one of the most overrated American playwrights, probably the one most likely to lapse into undergraduate irony and sermonizing on the subject of war. (Witness his Vietnam War trilogy *Sticks and Bones* [1971], *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* [1971], and *Streamers* [1976].) In his screenplay all the characters seem familiar, not from life but from previous films or plays or novels; all of them are pushed around like charade figures to symbolize Quality A in conflict with Quality B. Following the story is thus less like watching a drama unfold than like watching a recipe being filled: a cup of bitterness, a spoonful of lust, a dash of remorse, etc. Except for the suffering of the girl—very easy to convey—the story is detached and unaffectioning, though guns are going off and people are being killed throughout.

Whenever we might possibly begin to be involved, the dialogue bars us. Admittedly, this is partly because the actors are incomprehensible about 30% of the time. Mostly it's because, linguistically, Rabe ranges from the war-movie cliché to the stagy to the incredibly fancy. I thought I heard one tough grunt refer to Winnie the Pooh; I know I heard the bestial sergeant make a wordplay on a line from Psalms: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Rabe happens to have dissociated himself from the finished film, and has done even that in a woolly, ambiguous manner. I hope that his displeasure with the picture begins with his own contribution. Unless De Palma tampered with every line, Rabe can't get off the hook so airily.

This film was supposed to be a drama of cause and effect, the crime against the girl as catalyst for Eriksson's struggle with the military. But the first part is so synthetic that Part Two seems a protracted, puny epilogue instead of a courageous resolution. (And would the girl's body still be lying where it fell—in the same condition—by the time the Army got around to investigating the case?) Related to this puniness is Stephen H. Burum's cinematography, which shows a strange talent for transforming real locations into phony back-lot settings. In fact De Palma shot the outdoor sequences in Thailand, but the squad's first night patrol is lighted in a way that makes every tree seem spurious. This peculiarity recurs. (Burum was also the cinematographer of *The Untouchables*, where he did a good job of making history look both present and historical in that film, so his failure here seems all the more inexplicable.)

The casting and the acting are mostly deplorable. Thuy Thu Le is moderately affecting as the victimized girl, but any Asian actress, speaking a strange language, bound and ravaged by brutes, would have to be inordinately dull not to be affecting. Several members of the squad demonstrate casting at the stock level. Sean Penn, for one—as the sergeant of the squad and the instigator of the abduction—is rankly dreadful. He does an imitation of Robert De Niro that deteriorates into parody, seemingly encouraged by De Palma, with overdone pauses between lines and actorish gestures between phrases. As Eriksson, Michael J. Fox does his best, but it's a lightweight best. Besides, he suffers from De Palma's nineteenth-century-melodrama casting: if you want to show that one member of a group is morally superior to the others, put a clean-cut fellow in the good-guy role and put tough mugs in the others. The film might have been marginally more interesting if Penn, tightly directed, had played Eriksson and someone credible as a rugged vet (like Tom Berenger in *Platoon* [1986]) had done the sergeant.

De Palma, ultimately responsible for all the above, is immediately responsible for the banalities of composition and motion—the slow, sentimental dissolves (in a supposedly hard-nosed picture), the silhouette shots of soldiers crossing ridges against the sunrise (militarily stupid and cinematically hoary). Some of the suspense intercutting—as when Fox is trapped, his legs having gone through the top of a Cong tunnel, while a Vietnamese crawls through the tunnel toward the dangling legs with a knife in his mouth—would have embarrassed Edwin S. Porter, director of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Not one moment in the whole film shows an original or even keenly imaginative eye. At best the direction is commonplace, at worst pretty dumb (a latrine sequence, for instance).

It seems a rule when writing about Vietnam films to place a newer one in relation to others that have gone before it or that even came at the same time. Obediently, I note that two are still outstanding: *Hamburger Hill* (1987), for its recreation of combat hell, and *Platoon*, which transcends its schema to achieve what De Palma bungles—the moral transformation of men in war. De Palma is just a derivative

Hollywoodnik who, in this case, wasn't even been able to bite off more than he can chew.

Conclusion

Using the 1980s as simulacrum, such is the story, then, of Brian De Palma's entire filmmaking career (with the possible exceptions, as noted, of *The Untouchables* and his early, apprentice-like comic pictures), give or take a chew, from *Sisters* (1973) to *Body Double* (1984) to *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) to *Passion* (2012). Block by block, De Palma has built his *oeuvre* largely on the imitation of old movies, usually by Hitchcock, beginning with his very first film, *Murder à la Mod* (1968), through *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Blow Out* (1981), to such pictures as *Raising Cain* (1992) and *Carlito's Way* (1993), *Femme Fatale* (2002) and *The Black Dahlia* (2006). Indeed, one could say that De Palma likes old movies so much he has spent the better part of his career trying to make them. This is a pity, and it is what comes (as in the case of his acolyte Quentin Tarantino) of too much movie-going, too much movie love, not enough movie-withdrawal, not enough movie thought. Film criticism may abhor a vacuum, as I said at the start of this piece, but in the case of De Palma it has been filled by little more than vacuity.

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Filmography of Feature Films: Brian De Palma (born 1940)

Murder à la Mod (1968)
Greetings (1968)

Hi, Mom! (1970)
Get to Know Your Rabbit (1972)
Sisters (1973)
Phantom of the Paradise (1974)
Obsession (1976)
Carrie (1976)
The Fury (1978)
Home Movies (1980)
Dressed to Kill (1980)
Blow Out (1981)
Scarface (1983)
Body Double (1984)
Wise Guys (1986)
The Untouchables (1987)
Casualties of War (1989)
The Bonfire of the Vanities (1990)
Raising Cain (1992)
Carlito's Way (1993)
Mission: Impossible (1996)
Snake Eyes (1998)
Mission to Mars (2000)
Femme Fatale (2002)
The Black Dahlia (2006)
Redacted (2007)
Passion (2012)
Domino (2018).

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