

Wasted opportunities—Blow, directed by Ted Demme

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Blow, directed by Ted Demme, written by David McKenna and Nick Cassavetes, based on the book by Bruce Porter

Blow is a weak film about the cocaine trade in the 1970s and 1980s, based on the career of drug dealer George Jung. Born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, south of Boston, Jung, from a working class family, resolves at an early age not to endure the financial difficulties his father has faced. In 1968 Jung moves to southern California and becomes involved in selling marijuana. After a stint in federal prison, he hooks up with Colombian cocaine traffickers. According to the film's breathless notes, he "single handedly became the world's premiere importer of cocaine from Colombia's Medellin cartel." He makes enormous amounts of money and marries a Colombian woman, a party girl. Jung's erstwhile partner eventually cuts him out of the business and he loses his money and his family. He makes one final attempt at a comeback and, set up by old friends, falls into the hands of the law once again. The real George Jung is currently sitting in prison.

There is potentially interesting material here. Some of the dates are suggestive. Jung may very well have been untouched by the radicalism of 1968, but it is noteworthy that his career began at that point. The first portion of the film is relatively light-hearted, as the indefatigable Jung traipses around Mexico looking for a marijuana farmer and falls in love with a stewardess. There is never anything admirable about Jung, but he seems relatively harmless at this stage.

Most intriguing is the rise of the cocaine trade and the "cocaine phenomenon" in the mid-1970s. Jung makes his first delivery from Colombia in 1976. In 1977, obliged to unload 50 kilos of cocaine, Jung and his associate in southern California, Derek Foreal (Paul Reubens), sell \$2.35 million worth of cocaine in 36

hours. Jung tells Foreal: "I think it's fair to say you underestimated the market there, Derek."

Many factors no doubt came into play in making cocaine such an overnight success, but it is difficult not to see sociological processes at work as well. In the first place, one might point to the increasingly fabulous wealth of certain sections of the population, including those in the entertainment industry. The extreme polarization of American society, that has reached such a malignant level in our day, was well under way.

Furthermore, there was the increasing susceptibility of certain layers to the siren song of cocaine as the 1968-75 wave of radicalism subsided and a significant portion of the middle class and the working class turned to the right. Social activism and the accompanying spirit of protest and opposition gave way to hedonism, self-absorption and cynicism. The drug did not cause this transformation, nor was it merely a consequence, but it certainly assisted many—under increasingly less favorable political circumstances—in turning away from looking objective reality in the face. One can certainly trace the influence of cocaine in the work of German filmmaker R.W. Fassbinder, for example. And in his case the drug-taking coincided precisely with the onset of political "normalization" in Germany.

So there is potentially something in the story of George Jung, apart from the innate interest any such exotic tale might have.

Of course, the examination of one of America's netherworlds, e.g., pornography (in *Boogie Nights*), organized crime (in *GoodFellas*), is hardly something new. To me the stories not shown generally hold the most interest. For example, there was Ray Liotta's father in *GoodFellas*, dismissed as a "working stiff" by his gangster son. In the case of *Blow*, Liotta gets to play the father who is shortchanged by the filmmakers. To

follow the fate of a working class family is of absolutely no interest to the average American filmmaker. When will one of them recognize where genuine drama lies?

In any event, Jung's story would be interesting if it were interestingly told. It is not. The script for the most part is a series of templates and clichés. George's mother (Rachel Griffiths) is a one-dimensional, money-hungry shrew. ("Money. M-O-N-E-Y. That's your job, not mine! It's your responsibility. Why do you think I married you?... The boy? What about me, Fred? What about me? Don't I deserve more? Look at me. I'm beautiful, for Chrissakes.") His father is a saint, although Liotta does his best with weak material. Penelope Cruz is dreadful as Jung's wife, quite unconvincing. Johnny Depp, as Jung, makes the film watchable; there is something deeply human about his expression and voice and movement.

The film could have been different. At one point Jung, on the run from the law, tells his father: "I'm really great at what I do, Dad," and his father replies: "Let me tell you something, son. You would have been a great anything."

If the filmmakers had only decided to explore that! Why would a bright and obviously able kid from the working class throw his life away on something so stupid and wasteful and corrupt as the drug trade? What went into that? What were the social and psychological processes that rendered him vulnerable to squandering his life in this fashion? What other possibilities were open to him? What sort of life was closed to him? How did changes in American life of the time affect him? Why has "greatness" in American public life in the past 20 years so often been associated with either criminal or trivial pursuits?

Instead the film is simply flippant, and that is much too easy a way out. Jung may have been less than a stellar human being, but he, like everyone else, deserves to be taken seriously. Depp attempts to do that, but he is tripped up at nearly every critical moment by a cynical and shallow script.

Of course, cynicism and sentimentality are two sides of the same coin. Sentimentality often plays an invaluable role in contemporary films. Since contemporary filmmakers are generally unable or unwilling to pursue an idea from beginning to end or examine in depth an historical moment, they need an

element to provide some semblance of dramatic structure to what are essentially formless, drifting works. "Family values," uncritically thrown in, often provide that glue at the moment. In this case director Ted Demme and screenwriters David McKenna and Nick Cassavetes make a great deal of George's relationship with his father and later with his daughter. But to little effect. It seems out of place and added merely for effect.



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