

Blow-Up

Brian De Palma & Taryn Simon in conversation

TARYN SIMON: I recently found a short news film you shot in 1965, at the opening night of MOMA's Op art exhibition "The Responsive Eye." You're zooming in and out of all these hypnotic Op pictures with moiré patterns. It made me think about vision as a physical reflex, even a form of mind control—and about the long arc of your style, which is so distinctive and pored over. Do you think your aesthetic is conscious at this point, or is it unconscious? Is it something that just comes out and you can't control?

BRIAN DE PALMA: Look, the hard thing—I'm sure you've experienced this, too—is that once you have a project, you think about how you're going to photograph the scene until you actually do it. I have always felt that the camera view is just as important as what's in front of the camera. Consequently, I'm obsessed with how I'm shooting the scene. When you're making a movie, you think about it all the time—you're dreaming about it, you wake up with ideas in the middle of the night—until you actually go there and shoot it. You have these ideas that are banging around in your head, but once you objectify them and lock them into a photograph or cinema sequence, then they get away from you. They're objectified; they no longer haunt you.

TS: The haunting can be torturous. I don't think I've ever enjoyed the making of my work. It's a labor. Do you find pleasure in getting to that point of objectification?

BDP: You know, there is no rest. That's the problem ... I'm a very solitary figure on set—I just walk in. I don't want to say hello and kiss everybody. I'm completely uninterested in that because—I'm sure you have the same feeling—when you go to shoot a movie, you've assembled hundreds of people waiting for you to tell them what to do. For the first time, you've got the actors. You have the location. You have the cinematographer. You have the weather, the light, the emotional stance of the various people around you, and it's catching lightning in a bottle. You're there to maximize the moment on film. And you'd better be very alert and watching everything constantly, because once you shoot it, it's gone forever. If you make a mistake or haven't thought

everything through correctly, you will look at that mistake for the rest of your life.

TS: Yes—there's enormous pressure on the day of shooting. And photography's history is bound to the mistake, to the accident. But I've never been one to embrace surprise. I think the invisible lead-up to the point of actually taking a photograph is, in many ways, my medium. Years of research, accessing, organizing, and writing are behind the construction of a single piece. But no matter how prepared and calculated the details of the shoot days are, its imagined form always seems to crumble and mutate.

BDP: I guess a lot of people shoot alternatives. I never do that. I spend months planning it all out, and then we actually edit as we shoot. I know exactly where the camera should be and how all the film fits together.

TS: Yeah, me too.

BDP: But if something happens on the set that's different, I immediately accommodate it. You don't want to go in with such a rigid idea that this is the way it should be. You have to see what is there. These are living creatures in front of you.

TS: But accommodation can be dangerous. It's important to remind yourself of what you want and not get lost in the noise of it all. Sadly, one has to do a lot of interacting, which I find distracting. I avoid lunch and conversation as much as possible. There is no time or space for anything other than the work. But there's a perceived cruelty in that focus.

BDP: I'm exactly the same way. I never talk to my driver while going to work. I never eat lunch with anybody.

TS: For me, though, interaction can be a necessary precursor to gaining access. *Making A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I–XVIII* [2011], I was traveling nonstop, often to remote locations. I was constantly trying to avoid illness from local water and food that might slow me down. So my assistant and I lived on powdered meals, PowerBars, and bottled water. But in many cultures, refusing offers of food or tea can lead to the demise of a shoot. Cigarettes are helpful. Even after I quit smoking, I would smoke in order to find a way of transcending language barriers, of connecting.

BDP: In fact, you always seem to structure work around difficulties. You structured an entire project about the places you were not allowed to go.

TS: Well, in that work (*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, [2007], I wanted to confront the divide between public and expert access. After September 11, America felt like a new landscape: religiously, ethically, politically. So I wanted to revisit the practice of exploration as registered in early records of visits to the "New World." In those historical accounts, you see interpretive, seductive, even abstract renderings of plants, animals, people, and terrain accompanied by seemingly factual data and texts. I decided to use text and image in a similar way, to look inward. I wanted to confront the hidden, both physically and psychologically, and see how far I could get, with permission, as an individual citizen within realms that were usually reserved for privileged or expert audiences: the CIA's art collection, or a

nuclear-waste encapsulation facility, or a hibernating bear's cave.

BDP: That was one reason, I think, that I wanted to work with you on the photograph of Zahra [Zubaidi] for *Redacted* [2007]—that you were interested in taking a picture of what you can't access, and that film was about images and events we can't access, either. After our collaboration, what did you end up doing with the photograph? I know you presented it at the Venice Biennale, but then afterward?

TS: Well, since the image was originally produced for the final frame of your film, it had a text associated with it—your screenplay. But then the image took on associations with other texts, as the world responded to it. Its final form, on the walls of museums, includes three different annotations that are silk-screened to the wall beside the image. These annotations represent the changing contexts that the image and the actress who is its subject endured over the past five years. The texts clock the ways in which the photograph mutated through time.

BDP: And Zahra's story is fascinating because she comes to audition in a movie. She plays the character of a girl who is raped and killed and set on fire, which sort of dramatizes the whole involvement of America in Iraq, and the penalty she has to pay for it is she is a pariah in the Muslim world. They want her dead because of the fact that she portrayed this character.

TS: The photograph began as a fictionalized rendering of a real event. The resulting image of Zahra, an Iraqi actress, playing the role of this young girl led to the second annotation associated with the image. That text highlights the response to Zahra's portrayal—the death threats from family members; the criticism from friends and neighbors, who considered her participation in the film to be pornography. The photograph was completely recontextualized by these accusations. It became evidence of a new reality—a reality in which Zahra had to pursue political asylum in the United States. In the third and final annotation, written in 2011, I cite her legal defense, which used the international exhibition of this photograph at the Venice Biennale as a factor contributing to her endangerment. The photograph and its exhibition were used to reveal a continued threat and, at the same time, to support Zahra's case for political asylum, which was granted in 2011. She couldn't go home because of the images. You could see an image's very real influence on an individual life from start to finish: from a casting call with you in Jordan to ending up in the United States and receiving political asylum.

BDP: Her story just tells me that we have no knowledge about her culture. You know? This makes absolutely no sense to us. By the same token, this idea that you're just going to go in and put a few schools up and everybody is going to become democratic overnight is a specifically American idea.

TS: But at the same time, why is Western cinema so present throughout the world, then? If there are all of these intransigent cultural differences, why does an American aesthetic still seem to dominate global popular culture?

BDP: Because it's the devil's candy.

TS: Well, I wanted to ask you about that. Thinking about Zahra and everything

that happened to her, what is the difference for you between art being violent and violence in art? Is there a difference?

BDP: There are many violent images in my movies. But cinema is kinetic. It's motion. So obviously violent and very dramatic motions are part of the paint box of cinema. They are not really attainable or key in the same way in painting, not really in literature, not really in music. But in cinema, you can take these shots and make things go very fast and do very dramatic things. They can be very realistic at the same time and very terrifying. Violence can be used correctly. It obviously can be used incorrectly, but to me it's just part of the vocabulary. I am a great believer in trying to maximize the visual impact of what I'm trying to show. That's why there is the image of Carrie getting blood dumped on her. I mean, I have been watching that image being reproduced over and over for close to forty years now. That image is constantly repeated.

TS: When I think of the relentless return of a violent image, I think of the atomic bomb on film. Do you know what [J. Robert] Oppenheimer's response to that footage was? He likened it to Vishnu trying to impress the king with his many arms: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." I wonder if you think there are cases when an artwork has gone too far and takes on a "multiarmed" form, when a vision can destroy? Is there a boundary? Do boundaries matter in a world of spectacularized violence and anesthetized audiences?

BDP: No, I don't think there is a boundary. I mean, we can graphically represent things, and we can emotionally—and even intellectually—create quite an effect. But that's nothing compared with the actual bombing of innocent people.

TS: Zahra was in real danger of being killed. And you chose to not capitulate to censorship or threats. I remember during that time, you felt very strongly that images could stop the war and that their absence in mainstream media was perpetuating complacency.

BDP: There were absolutely no pictures coming out. They redacted all the real pictures of people who got killed in Iraq in *Redacted*—pictures that had been published and on the Internet, and that everybody had already seen or knew about. And I think that that containment of images had a real effect. The Bush administration went to the lengths of "embedding" reporters with the troops, and they would supposedly tell you the real story—which, of course, is nonsense. It's another way of completely controlling the image, which is what the military does all the time.

TS: As much as they used it to great propagandistic effect, the Third Reich feared photography because it makes you pensive. There's a long history of controlling the distribution of images in conflict. But those were times when the image was precious. Do you actually think it would have made a difference had we received the images?

BDP: Absolutely. I think it would have made a difference. What's ironic, of course, is that everybody has cameras now.

TS: But now that they are ubiquitous, do photography and video still maintain a position of power and authority?

BDP: Everybody can take video, and yet somehow none of it got back onto our American television screens. Or if there was anything too disturbing, they pixelated it, as if to say, “Oh my God, you can’t see that.”

TS: Are there things that you don’t want to see?

BDP: I’m not a good person to ask about this, because my father was a surgeon and I grew up in a hospital. So I saw it all. I saw operations. I saw blood. I saw people dying. I was even shot once. So nothing much shocks me.

TS: You were shot?

BDP: Yeah. I had broken up with a girl. I got drunk, stole a motor scooter, started to drive home. Some cop pulled me over. I knocked him down, jumped on my motor scooter, and tried to drive away, and they knocked me over. I ran, and they shot me.

Are there things you don’t want to see?

TS: I want to see everything. I guess the positive version of not seeing or not knowing would be the preservation of fantasy.

BDP: I would agree with you. It’s 1984. Fantasy sells.

TS: Is there a film you wouldn’t dare to do?

BDP: I don’t know. A film I wouldn’t dare to do ... It’s ironic that you mention something like that. You know, there are things I didn’t want to do, mainly because of lack of foresight. For instance, Paul Schrader gave me the script to *Taxi Driver*. I read it during Christmas week when I was in California. I thought, “God, this is incredible, but who would want to see this? I don’t see how you can make a movie out of this.” Then I gave it to Marty [Scorsese]. What a mistake. I mean, I couldn’t see how you could make a movie about this that anybody would go see, and Marty, of course, made a brilliant movie out of it.

Do you have limits, formal limits, that you’re afraid to go beyond?

TS: I have one project in particular that allows me to work without rigid conceptual constraints. For the past six years, I’ve built a series of images that follow the dimensions of [Kazimir] Malevich’s black square, on which I can project anything. For instance, I photographed [Henry] Kissinger in shadow, and an artificial heart; two of the most recent images have to do with protest, both imagined and real. One centers on a makeshift anti-hijacking system that is a reaction to the proliferation of carjackings in South Africa, in the most beautiful and spectacular form. Another highlights a blue bucket in Moscow that imitates the ersatz police sirens used by the wealthy and the powerful to circumvent traffic.

What does protest look like to you today? I know you protested against Vietnam.

BDP: Obviously, I am appalled by the fact that our independent cinema is not more political, but it seems to me it’s because of the ability of the media over the past several decades to steer the public away from the really dangerous material. They just want us to show an image of ourselves, get us involved in gossip.

TS: I teach sometimes, and I’ve noticed a marked resistance to and anxiety about making something too concrete. An anarchic, abstract approach, with no discernable

objective, is championed. It feels like a phenomenon of the past decade—in film, too. Or maybe I’m getting old.

BDP: But isn’t *The Innocents* [2002] precisely about photographs doing something—not just as documents but as things that have an effect?

TS: Well, in that work, I look at the ambiguity of a photograph—and its danger. The men I photographed were victims of misidentification. They were convicted of crimes they did not commit, through the use of visual material—composite sketches, live lineups, and, mainly, photographs. Victims and eyewitnesses identified these men from photographs presented to them by law enforcement. Their identifications relied on precise visual memory. But through repeat exposure and manipulations—both purposeful and unconscious—the photographs replaced the memory of the actual perpetrator, if there ever was one.

BDP: And then you introduced a plot twist, I’d say, by bringing the misidentified “perpetrator” to the crime scene that he had never seen.

TS: The crime scene represented this place to which they’d never been but that had changed their lives forever. The men in those photographs had imagined that location, in court proceedings, prison, dreams, but it had no real visual anchor.

BDP: And did you see your work as a form of justice?

TS: No. It was more schizophrenic than that. I was deeply invested in the issues of truth and culpability that the project raised, but also in its aesthetic concerns and in the issues it highlighted about a photographic image, its history and its context. And the material effects of ignoring a photograph’s context are directly seen in the misidentification that leads to the imprisonment or execution of an innocent person. I was always working in a fragmented form—a single image in which I’m constantly trying to keep both my conceptual and my visual interests alive. And sometimes one is failing and one is succeeding.

BDP: That kind of schizophrenia can happen in making a film, too.

TS: Right—and I guess the split screen, which is a technique I associate very much with your work, is the perfect example of that. That’s both a narrative and a stylistic choice. To me, the device, the multiple views, implies the inevitability of a kind of alienation.

BDP: Well, I first used the split screen in *Dionysus* in ’69 [1970], which I recently transferred digitally, so I have been looking at it again. The idea there was that there was the Performance Group’s new play, the original Greek play, and then there was the relationship between the actors and the audience. I shot the narrative of the play while my codirector Bob Fiore went off and showed the relationship of the audience to the players. And we were shooting simultaneously.

So you have this split screen from beginning to end. *Dionysus* starts dancing. Everybody in the audience, some rise, some get in, and they all start dancing. And then the troupe start dancing even more vigorously, and they start taking off their clothes, and then so does the audience. Pentheus, the king of Thebes, looks around, and everybody is naked and groping one another and dancing. He’s going, “Oh my

God.” Suddenly, the audience realizes they’re naked. They’re humiliated, and they run back to their seats. It’s an astounding moment.

TS: So is that less about alienation and more about cause and effect?

BDP: Well, in *Sisters* [1973], I used the split screen to show a guy getting murdered and writing HELP in blood on a window, and the woman in the apartment across the street seeing him writing HELP simultaneously. And then you see the murderers covering their tracks and the woman trying to get the police, both actions unfolding at the same time.

I like murder mysteries. I like suspense. Don’t you? When you were shooting all of that contraband—it’s like finding evidence for something, some crime, some puzzle we don’t know the answer to.

TS: I think of *Contraband* [2010] as a performance piece. I lived at JFK airport for a full working week and documented all the items seized by US Customs and Border Protection from passengers and express mail entering into the US. I worked without sleep for a five-day period. I’d take naps between the last flight and the first morning flight on an air mattress I shared with my assistants in the contraband room. There were counterfeit Louis Vuitton bags, counterfeit Chanel sunglasses; there was counterfeit Viagra, counterfeit Ambien—everyone chasing the same fantasy and escape. I anticipated collecting photographs of guns, heroin, animals ... and I did. But the customs officials’ overwhelming focus was on safeguarding brand identity. They were battling a relentless influx of copies.

BDP: And as a photographer, you are making yet another copy.

TS: Yes. A copy of a copy. The goods couldn’t enter the US, but the photograph could. I then took the photograph and inserted it into another economy—the economy of art.

BDP: There is no question that desire is tied to threat. I mean, television is the most insidious invention ever because it’s basically a selling machine. We have these things we call commercials, but don’t think the stuff between the commercials is not selling you something also.

The effects of consumerism on film are obviously insidious too. To me, the sad thing is that expensive films are now dominated by the visual-effects houses. And who are the artists of the visual-effects houses? You know, nerds who have spent their whole lives looking at comic books and video games. So that’s where they get all their visual ideas. That’s why there is an endless repetition of visual ideas in so-called spectacular fantasy or in science fiction. Look at *Star Wars*. It’s basically George [Lucas] looking at those old *Flash Gordon* serials and finding a new way to do that with what was then new technology.

TS: Your films often depict manipulative systems and invisible powers that influence your characters, who go mad in the face of it. It makes me think of one of my favorite films of yours—*Phantom of the Paradise* [1974].

BDP: *Phantom* is about the corruption of art. I got the idea in an elevator, listening to the Muzak version of a Beatles song. Money corrupts art. The money managers get richer; the artwork is reduced to pap. Yes, I’ve always thought about larger systems of power—how they monetize and ultimately destroy originality—and their historical arc, the rise and fall of empires. How do you picture those kinds of systems?

TS: Well, in my latest work *A Living Man ...*, I’ve tried to do that, in a way. To articulate certain systems, patterns, and codes through design and narrative. I traveled around the world researching and recording eighteen bloodlines and their related stories. There are several empty portraits representing living members of a bloodline who could not be photographed for reasons including dengue fever, imprisonment, army service, and religious and cultural restrictions on gender. Some just refused because they didn’t want to be part of the narrative. The blanks establish a code of absence and presence. The stories themselves function as archetypal episodes from the past that are occurring now and will happen again. I was thinking about evolution and if we are in fact unfolding, or if we’re more like a skipping record—ghosts of the past and the future.

BDP: Like the story in Brazil?

TS: Yes. I documented two bloodlines that are in an active feud in Northeast Brazil. Their story reads like something out of Shakespeare, something inexorable. Over the past two decades, their feud has claimed the lives of more than twenty members of both bloodlines and forty others involved in their dispute. It includes decapitation. One woman received a death threat by phone while I was photographing her. People are being born into a battle that is not of their making, but becomes their own.

BDP: But who’s the Big Brother here? What’s the power structure?

TS: The forces of economics, geography, religion, governance, are butting up against the internal forces of psychological and physical inheritance. I wanted to explore fate in relation to these categories. Power is less fixed. It’s not necessarily top-down. And I was interested in using the accepted order of blood at a time when it is very slowly breaking apart—artificial wombs, or genome manipulation.

BDP: So your next place of study has got to be Mars.

TS: Yeah, but you’ve already done it.

BDP: I made *Mission to Mars* [2000]. I have a good feel for the whole terrain. But photographing the unphotographable, that’s for you.

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