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BRINGING PREJUDICE INTO FOCUS

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Neal Slavin had none of the adrenaline-stoked energy you might expect of a first-time director on the eve of his movie's national release. But then again, Slavin has reached the point in life where he doesn't really have to prove himself - not that you'd know it from his modest demeanor. The new director, in town recently for the Boston premiere of "Focus" - a parable about perception and prejudice in 1940s America - has been an acclaimed still photographer for three decades.Now 60ish, with white hair and black brows, Slavin first read Arthur Miller's novel "Focus" 40 years ago as an art student at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City. He decided on the spot that he would some day adapt it to film. Though he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, what struck the incipient photographer most were not the particulars of the story - the transformation of a man whose anti-Semitic neighbors suddenly begin mistaking him for Jewish when he gets a new pair of glasses - but the fact that Miller had written a fable centering on questions of visual perception.

In 1994 Slavin decided that if he didn't make the movie then, he never would. He described the process of getting a first movie made as analogous to "stopping an oncoming locomotive, turning it around, and sending it back the other way, all on the same track." Being tight with a multimillionaire media tycoon apparently makes such a feat considerably easier. When Slavin approached old friend and New York mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg for advice on investors for the project, Bloomberg agreed to finance it himself. Bloomberg is the film's executive producer. (The playwright's son, Robert A. Miller, produces.)

Jet-lagged, recovering from bronchitis, and not fully caffeinated, Slavin had his mind on heading home during a recent interview at the Museum of Fine Arts, where the film opened the Boston Jewish Film Festival. He reminded an assistant several times not to forget to book his train ticket home to New York, where he lives with his wife and their 11-year-old daughter. Slavin apologized repeatedly for his fatigue, saying, "When I'm sitting on the train, then I'll probably think of a lot of other examples."

But when asked to teach a reporter something about photography while viewing the current MFA exhibit of modernist glamour photography, "The Look," he rallied and regained his focus.

Professorial in a corduroy blazer, Slavin held forth on photography's ability to both reveal and idealize reality. Strolling through the gallery of Horst and Hoyningen-Huene's black-and-white prints, he pointed out a distinction between the show's fashion images, with their "extra-beautiful surfaces," and its portraits of artists and socialites, which captured "emanations of who people really are."

"With models, real bodies are idealized to such a degree that they look like mannequins," he said. "Nothing is implied."

Slavin knows of what he speaks. In addition to being a highly regarded portrait photographer, he has worked extensively as a commercial photographer and director; his clients have included Apple Computer, Chase Manhattan, and Reebok. What interests him as an artist is what a photograph reveals about its subject. By contrast, he said, advertising is about hiding everything but the surfaces. Commercial photography "creates a world without feeling - or with only one, particular feeling."

As a commercial photographer, does he find himself relying on the kind of visual stereotyping that "Focus" explicitly condemns? "You separate out things. It's a different state of mind," he admitted. He finds commercial work interesting "as a sociological form of communication" that "shows what people want."

Slavin's two major art photography books, "When Two or More Are Gathered Together" and "Britons," comprise large-format, posed group portraits - mostly of organizational groups, clubs, and teams. (His works are included in the permanent collections of many major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art.) Slavin compared these photographs to maps, saying that from afar what you see is mostly abstraction, but as you look more closely, you are drawn into the interesting particulars. Explaining his fascination with the group portrait, Slavin said, "While subjects

are posing and trying to look the same in their uniforms, they are all different. Looking at their faces, you can surmise what they imply."

Slavin said that the connection between his photography and his new movie lies in "the theme of identity and the importance of visual perception in thinking about identity. Also, both are about group mentality."

While he avows that you can't compare the media of still photography and film, the tension between idealizing and revealing reality - so interesting to him as a photographer - is apparent in the visual world he created in "Focus."

The narrative in "Focus" sometimes shows the director's inexperience, but the film's visual style is both striking and substantive. Slavin uses crisp, super-saturated color and a squeaky- clean set design to throw an earnest social-problem plot pleasingly off balance. As opposed to the chaotic charms of MTV-influenced style, the look of "Focus" has the control of middle-aged mastery.

"The idea was to set up a Mary Poppins world where everything looks perfect, but underneath that world is an underbelly of anger, of evil. It wasn't about showing these dark, threatening scenes, but more, as you watch this beautiful world, this facade, there's a feeling that at any time the darkness could erupt," the director explained.

Slavin has taken some heat for the film's casting, which adds to the film's quality of visual unreality. William H. Macy and Laura Dern are the two leads, playing gentiles who are constantly mistaken for Jews. For many, it's hard to see how Macy and Dern could be mistaken for Jews based exclusively on their appearance.

The director said he cast Macy because "he knew how to be a real wimp and also at the same time he could be very strong." He insists that though blonde-haired, blue-eyed Dern "can look very WASP, if you look at her from one side, she can look very Semitic" and maintains that the film wouldn't have worked if he had cast typically "Jewish-looking" actors. "It's not about what people look like. It's about perception, not reality."

"Focus" is set in the mid-1940s, with America at war and intolerance running high. How does this resonate with the current state of the nation's psyche? Slavin said that because "Focus" is a fable, it is applicable to any time. He emphasized that there are visual dynamics to racism and prejudice of all kinds. "I don't call it racial profiling, I call it visual profiling. When the social milieu is of a certain nature, then you start profiling people - and you make value judgments. That's about you, not about the person you're looking at."

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