Interview with Bill Pruitt (by Clare Bucknell and Colin MacCabe)

Bill Pruitt is an American television producer specialising in reality television and documentaries. His credits include *The Amazing Race* (2002-8), for which he won four Emmy Awards, *The Apprentice* (2004-5), *Deadliest Catch* (2011-12) and *Price of Duty* (2018). He was interviewed in Los Angeles in November 2017.

CMC: Can we start by asking how you got into reality TV? Your age means that you pre-date the current age of reality TV. So you can't have grown up as a boy with a burning desire to be a reality TV producer.

BP: Well, it's strange, but before there was reality TV as we know it, I dreamt about it. I dreamt I was in a big ornate Broadway theatre and onstage were Cynthia Nixon and Robert Duvall and they were acting their asses off and everybody was enthralled. And then they paused onstage, the house lights came up to half and an announcer came over the loudspeaker to say: 'Angela Davis from Athens, Georgia!' And there was a smattering of applause. And this woman jumped up and ran up on stage dressed in a velour tracksuit. She proceeded to stand on stage and Duvall and Nixon returned to the scene; the house lights came down and they were all acting and the woman was waving to her friends in the audience – you know, all coyly – and then finally they paused again, the lights came up and Angela Davis from Georgia went back down off the stage. And remember that this was Broadway, the pinnacle for an actor: to get to that theatre and be on that stage. And here they were just giving it away to whomever in the audience won a lucky dip. The dream went on and eventually *I* was announced to go up on stage and be up there. I was with them there in the spotlights. Then I woke up and thought 'What the hell was that about?' You have to remember that at that time the world of performance and acting was an extremely exclusive one. You had to have a Screen Actors Guild card or a Directors Guild card to get in. But in a way I was dreaming of what would ultimately take place in television: a world where anyone lucky enough could have their 15 minutes of fame.

I grew up in Utah, and then the only job you could get in the film business was working for Robert Redford's Sundance Institute. That was a great opportunity, because the artistic director of Sundance was also the chairman of Columbia University's film programme in New York. He invited me to come there and study. And Columbia taught me the structures of storytelling, screenwriting – the basic core principles of filmmaking. The challenge of willing an image onto the screen and the hard labour of raising the money. It was a great introduction to what I'd always intended to do. Then I came out to Los Angeles with my wife who'd been offered acting jobs over there and looked for work wherever I could get it, which happened to be the *E! True Hollywood Story*. If you've seen the show you'll know that it's a pretty tawdry thing, basically defiling someone's career. But the themes were Shakespearean. Shakespeare's storylines were present in all these lives like Pee-wee Herman's or Elvis Presley's. You got to tell these stories about celebrities who made a bad decision or a Faustian deal, and you could be creative. So I jumped to it. Then one of my co-producers left and took me with him. He sold a show called *Sorority Life* to MTV. They'd been dying to get into the sorority world and do a real life show; this guy managed to crack the code by getting in with a sorority on the UC Davis campus.

CMC: And this was what year, roughly?

BP: It was 2002. The very beginning. Well, when we were in film school we were taught to pray at the altar of intention and obstacle. In other words: what does this character want, and what stands in her way? I was filming a scene with this girl named Candice for *Sorority Life*. Basically, her father called her on the phone and said, 'Candice, if you don't get your grades up, I'm going to pull you out of college'. You know, something all of us have heard, something I've said to my sons. If she wanted to stay in the sorority and party with all the other girls she had to pull up her grades. So I thought: we've got a great comeback story here. Let's watch her stack up the books and hit them hard and turn it around – or possibly not. Maybe she'll get the grades, maybe she won't. Whatever happens, that'll be the story. So I wrote it up, directed and produced it, followed it and sent it down to the editors. And in the end they totally dismissed it, because it wasn't about her getting drunk, it wasn't about her chasing boys, it wasn't about her fighting with her housemates; it was a normal sort of story. And I remember thinking: wow, they don't get it. Or, maybe, actually *I* don't get it. Maybe I'm not cut out to tell stories the way that I was taught in this new genre that seems only to look for bad behaviour for its source. Luckily then I got hired right away for this show called *The Amazing Race*. It's a hyper-fast-paced competition reality series in which eleven teams of two compete against one another in a race around the world for a prize of a million dollars. The reason this show has been so successful over the years (I won four Primetime Emmy Awards as the Supervising Producer) is that we got to tell an honest story about intention and obstacle (those two buzzwords again) that was simple and clean; the basic themes of 'at any cost', or 'nice guys finish last' would always resonate with audiences.

Finally I moved on and was hired to do *The Apprentice*. That really was a career high for me, because we were given money and creative power to invest in the stories we told. The budget for the show was substantial and Mark Burnett, the creator, gave us leeway to tell the stories as they came up. We had a template called *Survivor*, another Burnett creation, about people competing against one another on a deserted island with evictions every week, where the last person standing got a million-dollar prize. *The Apprentice* was basically *Survivor* set in the big city. *Survivor* had contestants voting each other out; *The Apprentice* made drama out of the company CEO deciding who stayed and who left. Instead of being voted off an island, each week the contestant judged to be the weakest would be fired and sent home. And the winner, instead of receiving a million bucks, would get the chance to work for Donald Trump, this illustrious titan of business (as we described him then). We made a few adjustments along the way but essentially the rest is history, because with *The Apprentice* reality TV obtained previously unheard-of ratings. We had 30 million people watching the grand finale episode. It was gigantic and it occupied prime time as adequately as any of the scripted shows which cost ten times as much to produce. And so the stage was set. *The Apprentice* really showed how cheap, tawdry, democratic television, plucking from the masses ordinary men and women to carry out the same functions as written characters, could dominate in prime time. We were off!

CMC: When you joined *The Apprentice*, was Trump already cast?

BP: Yes. Although, actually, the original concept as I understood it had been to introduce a new billionaire every season, just as *Survivor* had a new remote location. Every season there'd be some new billionaire's world you could enter into, whether it was David Geffen's or Martha Stewart's or whoever's. But Trump, it turned out, was the only one who said yes, and in truth he kind of needed to because his business empires were starting to crumble. For him, taking on and owning half a successful reality TV show was a necessary deal.

CMC: To what extent had the show's bosses already decided what they wanted Trump what to do, or did he determine to some degree how the show progressed? How much of the format of the show was Trump's idea, or was he just the front man?

BP: None of it was formatted by Trump as far as I know. We had this very successful franchise called *Survivor* and almost every aspect of that pre-existing series was transported into the concrete jungles of New York for *The Apprentice*, with survival in business replacing physical survival. The idea was that to get ahead and outwit your competitors in business you had to know about marketing, you had to know about strategy, you had to know about cost, about supply and demand and all those things. Burnett rigidly adhered to aspects of casting that he'd used previously on *Survivor*. On that show it was often the person with the best psychological profile and strengths who would prevail. Here he'd be looking for people who had some proven acumen and some salary to vouch for the fact that they were legitimately talented businesspeople. They'd have some entrepreneurial fire about them and they'd need to be telegenic. So Trump had nothing to do with the casting. He did have final approval of some of the tasks they were set, but even there he could be overruled.

I remember one occasion in particular, we were going to a meeting for Episode 10 of the first series but we were late because we'd been for dinner. And because we were late we got our pedicab drivers to race each other – we told them we'd give them an extra twenty bucks if they beat the other guys. When we got to the meeting at last it was pandemonium because the challenge we had planned had been cancelled at the last minute. The bosses asked us what we'd been doing and we said 'Pedicab racing'. It was pure chance but they leapt on the idea – we got together the pedicab companies and put together a task around them. Now Trump hated those guys. He hated pedicabs, hated street vendors of all kinds because he felt they littered the street, littered the sidewalk, devalued his real estate. He was adamantly opposed to the new task, but we had nothing else to shoot so we went for it. And as things turned out it was one of the biggest and best episodes. This is the thing about reality TV: when you let it play for real, when things are just allowed to happen, chances are it's going to be better than anything you can write yourself. We got spectacular results out of the task because of one moment in particular where the contestants were in a war room strategy session, and Amy Henry, one of the eventual finalists, said 'What if we were to sell advertising on the side of a rickshaw [pedicab]?' And then Bill Rancic, the eventual winner, said 'That's a great idea. Sell advertising on the rickshaw'. And in the broadcast programme it's *Bill* you see coming up with the idea. I'm not sure now whether the cameramen just didn't catch Amy having the idea herself or whether we deliberately edited her suggestion out to make Bill look like a more worthy finalist. (You see we'd shoot all ten episodes in New York, then go back to Los Angeles and produce edited versions that would create a smooth narrative up to the grand finale where Trump would choose between the remaining two contestants.)

CMC: In your email to *Vanity Fair*, you said that 'Effectively, the show manufactured an image of Trump as a successful businessman, which is very much the image on which he got elected'. Are you saying that reality TV produced this fake version of Trump which then became the 'real' president?

BP: Well, of course, none of us knew at the time that he would ever even *think* of running for president. We had one objective and that was to entertain: to tell stories and generate ratings. So we had 43 minutes and 50 seconds of programme squeezed between commercial breaks that we were responsible for delivering on a weekly basis. Those commercial breaks would pay for the NBC revenue which then paid our salaries. It was a job and we were doing it really, really well. We had to do it well to justify all these young, talented, successful, telegenic people giving up their normal pursuits to go and work for this guy Trump. Take Kwame Jackson who was runner-up to Bill Rancic in the first series. He was a Harvard MBA. He left a job at Goldman Sachs. He was extraordinarily talented and the casting director thought he'd be great. And he was a brilliant contestant and a great advertisement for how legitimate the whole programme was. But what you have to understand is that all of this was *also* legitimising Donald Trump. *Art of the Deal* notwithstanding, all of his billions, all of his real estate holdings notwithstanding, the Trump empire was in determined decline. Previously when his fortunes had waned they'd bounce back. But now 9/11 had happened, the economy was changing. There was no telling where any of this was going to go. So when we were tasked with making him look good, we did so by giving him a great platform. And he was, after all, Donald Trump, and he beat his chest and strutted his stuff. But there were clear problems. We had this Jessica Simpson benefit concert that Kwame was tasked with producing for the final episode. It was staged at the Trump Taj Mahal hotel and casino in Atlantic City. The Taj Mahal was decrepit, literally falling apart. The neon sign had letters missing, the carpet was rotting and releasing a very pungent odour. All this the viewers didn't see.

But the bigger point here, and what I think I was trying to get at in my email to *Vanity Fair*, was that we have a responsibility as media people to illuminate and entertain, certainly, but also to be truthful as we do so – because the big lesson we're kind of all waking up to now is that if *The Apprentice* hadn't been so successful for twelve seasons, we probably wouldn't be where we are now with this person in charge. And I think that warrants study and consideration. The people who generated this big story, who kicked it off in the beginning, have to take some responsibility for the success narrative that elevated this guy to a position where he could run rampant over anybody who tried to doubt him. After twelve seasons and all those countless viewers, you can't argue that he's not good TV. He's great TV. He's got a bombastic, narcissistic nature. He's got elements of the psychopathic, the dark triad, all those great things that cameras love, and optically you want to have that craziness on hand. That's so much of what we do in my business – sanctioned vanity is a big part of Hollywood, but sanctioned *narcissism* is a big part of reality TV.

CB: Let's go back to basics for a moment and clarify our terms. Before reality TV there was non-fiction content on television but it was called the documentary. Then this thing called reality TV slowly emerged, which *was* non-fiction, but it was also something new and different. How do you see the distinction?

BP: It's a really interesting question and one I've had to face again recently. *The Apprentice* is reality TV show, but *The Deadliest Catch*, which I also worked on, a show set in Alaska about the very dangerous and very real world of Bering Sea crab fisherman, is more of a documentary. The chief difference is perhaps that in a reality show you can shape things when you're out of the field. You can go and find eight acquaintances who are all curvaceous and blonde and have high heels and wealthy husbands and call them housewives, you can adorn them appropriately and feed them alcohol and tell them what to fight about. Usually it wouldn't occur to them to get into conflict with the person they're supposed to be fighting with, but here the camera and their contracts have forced them together; so they'll be at the bar with their martinis and their heels and their bags and they have this controversial subject to talk about and it will produce content that we want to see. Now, by contrast, when in *Deadliest Catch* we go out on a crab boat with ex-felons and 40-foot waves and life and death all around, it's hard to tell anybody what to do. The context tells *you* what to do. If you're lucky and you're talented and you can tell the story of what's happening around you, you can come out with something that is like Shakespeare or like Melville. You can craft the story so that it makes intentions and obstacles clear. Something like: I want to catch fish and I want to feed my family, but gigantic waves and a big Arctic storm are in my way. And this ex-felon is acting like a real big ass and he's going to kill somebody if I don't put him in his place. Those sorts of stories were what we dealt with over and over again, and they weren't shaped by anything other than the nature of the real situation.

CB: So it all comes down to storytelling?

BP: Yes, but not just any story: it's about exploring worlds, being invited into new situations and sharing them. For instance, I'm doing something now with law enforcement for a crime network that specialises in true crime, where the opportunity is to tell a new and different story about officers, the men and women who develop complicated psychological or emotional relationships with particular cases. Here we're in a new kind of terrain because cops don't typically like to talk about this stuff. It's exciting to be in this intimate psychological space where you can break ground and humanise people who usually avoid being human in front of cameras.

CB: But what you just described sounds like a straight documentary, not a reality TV show?

BP: Well, that's true in the sense that we can't tell these law enforcement people what to do. But what we *can* do is say, take us to the crime scene. Show us what happened. Tell us about your experience then and reflect on it now, as if you were there. That's got something a little more than the straight *verité* follow-doc format. The basic conceit written into the show is, 'Yes, I know you're good at what you do and you've dealt with 300 homicides; what I want to hear about is *this* one, tell me about *this* one'. You can't ask a cop outright to say 'Well, this one case really made me lie awake at night screaming and drinking too much'. It's all cumulative. You're continually needing to check in with yourself as a producer – what's true, what are the facts, what's properly in the spirit of what a subject has said, that kind of thing – just the kinds of controls a journalist has to apply. Except that we have nobody fact-checking us. We're chasing what's going to entertain people the most.

CMC: You've talked about being a showrunner. You've talked about directing and you've talked about editing. Do you fulfil all those functions yourself?

BP: No, what I'm doing is *overseeing*. In every non-fiction programme, whether it's *Deadliest Catch*, *Dancing with the Stars* or a news show, there are three versions: there's what happens; what gets filmed; and what gets cut into 43 minutes and 50 seconds of content between commercials. Just as there are columns in journalism with lengths writers have to adhere to, we have particular programme slots. Certain things have to be cut out. My job as showrunner is to oversee all three of those versions. Typically what I'll want to do is make sure they all resemble one another as much as possible, so that storylines run seamlessly through and the whole thing makes sense.

In reality TV there are different kinds of producers. Task producers, first, are the ones who build the sandbox everyone else will play in. They'll be the ones to make the deal with the pedicab drivers, for instance. And if they're good at their job, you know that when your contestants enter the sandbox it will be a great space from which you can build beautiful sandcastles and sculptures. As showrunner I will be weighing in on what the task producers do. I'll say perhaps, 'That's very dramatic. That's good'. Or, 'We've seen that scenario before. That's a little bit too much like the last episode'.

Then there are field producers. They're the ones who direct the cameras and ask the questions. They need psychological intuition, the ability to know where to find the threads of a story and gather them together so that the editors back home have the materials they need to work with.

CB: It sounds like what you're looking for are tropes – say, the 'hero' trope, the 'victim' trope, the 'rags to riches' trope, the 'red herring' trope. Is that right?

BP: Absolutely. That's the field producer's job. As 'reality' is happening (the first version of the story), the field producer is shooting and looking out for those moments that might become a trope. Let's say on *The Apprentice* that someone drops a wallet full of cash with all the team's money on it, and we happen to catch that fatal moment on camera. Our editors could frame that moment as evidence of a contestant's Achilles heel – something that will make sense of them not doing well later on – or they could use it as part of a red herring narrative because in fact they *do* go on to do well. Knowing what those little things could mean and looking out for them is key. It's about getting all the right elements on film to bring home to the editor – a close-up of the wallet lying on the sidewalk, for instance, would be a useful shot to have, and maybe too a connecting shot to show them running off down the street and that wallet still on the sidewalk.

CB: I've noticed that when I watch reality shows, the episodes that I've found most frustrating have been the ones where to me the ultimate hiring or firing decisions seem unfair, and I feel that the 'wrong' person's been eliminated. Are these cases of bad field production or bad editing, where the necessary evidence or shaping tropes haven't been provided for me?

BP: That's a really great question. We can go about the business of telling the right story – somebody dropping a wallet on a crowded street being a case in point – and carry that story all the way through to the firing. And despite the consistency you could still feel frustrated with the outcome because you've developed an attachment to that contestant and you're rooting for them. It could be that they've been given an ample amount of

'glory moments' (as we call them) to justify your feeling towards them, but when they do get fired and you get frustrated by that, it's because they dropped that wallet, and all we needed to do was present that moment factually. I can't control how you're going to feel about outcomes, but I *can* try to control the story and I'm certainly aware that you're going to have attachments and investments. In fact, there can be really wonderful mid-season turning points when the contestant you've invested so much in gets 'murdered' or fired and they're out. What are you going to do now? Who are you going to get behind? Stay tuned. You don't know what's going to happen. You'll be back next week to find out.

CB: So you're always playing dangerously with the possibility you might lose your audience if you don't give them sufficient plot satisfaction?

BP: That's right. And in a competition show you can't just conveniently decide, 'No, no. We're not firing her'. You can't. It's an FCC [Federal Communications Commission]-regulated thing. And actually that's the beauty of the game. We came up against it all the time on *The Amazing Race* – fan favourites would take a wrong turn, they'd go left when everyone else went right, and they'd come in last and be eliminated. Damn, we suffered when that happened, just like the viewers did. But people stayed with the show. They found new investments and it was fun to see who they'd latch onto next: we'd edited the episodes months before and then they went out into the world in weekly instalments, so we could jump on the internet and see the real-time reactions. People would give detailed, blow-by-blow descriptions for those who'd missed an episode. They were riding the thing like it was an amusement park ride. It was really kind of exciting and fun and satisfying for us. I really came to appreciate it.

But I do still have issues with the format, both because of its associations with the sanctioned narcissism I spoke about and because I feel it's made bullying more acceptable in our society. Somehow of the behaviour that we grew up being told was abhorrent is suddenly almost acceptable. And you know why? Because that guy Gordon Ramsay – or whoever – is that way. I know Gordon Ramsay, I've worked with him; he's not that way in person. But he plays a part. He's a performer. He gives what people want to see. But all this is creating a culture of bullying and we as creators need to think about it. The reason I'm talking to you guys is that I feel this obligation to right some wrongs or at least point out problems.

CB: Do you think that's being redressed at all by the fact that people who *aren't* celebrity bullies or larger-than-life performers are able to go on YouTube and vlog about their lives to thousands of viewers? Aren't we in fact getting very varied kinds of content from lots of ordinary people?

BP: Well, it's a kind of free-for-all with these social media 'influencers'. 'Influencers' are only anointed by virtue of how many followers they have, and these followers don't necessarily have to be real – they can be robotic and provide a popularity boost. Some of the content 'influencers' present is useful and interesting. Somebody who can demonstrate an iPhone hack will gather 60 000 legitimate followers. And they can be funny and crafty and maybe deserve the influence they have. But then there are the others who are just advertising their lives and nothing more. And they get 20 000 followers and suddenly a TV show of their own, and we find ourselves propagating the

same species of narcissism. But because of where things are trending currently in the industry, I have to be aware of the phenomenon they're part of.

CB: One critique I've heard of 'winner takes all' reality shows like *Survivor* or *The Apprentice* is that they're very of their time in reflecting neoliberal ideology. They're competitions in which ambitious contestants have financial incentives to eliminate the weak links around them, and the ones that succeed do so because they're hard-nosed and they don't pull their punches. Is that fair? Do you think it's perhaps significant that reality TV emerged when it did, at the height of Bush-Blair politics in the early 2000s?

BP: That's more cynical than I am! It's a wonderful question. I think yes and no. Perhaps in some of the 'survival of the fittest' game shows, you might say so. But it's hard to ascribe to *The Voice* or *American Idol* that kind of dark cynical view when it's just a kid with a great set of pipes bellowing her heart out in the most charming unforgettable way for a panel of judges. I don't know if that would translate in quite that way. Sometimes we just want to sit down and watch a little girl sing her heart out and win, not because the others are bad but because she's good – because she hits that particular nerve that makes us feel good about ourselves and our lives.

In elimination shows it's easy to focus on the negatives: often what you're looking for is the fatal flaw, the error that a contestant or team makes that puts them last or gets them ejected. But in the second season of *The Apprentice* I came up with the idea of the 'glory moment', when you're looking at a positive. NBC was so enthralled with our first season that that they gave us a two-hour premiere for season two, and I was assigned as the producer. Trump threw a wrench into the works because he fired a contestant called Rob Flannigan for doing nothing: after all the filming we had to go back to our footage and find *something* that would justify Rob being fired. It was like proving a negative. Rob was just there hanging out, not doing much. He didn't do anything particularly bad. Nobody did. But it got harder because then NBC came to us and said, 'Guess what? That two-hour episode of yours is supersized (meaning it's going to run a little bit over the hour). We're going to cleverly programme an episode of *Friends* right after you, so you have to lose twenty minutes of your show'. I was like, 'What? How the hell are we going to do this?' I had to tell the story of why this guy got fired in very succinct terms indeed. The solution didn't come to me until after a day walking in the hills with the editors and getting nowhere in cutting the extra twenty minutes. That night I was watching the Independent Film Channel (of course!) and there was a documentary on called *Looking for Richard* – Al Pacino's dissection of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Pacino gave a perfect analysis of how Shakespeare defined good by evil and evil by good. Eureka! I saw immediately that this was what we had to do in our show. We would put Jen, the leader of the women's team, in a situation in which she could propel her team forward. She would overcome the odds and we'd give her a 'glory moment'; and every time we showed some positive activity on her part, we'd cut to Rob Flanagan doing nothing. That way, when Trump said to him, 'You didn't do anything. You're fired', it would make sense. It would track right.

We watched as it aired and the internet lit up with this wonderful 'glory moment' for Jen. Everybody said, 'She's so good! She deserves to win!' Of course (as we knew), she would ultimately go on to become a finalist. From that point I made it my goal as a producer to share moments of somebody doing something smart and good, as a means of counteracting the focus on the bad and putting positive things as much at the

heart of our storytelling as negative ones. After you pick apart people for a while and reflect in a determined fashion on their failures, you start to think that humanity maybe needs something else. It was my thing. I went to extremes of coming up with shows that would bring 'glory moments' – but, sadly, it's not really in our culture to appreciate them. Nobody ever cared about those moments as much as they did about the failures.

CB: There's great potential in reality TV for things to go wrong, isn't there? Can that ever become a virtue? If something goes wrong in an unpredictable, spectacular way, can you re-edit a show around it instead of trying to edit it out? On *Deadliest Catch*, for instance, was there real danger?

BP: Oh yes. Every season as the showrunner I had to send a group of guys with cameras out into that world. I did do it myself, but mostly I directed from my office in Burbank over satellite phones while they called in the various horrors they had filmed that day. And hour by hour when that phone didn't ring you had no choice but to wonder if something might have gone horribly wrong and you might not ever hear from them again. In that context things would come up, like a boat capsizing or a battle with drug addiction, and you knew that the viewers would want to see the story. But in a competition reality show it's different: you kind of want to stick to the rules. On *The Amazing Race*, the contestants were travelling from Lisbon, Portugal to Algeciras, Spain and then crossing to Morocco. It was this gigantic epic journey; we knew that there'd be a long drive through southern Spain and they were driving themselves, so we could take a nap and head over to Morocco because there was a lot to do there. But when the contestants got in the cars, half of them didn't read '*sin plomo*' – unleaded fuel. So they put in diesel fuel which made the cars break down. We had to figure out how to deal with this because it eliminated a team – we had to tell a new story that wasn't scheduled into our programme time. We still had to get through all this other stuff, driving down cliffs, going into Fez, all the huge long journey. That was my episode and it was incredibly challenging to make everything fit. It turned out to be the happiest of accidents in a weird way *because* of the beautiful story it generated – but we had to make it all fit afterwards. When you're dealing with that kind of heavily formatted show, you can't stray too far from the format or you're going to be in real trouble.

CB: Do you think your contestants realise they're in a 'sandbox' you've made for them? Are they aware that there are only, say, *x* number of moves available to them to make?

BP: Yes, one hundred per cent.

CB: Do you think they act up to those constraints?

BP: They're instructed very rigidly going in there that there is a playbook. There are rules. You have to play by the rules for the game to be fair. This is a contest and, you wouldn't want to lose *your* million dollars to another guy's deceitfulness. And usually everybody does stick to the rules on grounds of basic fairness, and it works. I mean, you'll have seen shows where the host has to step in and say in a very host-like manner, 'We've had an issue. This guy broke the rules so he's been disqualified' – that in itself can be made into something dramatic.

CB: In the UK and I think in the US too there has been a wave of domestic-focussed competition reality shows – for instance, *The Great British Bake Off* and the *Great British Sewing Bee*. From what you've worked on it seems that you're interested in big-picture stories that have elements of thrill, danger and disaster. Do you understand why these seemingly homely and low-key productions have caught people's interest?

BP: Well, they're aspirational. That's the term that has come up recently in reality culture: 'that baker is so good that I want to learn from them how to improve my own baking skills'. In a funny way it's back to that question of yours I keep getting hung up on, the neoliberal survival of the fittest idea. Is it a conditioned trait that humans have to want to beat the pants off the other guy, to bring competition spirit even into arenas like the home and the kitchen? Something so basic and so ordinary can become a kind of Roman coliseum, a battle to the death. Reality TV is without question a battle arena. It's where we go to revere or despise other humans. We ourselves give them the big thumbs up or thumbs down, and we instil in people like Trump or Gordon Ramsay the power to justify their efforts or doom them to some other fate. So why not baking? Why not painting or sewing? There could be a competition show about anything and we would watch it.

CB: I like that 'thumbs up, thumbs down' metaphor. In Trump's case what we're seeing is the guy in charge of the lions in the Coliseum suddenly being elected senator of Rome. It's quite scary.

BP: Right. This is where we live.

CMC: How involved was Trump in the *Apprentice* editing process?

BP: He pretty much left us alone. That wasn't his domain and he was in New York while we were editing in Los Angeles.

CMC: Did he ever say, 'I don't like this – you're going to have to recut it'?

BP: No, because we were so capable of protecting him from himself, in a way.

CMC: I am slightly surprised that he had so little input – did he really just turn up and perform?

BP: Well, to be perfectly honest he was busy running an empire, and trying to rescue that empire. He was a very, very busy guy and in the first season he didn't really have a feeling for how the series was going to go. And nobody back then, not even Mark Burnett, could tell what an enormous success it was going to be. So in my dealings with Trump we were tied to his schedule. I think that probably did change after a while and he became more involved. But I never felt that he was involved beyond the degree that a lead actor would be in a scripted show. He hit his marks. He said his lines. He knew where he needed to be and what the purpose of the thing was. But he wasn't *invested*; he'd come into the control room (which was adjacent to where the boardroom was – our coliseum) and scoop up a fistful of M&Ms and pop them into his mouth and go 'Who should I fire?' He just wanted to cut to the chase. It was 'Tell me what you want me to do'.

CB: So he simply didn't care that much?

BP: He's not invested in anything but himself. So, pretty much, no. When we needed drama for our coliseum performance, we would tell him a story. We'd say, for instance: 'Clare and Colin were competing ferociously against each other in the office. The phone rang and our coffee arrived and they both jumped up to fetch it and Clare got to the door first'. You see, that would tell him *something*, even if it didn't tell him whom to fire. You could see him thinking: 'Clare got up first and beat Colin to the door'. And we'd be sitting back thinking: 'You've got it!' But it would never be a case of our telling him outright, 'Colin's got to go'. We wouldn't go anywhere near that. We couldn't. It really was drummed into us that he had to make his choice. And of course there were times that he didn't do it to our liking, but we would make it work in the end.

CMC: If I look at the arc of your career, from Sundance to *The Deadliest Catch*, it seems to me you're really an independent filmmaker. I mean, you went into reality TV, but the crab fishing series is really like going back to independent filmmaking. Did you think about it like that?

BP: I didn't. I stumbled into my work. If my background in independent film has had any influence on my work now it would be as a reminder that in every filmmaking endeavour you're limited to a budget. Reality and documentary TV series didn't proliferate because they were expensive to make; it was because they were cheap. That's the whole idea. So, you let the budget define your whole aesthetic. You push back with key cinematic visuals that surround your storytelling. Some of it's dirty, some of it's scrappy, but you deliver on the experience. You tell a good story and try to move the viewer in some way. Make it good, make it entertaining, but *make it authentic* because audiences are a lot smarter than we're giving them credit for being. If you don't believe me, look at the numbers on groundbreaking scripted series like *Breaking Bad* or *Game of Thrones*. Those are stories for the agile mind and the faithful follower. To kill off a main character in the third episode is a leap of faith you're asking viewers to make. Unscripted content has the exact same responsibility – to be daring and bold but also true to a story – but sadly it continues to be associated with the lowest common denominator, both in terms of what gets presented and presumptions about who's at home watching. But there are new trends now that I'm excited about, like hybrid documentaries with narratives made from scripted scenes based on real people. True crime is having a comeback. And while, sure, there will always be *Real Housewives* and *Big Brother* – those essential guilty pleasures – the viewer has begun to legitimise documentary storytelling in new and lasting ways.

I think the most important arc in my career has been about storytelling. Finding a way to tell stories and get paid to do it is the trick. And that's something we weren't taught in school. We didn't go to Columbia to become reality TV producers. We went to Columbia to become Orson Welles. But telling stories in an unscripted-TV, commercial-break kind of world is the same as telling stories in *The Third Man*. You need to get this guy through the tunnel and out the other side. Well, that's what we have to do. And in *The Amazing Race* we used that very same tunnel. But I'd also say that getting to travel the world and being paid to learn about it was a big part of the attraction as well. Being able to immerse yourself in a culture to extract a story from it and getting to know people in that world – border patrol agents, crab fishermen,

homicide detectives, politicians, fashion designers or Congolese rebels. It's been an extraordinary opportunity to be put on assignment like a journalist and explore something to bring back a narrative. Sure, I could sit in a West Hollywood apartment writing movie scripts that would take me there someday. But I wouldn't have *lived* it as fully as I have. I wouldn't have been in a design studio with Oscar de la Renta at the moment he decided to introduce denim into his line. Or with chefs in Italy making what everyone felt was the best pizza in the world. Or with border patrol agents launching a drug bust in the middle of the night in the Arizona desert. Or with spear-fishermen diving deep into the Gulf of Mexico, trying to ignore the fact that in each and every dive there are at least thirteen ways to die.

I once had an odd experience with the creators of *The Sopranos*. We were filming *The Apprentice* season two from Silvercup Studios. As we pulled up in our vans, I looked over and there was the director of *The Sopranos*. There was James Gandolfini and a couple of other people that I happened to know from earlier days of doing theatre. So as soon as I got everybody settled in safely, I went over to say hello, and they asked me what I was doing. We sat down and began to compare notes from a filmmaking standpoint. As we compared call sheets the difference between what they were doing and what I was doing really hit me. In their scripted show there were regimented, fully articulated schedule permutations. At this particular time you're going to be here doing *x*. Then at this later time I'm going to switch you to do *y*. Tony Soprano with Carmela in the kitchen: shoot till lunchtime, turn round, get reversals and hope something 'spontaneous' happens between these two actors who have learned their lines. Now, I had the same sort of call sheet. I had a helicopter I could call in, I had camera crews, I had light designers, I had a sound team. But where *The Sopranos* call sheet specified scenes and locations and directions, my call sheet just said: reality.

And that's kind of how it's been – an improvised filmmaking life. I can't tell you what's going to happen six months from now. I don't have a script.