

Michael Renov (MR)

00.06

Let's talk about some of the ideas that arise in watching your film Pratap.

00:15

I was very struck by the delicacy with which you (the director) approached your (his) subject and I think that that is something difficult to achieve. Because I didn't feel as though in anyway you were reluctant to approach your subject, and the family, but rather than you were feeling your way in order to gauge better what kind of impact you were having and what was wanted. And what your subject was willing to offer you, and so that delicacy is a kind of back and forth. That sense that you really were in interplay with *Justine*. Because it is a portrait. It is a film that offers us access that you (the director) never take for granted, that you are opening up her world to others. So I wonder if you could say something about how you approach this question. This seems to be a central feature of what you've accomplished here.

Pratap Rughani (PR)

01.43

I think with *Justine* I felt it was - I was very drawn to this work - partly through my own ignorance, and the invitation - as it were - to go to another country, try and understand, intuit, empathise and learn about the experience of another, and in the process of opening up, or trying to generate that communication, a loop is created. And what's in it for the maker, if you like, is the opportunity to become a little bit more human, a little bit more able to see the breadth of life. And with *Justine*, because of her severe neurological disorders, she barely speaks and a lot of my normal modus operandi couldn't work here. So I wasn't able to discuss, negotiate and understand and check - and all those things we use language as a tool for, I had to rely on a more visual language. And a process of what one might call, of learning to listen, and then learning to look. And I try and think of it that way around because so often in the empire of the senses we are led by vision, and it's such a profoundly visually led medium, that sound can be the poor relation. Many of us as documentarists could do better if we learn to listen and to hear and to dare to enter the sound world more and the soundscape is so important for this film. And that is a process of negotiation and relationship. It was a privilege to be allowed into the family and a lot of credit to her Mum and Dad, Mandy and Kevin and her sister (and brother). It was very much about seeing what *Justine* would allow, and there were times when she wouldn't allow, certain kinds of activity times when she would not want the camera there. I didn't experience so much of her not wanting me there although I tried to be ready for that. I would seek permission in fact at our first meeting I wanted us all to be making friends with the camera and being habituated to the camera being there, and she was really clear she didn't want me to lift the camera or do anything other than just be in the room with her. That was a huge step. At the first meeting I couldn't take it for granted, and shouldn't take it for granted that she would want me there.

MR

4:40

One of the things I think you achieved so wonderfully and is really moving is

that you refuse to put a label on her. So often, especially in a relatively short film, you feel a certain pressure, no matter what your subject matter is to make the material accessible and understandable to an audience. And the easiest and quickest way for people to make sense of others, especially for those who have any kind of challenge, or handicap, or difference, is to really focus on that difference and name it, but in doing that, whether or not we are always conscious of that, we set up limiting parameters and those labels can easily become stereotypes, and then we limit what audiences may make of this person. And that fact that you allow us into her world in a very gentle fashion without the kind of voice-over, without the kind of, let's say, knowledge dispensing, or any kind of expert culture that might of, either from a medical point of view or from maybe a public health point of view or a therapeutic perspective - never do you go to those places. You allow her to make herself understandable and relatable to us, and I think, I would say, much more human terms. A lot of that gets played out in affect and emotion and of, even I would say, spirit. Things that don't get easily named anyway, but it moves us outside of that register of medical, outside of even the therapeutic and puts it into another kind of zone and at that place, it's so much easier to really appreciate her for who she is, and not for what she can say, but for how she displays her feelings and her emotions on her face and through her body, and how she interacts with the world. And again I have to use the word, delicate. Because it is a bit of a dance that you're doing with her but also, we're learning in a way that we don't often learn in documentary films. We're usually led by the nose, we're usually lectured to - and you don't do any of those things. Could you talk about how you came to this approach? Surely you knew more than you're telling. How did you manage to maintain such restraint?

PR

7.48

It was difficult, I do know a lot more about Justine, about what Justine has to go through and I'll only refer to things that I refer to in the film. She had extended periods in hospital, had self harmed. There was actual visual material documenting some of the things that happened, and I was offered some of that material and with a more journalistic hat on one could say "Well. There you go, that's the material that's really going to communicate". But my concern, I suppose is that.. We live in an able-bodied society, and there's a kind of, obviously a dominance of the able-bodied, but sometimes, almost a tyranny of the able-bodied so we're not integrated with people with disabilities and people like Justine where there are neurological roots to that. To understand that as a culture, we kind of specify it, name it, as though giving it a label with somehow enable us to deal with that. Obviously there's a very important function to that in the realm of certain areas of medical practice, I completely understand that and those sorts of approaches and I'm not arguing against those sorts of approaches. However, for the broader culture, what kind of world could it be if we dared to be in fuller communication with each other, if we are allowed to look, if we could look at each other without seeing ourselves just as essentialised forms. So what I mean by that, in my case, that I'm more than a man of a particular culture and ethnic origin and particular class background and so on, and Justine equally is a young woman. In a certain sense the medical language says nothing about her it's another kind of prism

through which people can misunderstand her and have her in a particular box and think that they know her. That illusion of knowing is sometimes as much of a barrier, as much as a fence that prevents the unfolding of empathy which is a very natural human state and in the right conditions that will happen, it will happen between people and so often we are not allowed to let that happen. Or our imaginations are too confined to let that bloom and to dare to see the other. I'm not romanticising the other - that will then open up into to seeing each other in our weaknesses as much as our beauty, and that must be part of the documentary world. But for the purposes of this film the poetics where Justine could emerge through sound and observation was incredibly important because I don't know her. I came into contact with her over a period of 18 months at a time I'm also at a time training and learning myself with a pioneer of this kind, a pioneer of this kind of work, a woman called Kate Adams whom I respect very much and from whom I learned a lot from. So I'm in no position to name and so on, and I don't want to speak on behalf of her or just take the best opinions of those close to her. I respect those opinions but Justine's much bigger than that. And even if we're allowed 21 minutes to dwell a little more in proximity to her just maybe we will see something reflected, we may intuit and be able to embrace something that touches the nature of the spirit of another and that's a huge prize. That's an amazing thing to try to reach towards. I'm not making any claims for this work but I'm just saying that it's wonderful to have the freedom to let that aspiration to start to unfold. And there's much more that direction could bear huge rewarding fruit for us.

12:00

MR

Let's spend a little time talking about the very specific things that you choose in order to achieve those goals. They're wonderful goals but not every filmmaker is able to get there. For example the way that you choose certain framings and composition one that is really notable and I know that you've made use of it for a still, Justine at the birthday party. There's family members in the background and she's in the foreground there's a wall that bifurcates the space. And she is both there and with them and cohabiting and she's also in her own world. That's something like a visual metaphor. You could lift that moment and it would really resonate for the whole film. How conscious were you of trying to find something like a visual metaphor, or using different aesthetic approaches even techniques in order to achieve the goals you're trying to meet.

13:26

PR

It's a really interesting question, because it's documentary film that we're trying to meet on the ground of. So all of these things we've been talking about, that has to translate into visual form and aural form and these are shots for a duration of time, they are not still images. So to answer your question. It was a very moving evening shooting at Justine's 18th birthday party and that one shot when I'd composed and held that shot, I thought that there was one good thing I'd done this evening. Through exploring how one composes and arranges the frame - that was one moment- I hope it's not the only moment - where I felt that there was a visual translation here. Justine, her physical

world is incredibly important to her. For example she doesn't allow touch in her world. Only specific circumstances with a very selected group of people much of the time she prefers, she chooses to be in a space on the threshold of a space but not in physical contact, and that image you could feel both her separation and also in the deeper background, the loving environment that the family produce and that field that she moves within. When I chose the equipment that I used, the readily available Canon 5D Mk II camera and separate Zoom sound recorder and separate sound recordist on some days and that felt like the right tool for me. I didn't want a big broadcast camera and the size of the crew. I wanted a minimal size of the crew. And often people do that for economic reasons. This had a very strong editorial and relationship reason. I needed to build connection with Justine. It's a wonderful camera but it has some drawbacks but one of its features is a very precise depth of field and it's a very unforgiving camera especially if you're filming hand held because your depth of field and your point of focus is going to move typically and it's hard to follow focus hand held and tracking. So there are times when I decide to be on a tripod and working off the longer end of the lens and going in tighter and observing from the distance, and you get a cooler and more distant notion of observation there. But throughout the scene that you mentioned the birthday party it was all hand held and I wanted to hold just a particular point of the frame in sharp focus and allow the focus just to dissolve into the background so you had a suggestion of what's around rather than everything being clearly held in deep focus so you had a sense that certain things are in precise focus and she's in a world where only certain things come into focus at particular times. So there was an area I was playing with where depth of field was key to this approach.

MR 16:53

There's another moment that I wish you would speak to and that I found very moving part of your film where Justine is outside and she's observing other children playing the boys approach her and she opens the gate for them to let them into the play area. Knowing, at least from my perspective as I'm watching I'm thinking - she's not going to enter into that play - and yet she was there for another and until that moment I wasn't really sure how cognisant she was and how much care she had for others, I was much more focused on how much care others had for her. When I saw her humanity, when I saw generosity towards these young kids it was as if there was a whole other dimension added to my understanding, I felt a deeper kinship and I felt a stronger connection with her as a person. Could you talk about that moment? Was that something you observed that stood out for you or was it only in retrospect.

18.13 PR

At the time I found it very moving as well. Justine's brother talks about her as being in a bubble and I understand what he means, but there was a moment where she broke out of that. My sense of Justine is that she's always looking for ways to connect. Often - to the extent that people talk about disability, about how the world copes with disabled people - what I was trying to feel a way towards was is - what's it like the other way around? What are we like to cope with for a person with a disability? And I think finding those points of

contact are hard for people with the kind of disorders Justine has. They are particularly tricky in Justine's case because visually as her Mum says she appears like any other child just from a distance, however Justine is trying to reach out. There's a moment where she's leaving the supermarket where she tries to interact with another child but actually the other child's frightened because the sounds Justine makes and the pace she's moving are not the way to make that connection. But here's a moment where Justine sees what's happening - the younger children are trying to carry some sand and some water through to the playground - and she's in the perfect place - she's taller she can open the gate. She sees what's happening she opens the gate and the gate closes with her on the other side and I found it very poignant because Justine is both wanting to be inside but on some profound level she is outside. She's not like many of the other children and they find it difficult to create spaces where that relationship can unfold. Yet for a moment she passed like any other child. And I think I see a real register of that in her face and in her body and I think it's a really triumphant moment for her. In a certain sense it's the high point of the film, and it's a significant story point that we're building towards its about three quarters of the way into the film. And when I was looking at making this I was kind of scratching my head - what is this about? How can we create a journey? Where is the story arc, where are the story points? What actually happens? Well here's something that unfolds, it's a kind of an observational documentary gift and if you hang around in the right places hopefully cultivating an attitude and a sensibility that can be in relationship, these things will unfold. This is one of the great promises of documentary.

MR 21:04

You mention the observational approach. It's true you take so much the hands off approach, you don't overload us with information or voice-over, you don't have the experts telling us what to think, but there comes a point in your film where you move from one kind of filmmaking style and approach to another. I wonder if you could explain how you thought about this, because you go from the very gentle and immersive, the idea of you put us in the middle of something and you leave us to make sense of it, so that we are left to infer meaning without being told, we are left to find ourselves surrounded just as in a way, as you say maybe Justine our subject is in a bubble.. well we've joined her. You make this pretty stark change in the film, and you talk, and you are talked to by the family and from the audience perspective there is all that information you haven't given us but in some ways it does feel that it's antithetical to that approach you've adopted up until that point in which we've had to adopt other ways of knowing. So, how I understand making that big shift.

22:56 PR

The film is a game of two halves. The first 21 minutes 30 is in largely observational mode. And I use observational because there a different strands within for example, direct cinema. Much of the film is in a classic direct cinema mode but one of the rules of direct cinema is that your characters do not look at the camera, there's no direct address. In this film there are two visual moments of direct address where Justine's seeking connection,

relationship, reflection, contact with the camera, and I feel, with me as well. It felt really important to leave that in because in a certain sense there would be such a missing part of the story without it. They are only clues, they only appear for a few seconds, but it's part of that bond of trust and of honesty even with the audience is where you can afford to be clearer about what you are doing. The architecture of observation is very helpful but I don't want to be limited to the rules of direct cinema. Direct cinema's a wonderful evolution of the form but it has its limitations. And some of the claims it makes for itself are sometimes overstated and have led to all sorts of other developments. In France there's a different iteration of that form was allowing and embracing an acknowledgement of subjectivity and there are moments in that tradition which helped me see objectivity in a broad sense. So that's all fine, up until the shock, if you like, of where we leave Justine suddenly at the party and suddenly, bang, I'm in a completely different mode here. I've got a sequence of traditionally composed interviews and I'm being told about Justine, rather than be able to infer, understand and so on. Why do it? Part of me felt I would really rather leave the film in observational mode, but when I showed it to the family and talked to the family about it they felt that they wanted to speak. And there were critical moments in the making of this where I tried to hand over big editorial decisions to either Justine and the family and typically a combination of both. I actually felt that they were right. What's in it for the family? They were giving me their time and this privileged access and an opportunity to see if we could make a connection. The film needs to serve Justine in some way and in this sense it does in a very direct way because I made the film initially for use and viewing by some of the people who make judgments about whether she is going to have support and care in the social service structure and in that sense the film needs to advocate for her. So there's a change of mode where we need a sense of where the larger context is. However, even where we go into interview mode what I didn't do was to get them to describe all the awful things that have happened and to specify, to name it. What I'm looking for is a sense of how she fits in this web of relationships and how Justine makes that family. She's not this separate disabled person that we deal with through the care system, in some other way, she's absolutely integral. It's easy to say but when you see the care and the love and the challenge of that in the faces and the ways the family talks about her, especially her sister, that communicate that a lot to me. With another hat on I'm an admirer of well shot composed synch - I think it can do fantastic things but it all depends on the kind of creative space that's configured in the documentary and typically it will turn on the relationship that the documentarist and the subjects and if the ground is prepared properly and the relationships evolve in such a way people feel they can unfold and reveal things then that's a wonderful tool in the toolbox, I'm up for that. In these hybrid times of evolving forms I really embrace that. If it would have helped to animate part of it I'd have been doing that. There are lots of ways to play with these modes. I know it's not always comfortable or fits category neatly but I feel the categories are things that evolve with time and are projected back on the moments of production in the evolution of tradition. I'm more interested in what emerges from the realities of making the work and what suggests itself from practice.

28:27 MR

One of the things you just mentioned had to do with the notion of control. Some people the way they teach others how to make films was to give them a sense of imperial power, or to tell them they must wield it with care, but they must control every aspect, that they sure they must have cooperation of their subjects but that they would must always fall short of what they call collaboration or ceding any kind of authority to one's subjects. That's the kind of authorial control point of view. And then there are the ethical concerns. Having informed consent. It's interesting that Justine turns 18 during the making of the film because at least in the US 18 is a crossroads moment, that's the point at which one can give informed consent on one's own rather than be allowed to by a parent or guardian. But clearly because Justine isn't the norm she couldn't possibly utter the words and probably wouldn't be able to signify in a way that would be acceptable in a judicial framework. You have a very different set of needs and concerns to do with consent. Consent is typically something you get in exchange for the control that you take but from what you tell from everything you've said, you're coming at the project with very different terms and conditions, and I wouldn't actually say cede authorial control, but take very seriously more than usual what the rights and realm of involvement and maybe even control that could be given to the family member - and possibly even to Justine in ways more subtle than usual. Could you talk about where ethics meets authorial control?

30:53 PR

That's a great question. The legal frameworks are really important so we can function and at the very least tick the right boxes. The framework of consent as it's currently configured in my view doesn't serve people with profound disabilities which means the neurotypical, in this case the family who love her very deeply who are fantastic in many ways - what fascinates me is that Justine's experience is not the same as our experience and so we need some way of engaging with that. And we can tick the legal boxes and have the consent dealt with which we have with her parents and guardians and through proper consultation in terms of legal niceties in terms of covering your back and those important things which for example for broadcasters it's essential for them that that's in place, but those are clumsy tools and we can come up with other ways to attempting at least build a bridge into that different experience or other ways or refining or fracturing our notion of consent to ways that could be a better fit. What do I mean by that? Obviously for someone like Justine we can't seek verbal consent in the same way, let alone informed consent however from the way Justine is with me and with others, we can get a sense of if she assents to something or dissents from something, so even though we have the legal consent ticked and so on, it doesn't mean that the ethics stop there. It's only an invitation to come through into another garden where we need to look much more closely and let the ethics unfold the nature of the relationships and by trusting that all sorts of wonderful things can be possible. If you think about ethics and consent in this consent we have to deal with by flicking a switch or ticking a box or just kind of proving some kind of legal nicety that's not good enough the frameworks are fine and they are important but the frameworks are not the detail of the human experience.

We need a deep and strong kind of radically human engagement with the other in order to test out whether is going somewhere where things can be revealed that might be of interest to audiences. That kind of question opens out onto lots of stuff to do with what we mean by editorial control and authors control.

34:05 MR

To what extent do you feel handcuffed? Let's say that this film is not just a one-off that this film is one that might serve as a model for others. I think that we're just in the beginning of exploring ways the documentary film can really enter into other environments other communities maybe they're other species maybe they're other kinds of communities that maybe include people who are challenged in one way or another that is moving beyond our typical limits and boundaries but if we are going to use your film as a model for others to try, do you have any kind of - do you feel you need to issue any warnings or offer any caveats? Because it seems to me that there would be limitations.

35.04 PR

It would be good to hear those. In my naivety I initially approach this project and training in order to be able to feel I could spend time with Justine and her family I did that thinking its a collaborative piece of work, and I would love to do that. And my work has been in a broadcast context where that kind of working for all sorts of reasons to do with time and money and editorial values and perception of audiences one can't pursue this kind of working in that way - or it wouldn't get commissioned. So here's a fantastic opportunity to explore that so I was thinking - yeah great, its collaborative piece the more I thought about it and the time I spent the more I dare not use that word because it assumes all sorts of agreements and understandings that I couldn't be confident that I achieved with Justine. So I stepped back with that and use a phrase that Kate Adams - she puts it better than me - that we're entering a zone of where documentary become the art of not knowing - the art of not knowing. And the radical challenge there is to dare to think that we don't know we don't yet know. Maybe we can intuit but we're not there yet. Maybe we can aspire to collaboration but this is one area where we need to do a lot more work as practitioners as thinkers as theorists as educators as people who want to reach for a more integrated communication with different kinds of people. We need to refine that word collaboration and almost grade it into the kind of encounter that we think we're about because if we use that word loosely it can become a kind of cloak. A bit like the way that the corporate world brands itself as environmentally friendly or green - that world isn't policed its used in all sorts of ways that gives impressions that are not true and even a little investigation can reveal that. I think collaboration is a wonderful and even a noble ideal but in my case I'm not there yet, I'm at the early stages of trying to reach towards something that in the fullness of time might become more empathic might earn the label collaboration if its to mean something. And that does mean holding back some of the very useful instincts that a lot of documentarists have of trying to turn life into a story that's worth telling and that does mean taking control sometimes wresting control but we need to be upfront about that initially with ourselves. I think that the problems arise when the documentarist doesn't dare to be fully aware or even

partially aware of what on earth we think we're doing stepping into sometimes invasively stepping into other people's lives. We make our work and then we move onto the next thing and so I want to be able to look people in the eye who I've worked with. Even those I've disagreed with and know that its to some degree an honest encounter and that means at critical points like handing the decision to include interview material and allow the family to talk about Justine handing that decision to the family and then I'll try to use whatever skills and knowledge I have to develop that in a way as in a visual style drawing out something that's worth listening to. But I am serving their purpose. I am not an omniscient creature simply trying to arrange the colours on my palate in order to create the image that I want divorced from the experience and the responsibility we have toward those people. And to be really honest with you there is a tension here, between the language of artistic practice and the god of artistic freedom and the language of responsibility and social connection through which documentary emerges. And people move like me, move between those linguistic registers in order to create space for expression but I think either pole risks missing the gift of documentary which is to be both the creative exploration and also profoundly rooted in the people who are most important in this whole process who are the subjects who give us some time with them.

Ends.
40:17