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Justine essay

Pratap Rughani's 2013 observational documentary film presents a dependent young woman, Justine, as she turns eighteen and engages in a complex discourse of questions around neuropsychological disabilities, social framings of the disabled young person and how identity develops within such a context. It is not that Justine does not communicate and or cannot communicate but, rather, that her communication modes have a more limited range than the nuanced expressivity that language and physical controls over one's body and face permit. In this sense, Justine can be read in much the same way as media representations teach us to read someone upon the Autistic spectrum: but that is not to say that is the correct or most appropriate way to read this young woman's communication. As Rughani himself has noted, Justine would act differently with him and seemed to like him, moving slightly towards him and letting him film being a signal of her assent, if not her consent, to participate in the filming. Similarly, Justine would often choose to occupy spaces where she could observe and involve herself in action on her own term spatially, making social events, such as her own eighteenth birthday party, with its riot of people talking about her, about other things, amiably chatting but not, except when she was needed to, implicating her in the action, something she could cope with.

Thus, Justine communicated with the simplicity of a pre-language infant but the maturity of a young woman who understood her relationships with those around her and knew her own mind about the extent to which she wanted to participate.

This is best exemplified in the film by two examples, firstly when she instigates and sings 'Old MacDonald' with her family. Rughani has talked about this, in the press-pack for the film, as being a performance partially for his benefit, but what it clearly does represent is Justine's control over communication (in this case the song, more specifically, a nursery rhyme) and her familial engagement. Her family clearly love her, something we see on screen and in the interviews at the end of the film, but the fact that Justine's family's well-being is so tied (her parents comment that when Justine has a crisis, the whole family is in crisis) to her means that, effectively, she has a significant amount of political control within this social microcosm. Secondly, when Justine is in the supermarket, there are two gestures which show that she wants to engage with other people, initially a child (likely to be six to eight years younger than the seventeen-year-old Justine, who looks like she is ten to twelve) who rushes away from Justine's intensity and, later, packing the car, presaging the use of the nursery rhyme, she repeats the refrain 'Hop in, Hop in Hop in', which is surely the phrase used to invite her into the car on a regular basis. This communicative attempt is directly aimed at Rughani, sitting in the back-seat of the car filming the outside action and, with its use of repetition and sing-song manner, emphasises Justine's communication style as being like a child learning language and 'moods' of language rather than having language fully under her control: but that is not the same thing as saying it is not under some control.

Rughani's film reminds me of Charcot's account of the patient Augustine in nineteenth-century France. Communication which something which, in

contract to Justine, Augustine used extensively. She was labelled as a ‘hysteric’ and all the implications that holds for a woman at that time are not lost in how one can think of Justine’s medical and social infantilisation. The trope of configuring the person with a disability as childlike and incapable of behavioural control (aka ‘hysterical’) is common in much of the literature and representations of neuropsychological disabilities, for example Oliver Sachs *Awakenings* and Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, but most representations and discussions of this do not think about what happens for the individual in the movement from being a child to being an adult. This tension is precisely one of the key themes for Rughani’s film and is marked not only by Justine’s legal transition from child to adult but also by Rughani’s own design of the film as a space in which to debate ideas of the consenting participant. Unlike most consenting or even dissenting participants in observational work, the non-consenting participant cannot demonstrate consent with cognitive self-reflexivity in the same way. It is for this reason that Rughani moves towards a model of assent and dissent rather than consent. What this means for the representation itself is that the audience does not witness Justine’s dissent or moments of rejection of the camera but only her assent and acceptance of the camera. However, and understandably, this does leave the audience with questions about the extent to which the observational is truly motiveless and, as do all documentaries for me, leaves the fallacy of the objective document a concrete materiality for the film.

The role of editing in this is made all the more apparent by the sudden style shift to the interviews at the end of the film which actually enhance the undermining of representational truth, reiterating the final product as edited and artificial even within its ability to truly reveal things about Justine to the spectator and, as the family have said to Rughani since the completion of the film, to those closest to Justine herself. Finally, then, the question about who the

film is for arises, just as it does for the therapist's notes about the patient. Charcot's account of Augustine was not for his patient any more than Justine is for Justine's own aid - and perhaps this does not matter – but it is for Justine's family, for the documentarian's theorisation of research ethics in practice and for an audience who need to see alternative faces in documentary films. As one parent, with an Autistic child, observed at a recent viewing of the film “That is film is my life”.

This, then, is potentially where the real power of a film like Justine sits, not in its ability to teach people who are unfamiliar with the content ‘new’ things, but to help those who see themselves within the chronicle of a patient find something which emphasises they and not just the Justines of the world, are not alone.