



Wakulenko, I. (2013) Justine

Recording Justine
Iris Wakulenko

WAYS OF LISTENING

The director Pratap Rughani asked me if I'd like to record sound for his documentary and then explained that the person it centred on, wasn't really verbal - which clearly raised some issues for us as filmmakers. How could the director construct a narrative, how could the recordist present a full audio picture of the main contributor, Justine, who communicates mostly in ways other than speech?

Some filmmakers and theorists have referred to the phrase "giving a voice" to those under-represented in the mainstream. There is much relevant debate around that phrase which implies a power relationship, a kind of paternalistic or authoritarian "gift" from a position of societal power to the so-called powerless, elucidated by Trinh T Minh-ha:

"In the context of power relations, speaking for, about, and on behalf of is very different from speaking *with* and *nearby*... what has to be given up first and foremost is the voice of omniscient knowledge".

The person or community being represented already has a voice, even if non-verbal, if you listen "*with* and *nearby*".

The Project Art Works brief for the film was to create a portrait of a young person with complex needs for a series In Transit, "a project that helps young people with complex needs by creating a rounded film portrait with which to broker relevant opportunities in their adult lives". When the film was completed it was used at a social services review for support for the family, and for me, this part of the process was the most important function of the film. The family also used the film in personal contexts to share with others with whom they wanted to communicate about their lives together.

The effect of the Project Art Work ethos of collaboration, of listening, mutual respect and sensitivity informed our working process. It magnified the need for a heightened response to cues both from the director and from Justine, and from those around her. During the filming we'd also often stop, and just be present together in the same room or place. There would be the sense of creating a listening space, of an alignment. We learnt that Justine had developed some vocabulary and some signing and by being attentive to her it became easier to "hear" her and respond to her. Listening to Justine became an active perceptual act, in the sense of Pauline Oliveros' theory of Deep Listening - what one reviewer of her work called "radical attentiveness".

The range of Justine's vocal expression was big - from silence to very loud, - so that was a challenge to record, and I had to use some limiter in an effort not to distort the recording in those loud moments. Justine's non-verbal sounds were important, as a study at McGill University observes that sound expressions communicate immediately. However, fully understanding the communication required extra knowledge about her, the kind that family understanding develops over time. For audiences, being able to hear Justine breathing shared her presence, representing her in a fundamental way.

The soundscape of Justine's world assumed an extra importance, listening to the sounds around her, conversations in her world, at home, at the respite centre, at school, shopping, in parks and playgrounds.

The ubiquity of video in all our lives makes watching it a common experience but it can be daunting for anyone to have a crew following you and pointing equipment at you yet overall I felt that Justine tolerated our presence well. She had met Pratap before we starting filming and was always informed about our arrival. I think that having made a pop video at school with the other students may have also prepared her, and she was a teenager after all and like a typical teenager loves music. She particularly liked ABBA, and my heart sank somewhat at the thought of trying to clear its use for the film. I tracked down the publishers that covered the UK and Ireland rights and we miraculously managed to get the permission from Benny, Bjorn and Stig Anderson who co-wrote that massive hit "Mamma Mia".

As we saw, outside home Justine liked to be on the sidelines, to hover as an observer, occupying a space around the edges of action – in corridors, or looking out of windows. The family also told us that she doesn't like to be touched. That meant we weren't able to use a personal clip-on microphone, and that I would have to use the microphone on a boom pole when we were accompanying her around. If we were seated in a room together I could take the mic off the boom and hand hold, or try to keep the boom parallel to the floor. I avoided holding it over Justine as much as possible and would sometimes point the boom down and the microphone up, or point the microphone underneath her eye line.

As a recordist holding a microphone on a boom with a fluffy, carrying a recorder, and wearing headphones you have both a literal and a metaphorical distance or barrier between you and the person you are recording - not as much as when using a camera - but nevertheless, there is a separation

between you. Although you are separate, for the recordist listening as you record, there is an intimate dimension to the experience. In real life you usually only hear a person that closely if someone sits next to you and talks into your ear. So when Justine did upon occasion speak it was very powerful - as equally as her silences were. When she signed and said “happy” while getting out of the car, it was a strong experience for me.

Hohenberger, E. (2008) ‘Vietnam/US’ (an interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha in Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin (eds.) *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* Bristol: Intellect pp. 118–19.

McGill University (2016) *Human sounds convey emotions clearer and faster than words*. ScienceDaily.

Hohenberger, E. (2008) ‘Vietnam/US’ (an interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha in Gail Pearce and Cahal McLaughlin (eds.) *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* Bristol: Intellect pp. 118–19.

Project Art Works projectartworks.org

Williger, J. (2020) *Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster, Panaiotis, Deep Listening* Pitchfork Reviews.