

Editorial freedom and participatory practice

Professor Michael Renov, University of Southern California, in conversation with Professor Pratap Rughani, University of the Arts London

Duration of video clip: 8 minutes and 5 seconds

Michael: Of all the ways that documentary filmmakers have attempted to create access to worlds, I would say the observational approach is one that's probably been the most privileged, which is to say not to have experts talking, not to have a heavy montage back and forth, but really just to be present and attempt to be vigilant and respectful, and to allow whatever the rhythms and realities of the person's life and experience might be at that moment to be captured. Then to try your best to be accepted into that world so that you're not falsifying by your presence, et cetera, and I think what you've attempted to do here is tougher because of the person who is at the centre of your film. I love the nuances and I love the ways that we are left to grapple with what the issues are specifically for Justine, and then I also think it's very brave for you to take what was an observational film, that on its own had it ended then would have been a perfectly complete film and to append something very different at the end, in less than five minutes you've altered the entire aesthetic of the piece, and gone from observation into something else which is, call it interactive or participatory, whatever it might be, but it's interview subjects, with the family members. And for some, that could be "ruining" your piece, and for others, it might be "Oh now I have more context, now I get a little more history, now I feel some answers to questions that maybe arose in me anyway", but you really have changed the film profoundly. That's a very strong choice to make, which is to take something that you're committed to a way of making the film and at some point say "I'm backing off from that because there's something else that could be more important", and I wonder if you could start off by addressing that decision.

Pratap: Thank you, yes that's a great question and that's come up a bit actually as this film circulated on the festival circuit and taken up by universities and so on, and unlike some artists, I'll use that word for the moment I know that hangs differently in different communities, but some artists would work, for example, say you were a painter or a sculptor, you were to paint the mug or whatever - look at some object in your space now - and think how, "Would I make a representation of that?". You've got the artist or the maker and an object, and you will create something in relation to it, you know, painting a sculpture. What's absolutely central and astoundingly beautiful

about the gifted presence that the documentary camera and the makers have, is that it's primarily a relational project between a subject and another subject, and that completely reconfigures the dynamics. So many makers, artists say, would quite rightly talk about artistic freedom. And also, you know, in these times of hugely polarized kind of culture wars, you might say, in that tension in cultural production you're looking at the relationship between a subject and a subject, not just a subject and an object.

So when that when you're working with a subject and you're attempting to communicate, that, I would argue, completely recasts notions of artistic freedom and reframes it, in terms of - if you don't remember anything else from this session I'll just leave you, drop in a couple of words, who benefits, who benefits from this relationship?

So there now, we have a tension between a maker, you and the subject of your project, a subject, and a subject so into that dynamic, if we start exploring the classic philosophical ideas around freedom of expression, around free speech, around artistic freedom, those things never operate in a vacuum. And now in the context we're talking about, they exist in a relationship. so there's a tension there, between the maker and the subjects. Now, there's a long way of getting around to Michael's question, so how did I end up making that really difficult, almost split decision? So it's traveling along in one direction for whatever, and then a few minutes of talking at the end. I showed a rough cut or something approaching a rough cut to the family - so that's Justine, Jordan, Owen, and Mum and Dad, Kevin and Mandy. Mandy looked to me and said, "Pratap, I want to say something", and I was kind of taken aback by that initially. She said "No, I wanted to say something in the film".

Now for a lot of documentarists, my background is 10 - 15 years is mostly Channel 4, that's a UK broadcast network, and BBC TV, and partnerships with WGBH, and so on, in that editorial environment, the editorial freedom and editorial control of the maker is really precious and is protected in in all sorts of ways legally and otherwise. Now what happens, ask yourself, if you're making whatever it is that animates you, don't worry if this particular subject matter isn't your thing, think about what is your thing, and think about how you were developing a dynamic for it. Or for those of you who are writing more than making artefacts, think about your writing. At what point do you let someone else into your head, to your heart, to your experience, to your tender, editorial and artistic decisions, and you hand over or you seed, or you share editorial control, that's a big thing. So I, you know, I was talking to Mum and Dad and they wanted to be involved, and a big part of me was like "No, no, I've got a really... I've sorted this out", I spent a lot of time, months or so, working on this on and off and doing training because I had no experience working with people with these disabilities and so on,

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worked out an aesthetic, da-da-da, and then bang. Now it's not a commissioning editor telling me that, so this isn't about power, it's not that they are going to exert that kind of influence on me. This is something much more interesting, much deeper, and I'll get, I'd argue, it's about the ethics of making. And so, you know, I want to be able to look people in the eye when I've worked with them even, if we've had differences of view, even if they have different views about the final film. There's a test for any maker, our subject turns around and says "Okay Pratap, that's great, but I want it like this" - what do you do? That's kind of, that's an open question. You, we all might make different judgments, but for me, it felt really important to listen to what I was being told and not react to my own internal disagreement I was having, this argument with myself, whilst they were talking to me, and then stand back from it, and in a certain sense I think, they kind of made it a much more interesting work because it combines two different kind of rhetorical registers, a visual rhetoric and a more physical and and spoken one.