

Students debate representation

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

Duration of video clip: 5 minutes and 28 seconds

Mircea Stefan Gogoncea: I wanted to say I love the shift in format towards the end. I thought it brought everything into a much more meaningful context for me because I was initially watching and I had all of these questions; such as are the other kids in the facility, do they have the same type of disability, or is it totally different thing, are these educators always with the children, is the family just you know, taking them to that spot for a while? I had all of these practical questions of, okay but how does this work? Maybe that's bad, maybe that was not your intention at all, but in my mind I was just having all these questions. I was wondering how old is she (Justine), I can't tell, I couldn't tell how old she was until that moment came when I finally could, right? Listening to the family talk about how you know, what kind of challenges she's been through and how she's changed and managed to overcome so much to be at the point where she is now, suddenly made the first part of the of the movie give / get a total different amplitude or like magnitude of feeling for me. Because I was seeing this sort of, you know normal person, for me, obviously somebody with very different needs than most of us, but I was seeing this day-to-day interaction and I was thinking, is this just like a sort of fly-on-the-wall documentary where I just watch you know, I'm put into somebody else's shoes. But then I realized no, that, is an achievement. That is an unbelievable amount of love and effort and time has been put into this person being able to lead the life that she leads now, and suddenly all these things that might have seemed mundane at first are just gigantic achievements. And that really, really changed my impression for the better, gigantically.

Ray: When you first go into the movie, or the documentary, the first thing you notice is the rhythm. It's because we're not relying on the speech. Like, you can tell that it's very carefully edited, and you can feel how its rhythm like the scenes are rhythmically placed and for me, when it got to that interview portion it felt like not just disruptive, but it felt really invasive in a way, because you're made to invest in this almost vlog-like daily rhythm of Justine, but then you have this completely foreign section introduced. If I was going for more conventional editing, I would have put the interview at the very front. Or, have interrupted interviews in the scenes.

Kallan Benjamin: In terms of the interview portion, I thought it was important that it came at the end, because I thought it was really beautiful and lovely to get to know Justine in the place she's at, which seems like a very happy stable, lovely place. Her life seemed pretty good, but it kind of raises the stakes when her parents reveal that it hasn't always been the case. But if that had come at the beginning that would sort of have provided the frame, the lens that you see her through, rather than seeing her on her own terms, this joyful person. But then knowing that it hasn't always been that way, it kind of increases the tension, and I think it was really effective. And one other point, or it's not a super specific question, but obviously I don't know the details of her cognitive capabilities but there seemed like there were several moments where she was alone and she didn't know that she was being filmed, she wasn't aware of your presence. That created such a beautiful intimacy, that would be hard to recreate with a different subject, short of surveillance footage where they don't know they're being filmed, just to see her totally unguarded, and I wonder just about maybe what other people think, or if you have anything to say about the ethics of that, weighing the artistic benefits of that moment because it's so beautiful, but obviously raises other questions about consent - so those are my comments okay, thank you very much.

Pratap Rughani: I've got a note of that. But also just to flip that back to Ray, that in a way what Kallan was saying there about the danger of putting people talking about somebody at the beginning, my worry was that that would then become the lens through which one approached her, and for us and because I was trying to prevent that, allow audiences to just to start to have a feel for her a little bit more on her own terms. That was one of the main reasons I decided not to use the really strong journalistic information around her and her conditions and, not to medicalize her. My concern is that to the extent that any of us in the culture come into contact with much public filmmaking around people with disabilities, it's typically through the lens of that disability. I was trying to create a space where she was a little bit, we were a bit freer to come into relationship with her, and then the disability could become part of how we experience someone. And film can do that, whereas when we meet each other in the world, the first things that we see are typically the, you know, protected characteristics or the physical attributes.