

What is my duty to my contributors?

Abbas Sabra, MA Documentary Film student, in conversation with Professor Pratap Rughani, University of the Arts London

Duration of video clip: 4 minutes and 23 seconds

Abbas: The ethics question that I'm willing to focus on is about the ethical duty as documentary makers towards our protagonists. Are we liable to stay in touch with them, you know, for the rest of our lives? You know the relationship dynamics changes and it fluctuates between the pre-production phase when you get to know your protagonist. Maybe you go out for coffee with them and then the production starts with the camera, so you know it becomes a serious professional note and then in the post-production phase you either go back to your country to edit the film, or the contributor goes back to their country or hometown. So the relationship dynamics, and the objectivity so all of these ethical concerns... Are they people that just, you know, that are a part of our lives or are we like a thing in their life and that just passes by, or they should be part of our life for ever?

Pratap: There's no one-size-fits-all answer to this. I've made about 30-35 films and you've looked at one or two I think. In the case of Justine that's very much at the end of the spectrum where it's more of an abiding connection, relationship even, and we keep in touch with the family through our choice. And at the other end of the spectrum, I might prepare an interview and having completed the interview and have the release forms completed and soon might not have much more connection with that person until completing a fine cut, or indeed up until broadcast, and there are different conventions about the amount of contact you have with people depending on the kind of project you're making.

So I'll just give you one example. So I can think of a series that I did for BBC2 called Taking Liberties, and that was all about the abuses of power of different government departments. Now in that quite investigative journalistic environment which was about exposing wrongdoing or corruption, there was the idea of being, I'm going to use this word impartial, that we might want to contest, or the word you use, objective, but when you're in that environment where the burden is investigative, there are different criteria. So, for example, when I was interviewing a government minister in the food and agriculture department, the idea that I would have any personal contact as it were, before or after, or would want that, that was completely out of the question. And if anything, in those contexts, we prided ourselves on not being influenced by powerful

people, and so they had their moment, you'd do the interview and you would make the editorial judgments about what to include, what wasn't, or the balance of the argument, that's almost the opposite end of the spectrum, to the work that you've just seen with Justine, which was profoundly about attempting to intuit, understand, cultivate relationship and out of that, earn the right, as it were, to observe.

I think work that's much more in the ... In Britain we talk about observational cinema which has a history that goes back through the 1950s to what we used to call free cinema, what the British used to call free cinema. In the States direct cinema you'll know the work of Pennybaker and Maysles, and that tradition. Wiseman, Wiseman is still active actually, amazingly in his late 80s, then there are variants of that. Cinéma vérité in France and probably Katarina will be exploring those differences of emphasis, but all of those things which are more observed, rely on the quality of relatedness, which is different to the first example I gave. So the short answer Abbas, it could be you're in an abiding relationship or it could be that you're not, and that would flow from the way that you've setup the idea, the argument, film and the responsibilities that flow from that.

Abbas: Thank you.