



Immediations: the humanitarian impulse in documentary

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BOOK REVIEW

Immediations: the humanitarian impulse in documentary, by Pooja Rangan, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, 264 pp. (pbk), ISBN 978-0-8223-6371-2

Pooja Rangan's incisive and theoretically rigorous book, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, is a contribution that will be foundational to new scholarship on documentary in cinema and media studies. For feminist media scholars in particular, *Immediations* is a text that powerfully uproots preconceived notions about humanitarian ethics in documentary. Rangan provides a robust and timely intervention into a media landscape that prizes "giving the camera to the other" (5). Her diverse accounts of what she calls *immediations*, or "the aesthetic and political implications of the audiovisual tropes that are mobilized when documentary operates in the mode of emergency," are now as pervasive on television news coverage of natural disasters as they are in reports of war, terrorism, and state violence, in which spectators witness documentarians under duress, bearing their lives before the camera.

The central question of Rangan's book is: "What does endangered life do for documentary?" (1). In posing the question this way, Rangan challenges the long-held notion "that documentary works on behalf of disenfranchised human beings by 'giving voice to the voiceless'" (1). She compellingly proposes instead that participatory documentary's "humanitarian ethic," which relies on "giving the camera to the other—invents the very disenfranchised humanity that it claims to redeem" (1). Rangan's argument runs counter to a consensus within documentary studies, which asserts that while some previous documentary practices serve to represent the people it depicts as others, documentary filmmaking has now moved beyond those practices "in part because technical and social advances have enabled documentary's others to represent themselves" (5). Refuting this argument, Rangan establishes that practices of othering have not disappeared from documentary—they have simply migrated and morphed into different forms. Like the most astute books on contemporary media do, *Immediations* asks readers to make a shift in understanding that gives way to a reassessment of the documentary media we encounter daily.

As the first installment of the newly revived *Camera Obscura* book series, *Immediations* grapples with pressing concerns for feminist media scholars. As a whole, it draws on and extends critiques of documentary's mode of othering, which scholars like Trinh T. Minh Ha and Fatimah Tobing Rony leveled almost 25 years ago, and which, as Rangan indicates, have not been substantially elaborated on since. In so doing, Rangan calls attention to the ways that humanity is defined and constructed by documentary. She demonstrates that documentary "is thoroughly implicated in the work of regulating what does and does not count as human" (8). Even while Rangan engages with other documentary scholars, she reaches beyond documentary studies proper, for she pointedly elaborates on and aligns herself with the work of scholars including Lisa Cartwright, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Laura U. Marks, and others who work at the intersections of childhood studies, disability studies, and animal studies. The result of Rangan's interdisciplinary work is the reconceptualization of media ethics to challenge how humanity and suffering are constituted, even when a documentary's goals seem progressive.

Rangan's chapters focus on case studies addressing sites of difference that form part of the contemporary participatory documentary landscape. Rather than pursuing her project from a strictly historical lens, Rangan instead introduces a bipartite methodology that moves

from identifying how immediations structure and produce the participatory documentary she discusses to proposing new ways of textual reading that pull forth the “frictions” and “contradictions” emerging from the “liberating encounter with difference before they are smoothed over by the ideological glue of humanism” (9). In Rangan’s hands, the methodology is evenly woven throughout the book and illuminates the argument’s crux. This results in dialectical conversations that emerge at the level of the chapter and between and among chapters.

Rangan’s case studies produce tension within each chapter because of the way they contrast with and speak back to each other. Some of most evocative chapters include her reading of live eyewitness reporting and the testimonial form in Anderson Cooper’s award-winning CNN Hurricane Katrina coverage, which is positioned alongside *Trouble the Water* (dir. Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, 2008), a documentary wherein Katrina survivor Kimberly Rivers Roberts documents her experience during the storm. Similarly, Rangan’s reading of the deleterious tactics of an Autism Speaks video, “I Am Autism,” holds tension with documentaries created by people with autism that separate the often conflated ideas of justice and progress with having a voice. The documentarians in these videos communicate through other media forms—a communication style Rangan defines as *autistic voice*. With this, Rangan “locate[s] such a voice within existing immediational conditions that are already fraught, but that are nonetheless a precondition for an encounter with alterity that can shift our sense of the possibilities of images beyond the interventionist metaphors of ‘tool’ and ‘weapon’” (18).

Taken together, the chapters provide a sense of the scope and stakes of Rangan’s project and make substantial contributions to understandings of humanitarianism and the ethics involved in documentary practices. One of Rangan’s most robust interventions in this regard is her analysis and critique of Exotic World Gifts’ rescued elephant artists. While Rangan’s critique of posthumanist interventions follows the thread of her previous chapters when she argues that “strategies used to defamiliarize or disillusion the received frames of anthropocentrism ... are complicit in the larger discursive structures that hold the human in place,” she beautifully raises the idea that participatory documentary can move us beyond the categories of the human and animal altogether. Through readings of *PigeonBlog*, *Infestation Piece*, and *Animal Cam*, she concludes that meanings “emerge from the ... encounters between [the human and the animal]” (156; 190). Rangan’s argument articulates the tensions that her case studies illustrate while making visible the power of her methodology. In countering immediations’ mode of emergency by slowing down to closely read media texts in conversation, Rangan reveals the layers in participatory documentary’s humanitarian address. Rangan’s theoretical engagement with documentary is as much of a model for feminist media scholars as her consideration of humanitarianism is. She demonstrates how theory leads to practice, and in turn, enacts the feminist adage that “the personal is political” in ways that resonate for scholars and media practitioners alike.

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