



Figure 1. *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (dir. Brett Story, US, 2016). Photograph by Maya Bankovic

# Humanitarian Ethics and Documentary Politics

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Pooja Rangan, Brett Story, and Paige Sarlin

In 2017 *Camera Obscura* relaunched its book series with Duke University Press, including single-author monographs as well as edited collections that represent new directions in scholarship on feminism, culture, and media studies. This conversation among three women engaged with documentary was prompted by one of these books, Pooja Rangan's *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, and reflects the editors' interest in the implications of theory in practice. It is adapted from a panel discussion hosted by the documentary arts center UnionDocs in Brooklyn that began with Rangan explaining her title term. "Immediation" is a humanitarian documentary ethic that seeks to render human suffering urgent and immediate at all costs. Rangan cited examples from contemporary participatory documentaries that seek to "give a voice to the voiceless," ranging from live eyewitness reporting by disaster victims to first-person films featuring autistic people as protagonists. Filmmaker Brett Story then offered her perspective on the humanitarian impulse in documentary as a filmmaker and geographer invested in critiquing the prison documentary, a genre that frequently focuses on assert-

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ing the humanity of people behind bars. As an illustration of her own approach, which looks beyond the literal walls of prisons for their presence and influence in everyday landscapes, economies, and relationships, Story screened scenes from her feature film *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (US, 2016), as well as from other non-fiction films dealing with prisons.

What follows is a synopsis of the conversation that followed these presentations, moderated by and with commentary from Paige Sarlin, director of *The Last Slide Projector* (US, 2006), activist, and author of *Interview-Work: The Genealogy of a Media Form*, a forthcoming book on the politics of the interview form in documentary.

**Sarlin:** Pooja, you want to challenge what you refer to as “emergency thinking” in documentary. Can you talk about how your concept of “immediations” is related to your critique of emergency thinking, perhaps through an example?

**Rangan:** “Emergency thinking” refers to a particularly modern ethical imaginary that has arisen in response to the human suffering caused by the escalating incidence of catastrophe, war, conflict, and state violence. Essentially, emergency calls for a humanitarian, not political, response, meaning that saving endangered human lives takes precedence over all other considerations. Scholars including Elaine Scarry, Didier Fassin, and Craig Calhoun have taken up the phrase to identify how “saving lives” functions in the late twentieth century as a moral justification for humanitarian intervention.<sup>1</sup> They point to a central contradiction of emergency, which is that the seemingly apolitical goal of saving lives justifies suspending the rule of law, even as humanitarian organizations are increasingly involved in the political work of governing crisis zones.

I am interested in how the contradictions of emergency thinking infuse contemporary documentary practices that produce a sense of urgency around endangered life. The central question for me is: How does the humanitarian ethic of “saving lives” justify the aesthetics and politics of documentary immediacy, even as such documentary representations actively shape our

understanding of what constitutes a life worth saving? I find that these dynamics are especially revealing in the context of participatory documentary initiatives seeking to “hand over the camera” to otherwise dehumanized subjects, such as disaster victims, at-risk children and animals, and disabled individuals. I refer to these initiatives as humanitarian media interventions to locate their rescue mission of “giving voice to the voiceless” within the ethical imaginary of emergency thinking.

Such rescue missions frequently employ representational strategies that end up reproducing the structures of exclusion they claim to remedy—and, troublingly, they do so in the name of humanity, which can be difficult, even impossible, to criticize. “Immediations” is the term I use for documentary tropes that generate a sensation of emergency around endangered humanity—a sensation that makes us feel “nothing else matters,” especially when these tropes are employed directly by disenfranchised subjects. For example, the photographic aesthetic of innocence that the British photographer Zana Briski trains children of prostitutes in India to reproduce in the film *Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids* (US, 2004) is what I would call an immediation. This trope pathologizes sex work and child labor even as it recruits non-Western children in producing humanitarian commodities that re-center Western visions of childhood innocence. My book investigates what immediations *do*—how they produce consensus around particular meanings of humanity, justify insidious forms of discrimination, and consolidate unspoken regimes of power, all under the aegis of the seemingly inclusive gesture of giving voice.

**Sarlin:** Brett, what does Pooja’s critique of emergency thinking and her concept of “immediations” illuminate for you about the prison documentary genre? Where, as a filmmaker, do you encounter the imperative of immediation or the logic of emergency thinking?

**Story:** The opening question in Pooja’s book, “What does endangered life do for documentary?,” is of great relevance to those of us interested in the subject of incarceration. The prison is an

institution that itself produces endangered life and that manages the social wreckage produced by other systems and state practices that make people vulnerable to premature death. It is also a scene that is commonly mined for documentary images.

Many of the films that fall under the broad umbrella of the prison documentary have progressive, social justice-oriented ambitions. They ask their audiences to be affectively and ethically troubled by the effects of incarceration on individuals, often relying on images of prison spaces (cages, mess halls, etc.) to convey the indignities of incarceration, and on stories of innocence, suffering, and redemption to express the humanity of their subjects. The expectation seems to be that these images will undo the *dehumanization* that is presumed to emotionally underwrite the prison regime. Thus it is that so much media art on prisons relies on a quintessential carceral image: the black body displayed in confinement. These images contribute to what visual criminologist Michelle Brown calls “a visual iconography of social suffering.”<sup>2</sup> Their vision of social change is thus tethered to the humanization of the prison’s captives.

There’s a lot these films can do. They can tell us, for example, that a person didn’t do the crime after all, that they are “wrongfully committed.” They can tell us that the people inside are more than just their worst deed, or that awful excesses of violence transpire inside, perhaps moving us to wish to make the spaces better. But what they cannot do is tell us about the work that prisons do for the contemporary social order and therefore how we might live without them. Many of these cultural artifacts thus end up reinforcing and reproducing the carceral regime rather than undoing it: ideas of individual responsibility; the prison as a response to crime; the criminal as dangerous (and as black).

As critical race scholars Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields point out in their analysis of race as ideology: “A commonplace that few stop to examine holds that people are more readily oppressed when they are already perceived as inferior by nature. The reverse is more to the point. People are more readily perceived as inferior by nature when they are already seen as oppressed.”<sup>3</sup> I think there’s a real imperative to ask not just what is inadequate about the

(often urgent, devastating) images circulated within many prison documentaries, but also what they *do*, perhaps even inadvertently. Following Fields and Fields, for example, I wonder how images of captive black life produce racialized ideas about who is a “criminal” and thus who is “dangerous” rather than undoing those ideas. I also wonder how they consolidate the consensus around “innocence” as a metric for human value. Innocence is already the main barometer of what amount of violence the state is allowed to inflict on you, and within criminal justice reform campaigns (just like in many prison documentaries), it is used to justify rescuing some and, at best, attenuating aggregate harm without actually challenging the underlying neoliberal premise of individual responsibility or the power relations that produce such “endangered” life—or, to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s phrase, “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”—in the first place.<sup>4</sup>

**Sarlin:** I’m struck by how both of you think and work through documentary filmmaking as a subject, practice, and field even as you critique it. Why do you find documentary such a crucial and/or symptomatic arena of cultural production to be considering today? What, in your mind, can documentary do when it resists the thrall to immediations? Or to put it somewhat differently, how might we differentiate between a documentary practice guided by emergency thinking and one guided by political urgency or necessity?

**Rangan:** At first glance, “emergency” and “political urgency” might seem to have similar connotations, but emergency thinking and political thinking are concerned with distinct forms of life. Emergency thinking is concerned with what Giorgio Agamben calls the “bare” fact of living or being alive (hence the humanitarian ethic of “saving lives” as a first-order principle, regardless of nationality, caste, religion, etc.), while political thinking is concerned with the political forms, practices, and relationalities that make a life worth living.<sup>5</sup>

The difficulty is that saving lives routinely involves making judgments about its value, about what makes a life “count” as

human and imbues it with meaning—thus humanitarian action is political even if it insists on principle that is politically neutral. In practice, humanitarian agents are routinely placed in the position of adjudicating human rights speech acts. Human rights speech acts are politically urgent, desperate acts. They assert the right of those whose political standing has been stripped away to speak and be recognized as human, as political agents. They seek to enter a power structure that by definition excludes them, and, by necessity, this involves imitating the codes or tropes of what counts as human (and this includes the tropes I call immediations). In other words, even though these acts are potentially radical, they require an audience that is attuned to how these acts seek to change or undermine the definition of the political and of humanity itself through imitation, quotation, or mimicry of the dominant tropes. But without this attunement, the concept of the human, and the systems of power that these tropes hold in place, can both be reinforced in a normative direction.

With the continuing disintegration of global democratic structures, documentary filmmakers are increasingly being hailed as humanitarian agents, adjudicating, arbitrating, and bearing witness to such politically urgent acts. It is in this sense that I find documentary—and especially the participatory discourse of “giving voice to the voiceless”—to be a both crucial and symptomatic area of cultural production. The gesture of handing over the camera often comes with strings attached (in the form of conventions and even obligations to funding sources) that hold in place dominant media institutions that reinforce structural exclusion. Take the case of the protagonists of the film *Trouble the Water* (dir. Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, US, 2008): poor, black Katrina survivors who recognize their commodity value as “live” eyewitnesses and entrepreneurially document their vulnerability to appeal to the filmmakers’ humanitarian sentiments, all in a desperate bid for survival. The centrality of catastrophe to the televisual spectacle is well known. It is disconcerting to consider the entanglement of humanitarian sentiments and documentary funding in the production and assimilation of crisis as part of the ongoing, racialized spectacle.<sup>6</sup>

To cite a different example—one that points to the par-

ticular visions of the human and of political standing that immediations hold in place—consider recent first-person documentaries that employ an intimate, expository voice-over to represent autistic protagonists “speaking for themselves.” It’s fascinating to note how this seemingly natural gesture of giving voice to autistic people equates intersubjective communication and articulate, rhetorically persuasive speech with “having humanity” and autistic modes of perception and expression with impairment. But I also see in this gesture an opportunity to become attuned to practices and modes of being in the world that do not immediately reveal themselves to be “human” or politically significant and therefore worth saving. Politics, to me, is what is at stake in resisting the thrall of immediations.

**Story:** I agree. What’s at stake in debates about documentary immediacy is politics itself. And by politics, what we’re talking about is power: how it circulates, in service of what interests, upon which contingencies, and with what consequences. There’s actually a deep and disturbing disavowal of politics in many conventional prison documentaries. While they ask us to believe them when they tell us one or another prisoner is “human” and deserving of sympathy, they ask very little of the power structures or social relations served by that person’s *de*humanization. And so they take dehumanization as a given rather than a contestable product of politics.

Prison abolitionists remind us that the prison is not simply a building, over there, that houses certain people and employs others. Rather, prison abolition as a movement is concerned with transforming the social relationships for which prisons serve as surrogate resolutions. The prison, in other words, is an expression of the already existing power relations in society, and it is these power relationships that need to change. The immediations, to use Pooja’s term, conjured by the innocence stories or redemption stories that so dominate prison documentary narratives effectively hide those power structures.

Prisons are already deeply reified spaces in the social imaginary. Their built forms tell us nothing of the histories or struggles



that brought them into being in the first place. The capacity of documentary cinema can be harnessed in the service of demystifying the prison, illuminating its contingencies and destabilizing the narratives that convince us we can't live without it. And one place to start is by interrupting the prison's relationship in popular thought with the problem of "crime." So long as people believe that prisons are truly a response to this objective thing called "crime" (successfully so or not) rather than a political mask for all sorts of other economic and political crises, then the movement to downsize or even abolish our prison system will fail. But if they can see the prison as, for example, an economic development strategy, or a warehouse of the poor or chronically unemployed, or a disciplinary tactic against social dissent, then all sorts of room opens up for us to collectively imagine alternatives.

**Sarlin:** It seems to me that what Pooja calls "immediations" are precisely the material practices and modes of representation that stand in the way of creating the images of social structures and diagrams of political forces and institutions that we need in order to challenge the status quo. Documentary that is in service of or grounded in emergency thinking (perhaps we can call it "emergency filmmaking"?) often focuses on individuals, relying on the stories of particular personalities to illustrate some aspect of a larger-scale problem or crisis, or even more typically, a value, at the level of narrative and character such as resilience or overcoming. Myriad levels of distance and difference—economic, cultural, and ethical—are thereby deemed "immaterial," unimportant in comparison to the urgent issue at hand. Questions of form recede. Or, more accurately, documentary filmmakers rely on forms that are ready at hand—forms, like the interview, that focus on the individual.

The gesture of handing the camera over to subjects appears as an easy solution to the ethical problem of "who speaks." But what *Immediations* demonstrates is how that gesture perpetuates the power relation—the distinction between criminals and citizens or the innocent and the guilty, in the case of prison documentaries. Brett's film moves beyond the mystifying scale of individuals,

of innocence or guilt. *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* provides us with images of the elaborate machinery that perpetuates structural inequality.

Documentary always shapes the problem it sets itself up to solve. For me the question is: What other problems do documentaries create or efface? Pooja's approach isolates this dynamic at the level of form, confronting the hierarchies and assumptions manifest within films that rely on participation. I am particularly interested in the historical significance of documentary film to institutions charged with democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention. Take, for example, the nongovernmental organizations tasked with the construction and reconstruction of civil society in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the 1990s, organizations like USAID [United States Agency for International Development] funded training for documentary filmmakers in former Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. There were workshops that taught "professional" camera and interviewing skills alongside editing and story development. It was an earlier moment in terms of US foreign policy, when human rights discourse was deployed to promote "democracy" rather than to legislate bare life. This wasn't exactly emergency filmmaking, but it was portrayed as urgent and time-sensitive. In fact, it coincided with the opening up of these countries and their media outlets (such as state-run television, newspapers, and radio) to market forces. From the perspective of the West, these organizations were giving their subjects cameras, making sure that they learned the masters' language well so as to be able to smooth the way for the influx of Western commercial media.

Documentary is not separate from the institutions that use it, teach it, fund it, promote it. It is a toolkit for the production and reproduction of certain logics, humanitarian or otherwise. *Immediations* and *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* make legible how documentary can illuminate emergency thinking, or the centrality of state violence and incarceration to the operations of American society. When documentary operates under the mantle of "immediacy," it can obfuscate—or, even more significantly, retrench and perpetuate—the crises it sets out to portray.

## Notes

1. Elaine Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency* (New York: Norton, 2011); Craig Calhoun, “The Idea of Emergency: Humanitarian Action and Global (Dis)Order,” in *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*, ed. Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (New York: Zone, 2010), 29–58; Didier Fassin, “Humanitarianism as a Politics of Life,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007): 499–520.
2. Michelle Brown, “Visual Criminology and Carceral Studies: Counter-Images in the Carceral Age,” *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 2 (2014): 176.
3. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2014), 128.
4. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
5. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
6. See Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 236.

**Pooja Rangan** is a film and media scholar based in western Massachusetts and New York. She is assistant professor of English in Film and Media Studies at Amherst College and author of *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (2017). Rangan has written for *Feminist Media Histories*, *Film Quarterly*, *Camera Obscura*, *World Picture*, and *differences*, among other venues, and is the coeditor, with Genevieve Yue, of a special issue of *Discourse* titled “Documentary Audibilities.” She also serves as president of the Flaherty Film Seminar’s Board of Trustees.

**Brett Story** is a geographer and nonfiction filmmaker based out of New York and Toronto. Her feature documentary *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (2016) was awarded the Special Jury Prize at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival and was a nominee for

Best Canadian Feature Documentary at the Canadian Screen Awards. Story holds a PhD in geography from the University of Toronto and is currently an assistant professor in the School of Image Arts at Ryerson University. She is a 2018 Guggenheim fellow and the author of the forthcoming book *The Prison out of Place: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America*.

**Paige Sarlin** is a filmmaker, scholar, and political activist. Her first film, *The Last Slide Projector*, premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2007. Her writing has appeared in *October*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Afterimage*, *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, and *Framework: A Journal of Film and Culture*. Her book *Interview-Work: The Genealogy of a Media Form* is forthcoming. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Media Study at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.



Figure 2. *Trouble the Water* (dir. Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, US, 2008)