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*Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* by  
Pooja Rangan (review)

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# Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary

by Pooja Rangan. Duke University Press, 2017. \$99.95 hardcover. \$25.95 paper. Also available in e-book. 264 pages.

reviewed by RYAN WATSON

Pooja Rangan's *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* is a provocative, polemical, and vital book for thinking through the often-problematic humanitarian impulse to give the camera to the Other. Traditionally, this act is located within the benevolent discourse of "giving a voice to the voiceless." Rangan argues the opposite, namely that "giving the camera to the other invents the very disenfranchised humanity that it claims to redeem." While the book concentrates on a range of non-fiction examples that fall broadly into the subgenre of "participatory documentary," Rangan's critical orientation does not rest firmly in the methods and concerns of documentary studies or media studies more generally. Rather, she works "diagonally" across those disciplines as well as disability studies, childhood studies, and animal studies using a methodology informed by the work of feminist and postcolonial scholars and the close textual analysis of deconstruction and semiotics.<sup>1</sup> This intellectually expansive approach enables Rangan to trenchantly interrogate essential questions about documentary ethics, human rights, representation, authorship, spectatorship, and medium.

Fundamentally, Rangan sets out to explore "the reality effects of participatory documentary," especially when they operate in the mode of emergency, offering the concept of "immediations," which she defines as "the documentary tropes of evidencing . . . attributes of humanity in all their immediacy." In other words, *Immediations* analyzes how "humanist tropes of documentary immediacy" exploit the "circumstance of labors of disenfranchised individuals" that simply work to "reinforce their status as other" while fulfilling British documentary pioneer John Grierson's vision for the humanitarian mission of realist



1 Rangan, *Immediations*, 1, 19.

documentary.<sup>2</sup> For Rangan, those disenfranchised individuals, largely illegible to documentary tropes that signify “humanity,” are represented in the figures of the child, the refugee, the person with autism, and the animal, all of which are explored in separate chapters. These figures exceed the humanist ethical paradigm of the Other as articulated by Emmanuel Levinas that has been used to undergird part of the ethical logic of participatory documentary. *Immediations* works to create and explore a new space that includes an ethics after humanism and legibility as well as representation beyond the traditional inclusionist logic that informs the tenets of documentary realism.

The first chapter closely analyzes the 2004 documentary *Born into Brothels* (Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman). The film, which won an Academy Award for best documentary feature in 2005, explores Briski’s efforts to “save” the children of prostitutes in Calcutta, India, by teaching them photography so they could document their lives and then sell those images to fund their escape from the world of sex work. One of the many generative concepts Rangan coins and explores here is the notion of “feral innocence” within what she calls the “enduring humanitarian myth of childhood innocence.” The concept of feral innocence speaks to the aesthetic appeal that the children’s photographs possess while affirming two complementary myths: “the myth of the child’s untutored genius and the myth of photographic spontaneity.” The photographs also both disavow and depend on the spectacle of the children’s seemingly barbaric lives. The production of the photographs is also a form of labor, and Rangan further argues that Briski’s monetization of the images through the representation of feral innocence “dematerializes the ideological stakes of the labor that Briski’s students undertake in the name of their universal human rights.” Part of this argument relies on the notion of pseudoparticipatory documentary, which Rangan contends hinges on two key points: the fact that the narrative, cinematography, and editing of *Born into Brothels* work to blur Briski’s and the children’s point of view and the fact that Briski manufactures the children as innocent victims who need immediate rescue.<sup>3</sup>

Rangan turns from this consideration of a constructed temporal urgency to a concern with the televisual discourses of liveness in relationship to catastrophes and other humanitarian emergencies. Rangan asserts that the tropes of liveness enacted by television reporting, such as Anderson Cooper’s coverage of Hurricane Katrina for CNN (which is analyzed at length), establish modes of representation that disaster victims must follow in order to gain currency and a platform for their eyewitness status. To this end, she focuses on two representative examples: the well-known 2008 documentary about Katrina *Trouble the Water* (Carl Deal and Tia Lessin), which includes the on-the-ground, eyewitness footage of Kimberly Roberts, an African American woman who was unable to evacuate from the storm, as well as the performance art pieces of Haitian youth collective Tele-Geto, created in the wake of the earthquake that devastated that country in January 2010. Through her close reading of both examples Rangan posits that “documentary evidence of the bare lives of disaster victims” is “agentially and entrepreneurially performed by them as a human rights

2 Rangan, *Immediations*, 11, 7, 5.

3 Rangan, *Immediations*, 25, 39, 50, 29.

claim.” Thus, in her words, the “inclusive rhetoric of participatory media extends the predatory logic of disaster capitalism.” Ultimately, Rangan challenges the work of critics such as Michael Hardt as well as Antonio Negri and Henry Giroux, who emphasize the potentially radical and liberatory possibilities of the communicative potential of the dispossessed. These critics, she argues, are “unable to account for the actual testimonial forms” of disenfranchised subjects because they do not acknowledge the ideological and ethical minefield of representation and medial forms they must navigate to document their humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Navigating humanity emerges as a central concern in Rangan’s exploration of the trope of the first-person documentary voice-over and its attendant logocentrism by dissecting two recent documentaries that feature protagonists with autism: the CNN telefilm *Autism Is a World* (Geraldine Wurzburg, 2004) and a short, experimental video titled “In My Language” (Mel Baggs, 2007), which was made by a woman with autism who posted the piece on her YouTube channel. Rangan explicates three approaches to evaluate the politics of the documentary voice: dominant, resistant, and autistic. The dominant mode is exemplified by the chapter’s opening example, “I Am Autism” (Alfonso Cuarón, 2009), a short video produced by the nonprofit Autism Speaks. Here, booming voice-of-God, acousmatic narration is used to “authoritatively convey that autism is a humanitarian emergency requiring urgent intervention.” The resistant mode encompasses the act of allowing individuals with autism to “speak for themselves,” paired with guiding voice-over, both of which are seen in *Autism Is a World*. The protagonist of *Autism Is a World*, Sue Rubin, is a largely nonverbal twenty-six-year-old woman with autism. To communicate, Rubin uses facilitated communication (FC), in which she picks out letters on a keyboard that are then read aloud. In this sense, viewers get a glimpse into the world of Rubin, but in the film Rubin is always voiced through a facilitator (although we see a shortened version of her FC process). Hearing directly from subjects with autism, in a mode of communication understood by other subjects with autism, characterizes Baggs’s (who uses genderless pronouns) video, which begins with a variety of sounds produced by Baggs, such as humming or tapping, paired with various images of Baggs at home. Further, Rangan argues that “the camera, in hir hands, becomes a haptic, sonic eye” that immerses Baggs’s viewers in hir environment via a more tactile form of representation. According to Rangan, the autistic mode, often illegible to people without autism, is also “imperceptible to a humanitarian radar.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, for Rangan, to articulate space for the autistic voice to emerge in documentary would necessitate new forms of mediation that are more open and accommodating, a task she takes up in the final chapter.

There *Immediations* returns to the idea of rehabilitating disenfranchised subjects through art that appears in the first chapter. Rangan focuses on animal art in the form of participatory documentaries and media projects that feature animal collaborators. She opens the chapter with a consideration of the short video “Original Elephant Painting” (“ExoticWorldGifts,” 2008) which quickly went viral after it was posted on YouTube in 2008 as a way for two tourist art entrepreneurs to promote their

4 Rangan, *Immediations*, 56, 67.

5 Rangan, *Immediations*, 110, 121, 21.

business Exotic World Gifts. Rangan uses the example to highlight the larger trend of anthropocentric and “humanizing” narratives that are often grafted onto animal welfare initiatives. She dubs this approach to animal art “humane-itarian,” and the rest of the chapter explores how other forms of animal art fall more squarely in the realm of posthumanist critique and reflexivity. Rangan draws on the work of Roger Caillois and Laura U. Marks to theorize how projects such as *Pigeon Blog* (Beatriz da Costa, 2006), *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* (Simon Starling, 2006/2008), and *Animal Cams* (Sam Easterson, 2008) allow artists and creators to “surrender the semiotic, narrative, and technical protocols of their media to their non-human collaborators.” In addition, through this technique, Rangan argues that these works awaken the haptic within documentary media and “index” the act of surrender “that gives in to the unpredictable outcome of [the] encounter” an affirmative and generative space to experience “nonhuman modes of being in the world” while exploding the staid and limiting tropes of humanitarian documentary media.<sup>6</sup>

In her conclusion, Rangan returns to the idea of the seemingly benevolent “gift” of documentary that often requires a return gift of the proper form of legible representation dictated by the giver. Yet she argues that if we focus instead on a camera (the gift) given with no expectations for the legibility of what is recorded, then doing so allows for the return of the gift “with images and sounds inscribed with a trace of themselves, and of their mode of being in the world.” This radical openness reconfigures the gift of documentary as something that can “absorb the camera, and us, in the spontaneous nature of the encounter.”<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the many rigorous, theoretically astute close readings in *Immediations*, Rangan skillfully probes at gaps and contradictions in the construction and operation of otherwise unremarkable texts, weaving the insights gleaned from each into bold theoretical declarations. These inform a larger argument that the humanitarian ethos of giving the camera to the Other is fraught with blind spots in regard to ethics and representation. It is hard to do justice in a short review to the virtuosity and precision with which Rangan expertly wields and weaves a range of theoretical revelations. Yet at times, the prolific amount of theory threatens to overwhelm and/or overdetermine the well-chosen case studies, making them hypersignify in ways that may exceed the visual and aural material. In addition, with concerns about liveness, urgency, and the gift of the camera, there seems to be a missed opportunity to consider how emerging and increasingly widespread media technologies, including the ubiquity of cameras (particularly via cell phones) and the proliferation of platforms for video uploads, might complicate or challenge some of the arguments made and conclusions drawn. Such challenges might also come from historicizing and exploring the development and definitional slippages of the participatory documentary subgenre. All of that said, *Immediations* is a bold, refreshing book that I simply cannot stop thinking about. For documentary scholars in particular, it widens the concerns of the subfield. By framing debates about representation, politics, and ethics within other disciplinary conversations and at the limits of documentary, Rangan illuminates important considerations that

6 Rangan, *Immediations*, 155, 180, 190.

7 Rangan, *Immediations*, 194, 196.

are often discarded in the face of immediacy and emergency while pointing us to new, more open and inclusive models of documentary that are better able to accommodate the perspectives and voices of disenfranchised subjects in contingent, emergent, and unpredictable ways. \*

## Contributors

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**Thomas Schatz** is a professor in the Radio-Television-Film Department at the University of Texas at Austin. His books include *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010) and *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (University of California Press, 1999). His current book project, a history of contemporary conglomerate Hollywood, was awarded a Film Scholars grant by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

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