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The Message It Is Not: The Work of the Medium Known as Documentary

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This article is a brief discussion of Pooja Rangan's book Immediations*, highlighting her argument for the need to analyze carefully the audiovisual materialities and ideological assumptions of documentary as a medium.*

Keywords: autism, documentary, humanitarianism, ideological, mediation, neoliberal, participatory media, voice

Pooja Rangan is invested in the formal, ideological, and institutional stakes of theoretically oriented media production, especially when such production touches on the inequities of globalized social relations. In her recently published monograph, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, she articulates these investments in a crystalline engagement with documentary in its multiple valences. The book showcases a mind at work that is at once inquisitive and imaginative and that combines knowledge of the empirical side of filmmaking with nuanced cross-disciplinary thinking. The thesis of the book is clear and powerful: a habitual disregard of the materialities of mediation is, Rangan suggests, what characterizes much of humanitarian work, and this disturbing combination of humanitarianism and *im*-mediation finds a prevalent public form in documentary, which traditionally stakes its political claims on being a neutral and authentic representation of reality. Interestingly, Rangan defines immediations in terms of tropes, calling them "tropes of documentary immediacy" (5). Going further, she writes: "Immediations, I propose, are the documentary tropes of evidencing … attributes of humanity in all their immediacy. If humanity is the 'ultimate imagined community,' … then documentary immediations can be regarded as part of the ritual, tropic performances of belonging to this community" (7–8). Rangan's argument is that such tropes demand interrogation on formal, ideological, and ethical grounds—a task she takes the lead in performing with rigor throughout the book. However difficult the task may be, she urges that we try in some ways to meet "the challenge of evolving a noninterventionist mode of encountering the other" (17).

The profound concerns raised by Rangan can perhaps be reiterated in a somewhat different kind of register. Imagine humanitarianism and mediality as two concurrent

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series of signification, two series of meaning production. Series 1, humanitarianism—which in this case can be taken as a stand-in for any unambiguous political message of neoliberal inclusionism—tends to become so dominant that series 2, that is, the significatory aspects of the documentary medium/media conveying the contents being reported, are eclipsed or simply ignored. Even though series 2 functions with its own irreducible specifics, it is often treated, or so Rangan tells us, as though it were a transparent windowpane (or a nonexistent middle zone), one that allows spectators direct access to the truth of what is being presented. Rangan's readings show how series 1 has been empowered to become dominant by a number of contemporary forces, among which are fervent capitalist commodification and neoliberal political rhetoric. Operating under the auspices of the market and virtuous talk, humanitarianism makes it quite convenient to sidestep the formal elements constitutive of series 2. Despite being a medially specific form (and belonging appropriately in series 2), then, documentary tends to be viewed as a mere conduit—at times a justifiably aggressive conduit—for preformed political attitudes (series 1), a means of mobilizing the viewing public by sensationalizing their perceptions. Because of this hierarchical relation between series 1 and series 2 (whereby series 1 plays the role of the determinant factor even though there are two series of meaning production at stake), disenfranchised or disadvantaged populations' participation in media production often ends up aggravating, rather than ameliorating, this lopsided scenario of truth-telling. Furthermore, such populations are nowadays often encouraged to dress themselves up with identity politics, so that their productions can be hailed as political statements that they are performing as part of their injured but authentic selves. As Rangan puts it, "Participatory documentary exhorts destitute individuals to showcase the very bare humanity whose lack it purports to remedy as a mediatized spectacle" (11).

Immediations offers a remarkably original approach to one of the persistent questions in the overlapping fields of film, media, and cultural studies: How are we to assess and evaluate (pre)suppositions about objective "facts," indeed about claims to reality, in the postcolonial representational contexts embedded in sociohistorical unevenness and inequality? In the subfield of documentary studies, in particular, Rangan's inquiry spotlights the issue of documentary's longstanding custodianship of moral authority through (a conventionally assumed) medial transparency—in Rangan's words, through a claim to *immediacy*. She discusses, for instance, the trendsetting work of John Grierson, credited with inventing the term *documentary*, to pinpoint documentary's cathexis to this entwinement of moral authoritarianism and *anti*-aestheticism: "Grierson wished to innovate a form of cinematic mediation in which the role of the aesthetic was to refer the spectator to urgent social realities in a direct, immediate, and didactic fashion" (3). To put it in a nutshell, Grierson "believed in propaganda first, and art second" (3). In her copiously informative chapters, Rangan, reading against the grain of the entrenched Griersonian mandate, opens up four cases of immediations whose status as medially specific events has been, for her, prematurely foreclosed. These four cases comprise timely scenarios of global social concern. There is, for instance, the photographic aesthetic of "feral innocence" (an aesthetic that tends to fetishize and commodify the lives of non-Western children, in this case children of prostitutes in Calcutta, India), and there is the televisual spectacle of "liveness" adopted by disaster victims of Hurricane Katrina posing as eyewitnesses to their own damage and destruction. We also read a riveting account of the use of first-person voiceover narration by autistic protagonists to speak for

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themselves and an eye-opening discussion of the enigmatic production of an apparent self-portrait by an elephant, as revelation of animal intelligence.

Focusing on these four case studies, respectively devoted to four arenas of humanitarian intervention that seek to empower subaltern, endangered, disabled, and nonhuman "others" with the technical skills and instruments of visual media production, Rangan describes how, in each case, socially marginalized subjects have been converted into media entrepreneurs. Such conversions, she suggests, exemplify contemporary neoliberalism's systemic incitements to socioeconomic participation and volunteerism. Aiming her readings simultaneously at the enlightened mission of empowering such others and at their subsumption by a coercive humanitarian agenda, Rangan delivers a brutal conclusion, namely, that documentary immediacy has long been a means of fixing the other-in-precarity in the position of a wounded noble savage, replete with condescending underpinnings that are now updated with fashionable do-it-yourself and supposedly "reflexive" media technologies. Her ultimate question, an unsettling one to be sure, carries far-reaching reverberations: What does it mean for contemporary philosophers and theoreticians as well as media practitioners to invest so much speculative and creative energy in bare-life figures and their liminal existential conditions, when the biopolitical stresses of humanitarianism as a discourse are so seldom subject to critical scrutiny yet so urgently require attention?

Rangan's inclusion of autism in her study (see chapter 3 of *Immediations*) is especially noteworthy for a number of reasons. Although the other chapters of the book discuss documentary largely from the visual perspectives of camerawork, spectacle, and image, in this chapter Rangan introduces a topic (autism) that, by confronting us with what it means to have "voice," brings about an interesting shift in focus to sonic perspectives, whose resonances go beyond medicine and neuroscience to bear on the acts of speaking and narrating that are the bread and butter of documentary itself. The chapter evidences fascinating research materials, many of which are not usually associated with autism—from the various films and videos to the arguments of Aristotle, Mladen Dolar, Michel Chion, Erin Manning, Temple Grandin, Michel Serres, Bill Nichols, and others. The chapter also displays Rangan's critical talents at their best, as an observer pursuing her subject matter with enviable levels of conceptual acuity, agility, and finesse. Beginning with a careful reading of the details of the diegesis and voiceover narration in the films about autistic people, she delves with ease into the nuances of philosophical and theoretical debates about voice. Her painstaking engagements with these debates allow for a thorough elaboration of the autistic perspective with its singularly embodied relations and organic attunements to a larger ecology—what Rangan calls *voicing*—which in turn reveals the neurotypical (that is, "normal") production of voice itself as a narrow, because reductive, form of channeling. The judgment Rangan reaches brilliantly reverses the very logic of the normativity routinely imposed on autism:

> From a humanitarian perspective, the autistic dwelling in an infinite field of perceptual and relational possibilities is seen as disabled or trapped. However, when we look at speech from an autistic perspective, it is voicing in the "normal" sense, from which these possibilities have been subtracted, that is revealed to be disabled, lacking, closeted, and constrained—it would not be an exaggeration to call it thoroughly autistic.
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> (130–31)

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An interdisciplinary work that draws on a rich repertoire of cultural and social materials as well as film and media theory, *Immediations* is a strikingly refreshing intervention, one that compels readers to rethink their cherished beliefs and customary scholarly methods and practices. Rangan is in full command of her presentation because she has processed her sources, theoretical and empirical, with unfailingly meticulous attention. Her discussions of numerous philosophers and theorists—from Michel Foucault to Gilles Deleuze and Roger Callois, from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Henry Giroux, Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Cary Wolfe, Didier Fassin, Lisa Cartright, Laura Marks, and many others—as well as of a variety of medial objects such as photographs, films, videos, TV journalism, and artworks are exemplary in their sensitivity and judiciousness. These discussions provide instructive accounts of leading critical trends in the subfield(s) involved even as Rangan advances her own innovative reconfigurations of the major issues at stake. By tackling participatory documentary at its *raison d'être*—giving voice to disenfranchised or disadvantaged people by charitably handing over to them the technical means of medial capture—and by aligning this *raison d'être* with the propagandistic rhetoric of immediacy in representation in general, she masterfully reassembles documentary, revealing it to be nothing short of an epistemic event. After Rangan, documentary can no longer be viewed simply as one genre among many; rather, its status is that of a medial-ideological mode that has been leaving indelible imprints on our time by cutting across different genres (including TV journalism, YouTube videos, and photography as well as films and videos formally designated as documentaries).

I consider Rangan's book a substantive contribution to a number of fields and subfields, including film and media studies, feminist studies, critical race theory, and the philosophy and politics of global cultural production. As an inquiry into the indispensable and often not so subtly exploitative connections between humanitarianism and participatory media, the book is as much an astute ethical statement as it is an outstanding piece of scholarship. Based on thorough research, the book also demonstrates the wide-ranging implications of gender, not only in relation to particular gendered populations but also in relation to the discursively generative momentum of the liaison between humanitarianism and media production—indeed, of humanitarianism itself as a leading type of generative media production in our time.

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