

On Nature Programming, the Anthropocene, and the Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary

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This response to Pooja Rangan’s book Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary considers the ways nature programs such as Planet Earth and Our Planet make the natural world newly visible yet imagine wildlife and ecosystems almost entirely separate from human contact or intervention, despite concurrent discourses of the Anthropocene and climate crisis.

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Documentary practice and studies’ core questions—how to represent the truth of the profilmic world and how to represent other people without exploitation—reflect a core ethics of responsibility, at once rooted in a drive to understand the world and in a commitment to human rights and agency. Pooja Rangan’s *Immediations* necessarily calls into question this humanitarian intent that undergirds so much of documentary ideology and production. In this brief response, I want to look to nature programming, a pervasive genre of both television and documentary that has to date received disproportionately little scholarly attention and that arguably helps us to push the definition of “the humanitarian impulse in documentary” as Rangan’s title phrases it. Nature documentaries strive to show us the world as we cannot see it otherwise and at-once anthropomorphize animals in narratives of courtship and survival while occluding humanity itself; such anthropomorphizing operates to maintain the animals’ instinctual behavior as both peculiar and comprehensible—or, as Rangan writes, “a regulatory capture that reinforces a particularly anthropocentric and perceptually normative mode of being in the world.”¹ Here I seek to put Rangan’s work in dialogue with a consideration of the prominent *Planet* series: *The Blue Planet* (BBC/Discovery, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2001), *Planet Earth* (BBC, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2006), *Frozen Planet* (BBC, series producer Vanessa Berlowitz, 2011), *Planet Earth II* (BBC, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2016), *Blue Planet II* (BBC, series producer Mark Brownlow, 2017), and *Our Planet* (Netflix, series producer Alastair Fothergill, 2019).

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1 Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 156.

The Anthropocene—or the era of human-driven planetary impact and now climate crisis—has become a prominent concept and conundrum not only in the Earth sciences but also the humanities.² Drawing insights from postcolonial studies and critical race studies, scholars and critics have convincingly made the argument that what we are experiencing is not simply human-driven change writ large but the particular effects of colonial extraction and redistribution as well as capitalist exploitation. The agents of climate change are those people and nations who have profited most from colonialism and capitalism, and the populations most vulnerable to its effects are those whose lives are already the most precarious from both—a condition that has been termed *environmental racism*. Climate change, thus, can be recognized not only as a crisis of nature but also of human society and its uneven wealth and resources. Ironically, attention to and critiques of the *anthro* in the Anthropocene have emerged more or less concurrently with theoretical forays into posthumanism, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and deep ecology—each of which effectively attempts to conceive of how to decenter the human from our worldviews.

Filmmakers, alternately operating via the modes of nature documentary and of activist demystification and agitprop, have sought to render the climate crisis—a problem of unimaginable scale and temporality—comprehensible by way of documentary.³ Here I

2 For the sake of sharing resources, I offer a number of references here that I found most insightful in teaching a new course on the environment and media. For humanities literature on centering postcolonial or racial critiques of the climate crisis, see Ramachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 71–83 and *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222 and “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change,” *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1–18; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Gabrielle Hecht, “The African Anthropocene,” *Aeon*, February 6, 2018. <https://aeon.co/essays/if-we-talk-about-hurting-our-planet-who-exactly-is-the-we>; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019). On decolonizing or centering capitalism in the naming of this era, see Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44.3 (2017): 595–630, and Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *ACME* 16.4 (2017): 761–80. On nature documentaries, see Luis Vivanco, “Penguins Are Good to Think With: Wildlife Films, the Imaginary Shaping of Nature, and Environmental Politics,” *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, eds. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 109–27. On “nature” as discourse, see Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994). On the narratives we construct about the environment, see William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78.4 (1992): 1347–76. On visual cultures of the climate crisis, see Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); E. Ann Kaplan, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); and T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and the Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017). For an expansive overview of various environmental concepts, see Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow, eds., *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2016). By and large, I have found the work grounded in science, history, and cultural studies more productive than the work coming out of (White) critical theory, literary studies, and cinema and media studies (my home discipline).

3 Examples of the activist mode include *Food, Inc* (Robert Kenner, United States, 2008), *The 11th Hour* (Leila Conners Peterson and Nadia Conners, United States, 2007); *Racing Extinction* (Louie Psihoyos, United States, 2015), and *This Changes Everything* (Avi Lewis, United States, 2015). Perhaps the most

want to suggest a connection to Rangan's provocation that "endangered, dehumanized life not only sustains documentary, but supplies its *raison d'être*"⁴ to think through nature documentaries in the age of climate crisis. The curious condition of this genre is that it has historically imagined nature and humanity as distinct realms and has perpetuated an artificial separation, even when it argues for human impact. How might rethinking the humanitarian-centrism of documentary help us make sense of a genre about human causes and consequences (for implicit is not just that *other* animals but also humans are at risk of extinction) that so often renders the human out of sight? In his early "third-world critique" of American/Western conceptions of environmental conservation, Ramachandra Guha argued that imagining a pristine, protected nature removed from human occupation (such as national parks and forests and wildlife preserves) was both wrong-headed and threatened the lives of indigenous and rural peoples who modeled comparatively sustainable coexistence with nature.⁵ Nature documentaries extend this conservation logic by working to visualize the environment as detached from human civilization.

The nature documentary generally reflects the contradictory senses of documentary immediacy—what Rangan calls *immediations*—in that it presents the viewer with observational footage of landscapes and wildlife as though untouched by intervention but in a highly aestheticized form, often with conventions that are just as standardized as scripted narrative media. Such conventions include aerial and underwater cinematography, extreme close-ups, and time-lapse recordings, as well as sequences of hunting and of mating and birthing; in addition, they typically present nature as outside historical time and mask their own production. Rarely are animals shown lethargically lying around, shot in obscurely visible static long takes (as visitors are likely to experience them at the zoo). Nature documentaries' highly mediated images exceed typical human perception while their narratives focus on the raw elements of other species' survival; here, Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that, for humans, conceiving of ourselves as a species tests our historical and conceptual limits resonates.⁶

The BBC-produced *Planet Earth* series shows images of global conquest without human cost, showing us a magisterial world of species and places—often boasting at how rarely documented such creatures and sites/sights are—that is the product of imperial and technological prowess, narrated with a genial British male voice of authority. The series strives to achieve wonderment, both at the spectacular and wonderful strangeness of nature (exemplified by the first series episode on caves) and at the feat of capturing such stunning footage, expertly edited to riveting effect (as in a thrilling race between snakes and iguanas in the second series' episode on islands). The series, as with subsequent *Planets*, is a showcase for new video technologies as much as of nature; the first *Planet Earth* series, in particular, coincided with the widespread adoption of high-definition televisions and showcased the luminous color saturation afforded by these new screens. David Attenborough's voiceover gives a sense of intimacy and

empathic documentary exploring alternative consumption practices is Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (France, 2000).

4 Rangan, *Immediations*, 1.

5 Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation."

6 Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History."

knowledge that is both seductive and central to all of these series. Yet the effect of both the astonishing footage and storyteller narration is to keep the wild world at an exotic, even mythical remove. In all senses of the word, the series is masterful in what it does—and retains the duality of a series that is both an exceptional filmmaking achievement and one made possible by the apparatus and ideologies of conquest. (As should already be transparent, I am a fan of the series but am trying to also attend to the ways in which it is ideologically problematic.) The making-of *Diaries*, included on the DVD releases but not on Netflix in the United States, reveal—even belie—how much contingency, trial and error, and sheer waiting actually go into the capturing footage, which is edited to feel so formally and narratively controlled in the series' final form. Again, the calm, kindly, rational-seeming voiceover contributes to this effect of mastery of nature even as it narrates how precarious survival of the young or success in a hunt are in the wild.

In Rangan's third chapter, she offers an exemplary engagement with and provocation of the normative role of voice in both documentary and documentary studies—from voice-of-God narration to humanitarian projects that speak on behalf of the subaltern and purport to give voice to the voiceless to first-person documentaries that speak from explicitly subjective positions.⁷ In looking to projects that differently attempt to articulate the experience of autism, Rangan suggests the need to reimagine and deprive the role of voice and speech. *Planet Earth* operates in the voice-of-God mode, and certainly the claim could be made that it must do so because animals cannot speak for themselves. Voiceover here operates at once to communicate a semblance of scientific knowledge and to anthropomorphize the creatures on screen.⁸ But what are the alternatives? Precursors to *Planet Earth* have offered far less didactic explorations: *Microcosmos* (directed by Claude Nuridsany, Marie Pérennou, France, 1996) offers a nearly narration-free world of insects, snails, and caterpillars in extreme close-up, and *Koyaanisqatsi* (directed by Godfrey Reggio, United States, 1982) presents mesmerizing footage of industrialized and urban landscapes edited to a Philip Glass score. Yet neither rejection of vococentrism refuses hyperstylization nor actually approximates the animals' or landscapes' point of view.⁹ Is it possible to have a documentary addressing the climate crisis without an attempt to have human speech explain it or offer solutions?

As a more urgently toned revision of the seemingly timeless *Planet Earth*, the Netflix-produced *Our Planet* (the title seemingly inspired by the "Our Blue Planet" episode of *Blue Planet II*) frames much of its documentation in terms of the devastation of human-driven climate change (often recounted in statistics of population decline or extinction for various species) and of nature's powers of resilience. The emphasis of this series is on the interconnectedness of all life on the planet, across ecosystems and regions, though its form remains much the same as *Planet Earth's*. Nonetheless, even this latter series maintains humanity as an abstract off-screen presence, as with its material traces. One might also suggest that the shift from the BBC to Netflix marks a shift from national empires to global-capitalist tech ones, though the aesthetic seamlessness between the

7 Rangan works through and beyond Bill Nichols's foundational essay "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, 3 (1983): 1–30.

8 Advocacy documentaries, of course, are no less didactic or vococentric in their address to audiences.

9 Rangan raises the acclaimed film *Leviathan* (directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, France, 2012) as one example, though I confess I was too bored to sit through the film in its entirety.

series suggests that many viewers won't notice a difference in where the money came from. The series implicitly if dispassionately argues for multinational regulations protecting species and habitats, but primarily operates to show us what we risk losing.

Organized according to different ecosystems, each episode of *Planet Earth* and *Our Planet* offers brief local dramas of animal life and then cuts to other stories from different continents to construct a network of connections that transcend political borders. Four series-finale episodes, however, do offer a curious range of acknowledging the human. The *Planet Earth II* episode on cities is the exception that proves its series' rule of rendering humanity out of focus; here the episode presents people—virtually all faceless people of the global south—as background species or suppliers to the food chain without individuation. This episode perhaps comes closest to a posthumanist/deep ecology approach. *Frozen Planet's* “The Last Frontier” episode, as indicated by its title, instead focuses on human residence and exploration in polar areas with attention to stoic endurance and manifest destiny rather than to ecological impact. *Blue Planet II's* “Our Blue Planet” episode focuses on the labors of marine scientists and the series' crews, as well as on the impact of plastics on sea animals; here the framing relationship is one-directional as the episode focuses on human impacts, research, and solutions for aquatic life rather than the impact of oceanic devastation on human life, which gets only passing mention. Perhaps most astoundingly and most recently, *Our Planet* ends with the “recolonization” of Chernobyl by forest and wildlife inside the exclusion zone—the only utterance of the word *colonization* I can recall across the various *Planets* and here spoken as hope for the future of life on the planet. The *Planet* series imagines its imperial team as doing humanitarian work and cannot distinguish between a totalizing *anthro* and the uneven histories of conquest, consumption, and waste.

Although cultural commentary on the climate crisis invokes the particular vulnerabilities of the global south, of climate refugees, and of future generations (embodied by the figure of the child), in nature documentaries, it is typically animals that are presented as the face of ecological devastation. Rangan touches on these various categories as she explores the way that documentary “regulat[es] what does and does not count as human.”¹⁰ My subject departs from Rangan's in that most eco-documentaries do not engage the practice of participatory or self-representative production practices (except, arguably, in a genre of YouTube videos in which squirrels steal GoPro cameras that record the incident, an agentive act distinct from the crittercams strapped to animals as analyzed by Rangan).¹¹ In contrast to this trope, Rangan makes the case for imagining “a radically noninterventionist ethic of participatory documentary based on the memetic principle of surrender” in her chapter on animal texts.¹² She continues, “They cultivate an attunement to the documentary medium as a milieu of mutual becoming and transformation, rather than as an intervening force that distinguishes between subject and object, human and nonhuman.”¹³ This sounds lovely.

But, then again, for me the question nags (in a reformulation of questions I posed previously about voice): if humans created our current environmental catastrophes, isn't

10 Rangan, *Immediations*, 8.

11 Rangan, *Immediations*, 185–90.

12 Rangan, *Immediations*, 177.

13 Rangan, *Immediations*, 177.

some form of human intervention necessary to save us and the world from ourselves? Rangan precisely pinpoints and critiques the preoccupation with the human and humanitarianism in documentary and documentary studies, but can we ever get away from the human? Do we want to? Nature documentaries, in at-once rendering humanity off-screen but speaking to and from human perspectives, might be the genre that demonstrates this impossibility and this conflicted desire (or one might call it disavowal). In this moment of existential crises for life as it exists on the planet, it seems the stakes exceed the theoretical.

Rangan ends *Immediations* by asking what documentary does for—or gifts to—those endangered subjects it represents and attempts to make humanitarian claims for. Inevitably, the consequences are mixed. All media production makes a carbon footprint, not least of which in the case of the *Planet* series are the gallons of jet fuel necessary to deploy its crews around the world during production and the server farm power used to sustain streaming the series to viewers.¹⁴ Yet *Blue Planet II* and *Our Planet* have also been credited with a massive reduction in plastic usage in the United Kingdom, in what has come to be called “the Attenborough effect” (named for the narrator).¹⁵ This is perhaps as much of a progressive impact as any political documentary can claim to have made,¹⁶ and in spite of the decades-long ideological suspicion of voice-of-God narration in documentary practice and studies. Dare we ask, What if the voice-of-empire narration is what will effectively change individual actions and consumption?

Yet a recurrent argument in environmentalist discourse is that individual action will have little effect without significant government regulation, changes in corporate practices, and a large-scale sustainable transition of our energy, transportation, and food infrastructures. We have had the information but apparently not sufficient political or economic will to change things for the better on a large scale. Is part of the humanitarian crisis of documentary that such media expose its audience’s and humanity-at-large’s *lack* of empathic capacity?—that, despite the visualization, rational knowledge, and emotional pleas that documentaries offer, our species refuses to act for collective survival?

14 On the impact of media production, storage, and transmission, see James Glanz, “Power, Pollution, and the Internet,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/technology/data-centers-waste-vast-amounts-of-energy-belying-industry-image.html>, and Kyle Sine, “There Is No Carbon-Neutral Production: Cinema and the Anthropocene,” *Media Fields* 13 (2018), found at <http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/there-is-no-carbon-neutral-pro/>. On the impact of media technologies, see Elizabeth Grossman, “Raw Materials: Where Bits, Bytes, and the Earth’s Crust Coincide,” *High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxins, and Human Health* (Washington: Island Press, 2006).

15 Basit Mahmood, “The Attenborough Effect’: 53% of People Report Using Less Plastic,” *Metro*, April 11 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/04/11/the-attenborough-effect-53-of-people-report-using-less-plastic-9156711/>.

16 Jane M. Gaines questions the efficacy of documentary films for social change in “Political Mimesis,” *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 85.