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Slumdog Millionaire: The Film, the Reception, the Book, the Global



Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* was the runaway commercial hit of 2009 in the United States, nominated for ten Oscars and bagging eight of these, including Best Picture and Best Director. Also included in its trophy bag are seven British Academy Film awards, all four of the Golden Globe awards for which it was nominated, and five Critics' Choice awards. Viewers and critics alike attribute the film's unexpected popularity at the box office to its universal underdog theme: A kid from the slums of Mumbai makes it to the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and wins not only the money but also the girl. A distribution strategy of slow release building on word-of-mouth may also have worked in the film's favor.¹ It is likely, too, that the current dismal state of the US and global economy played to the film's success, for 2009 was the year in which high numbers of financially strapped consumers took themselves into theaters to lose their woes. But the film's success was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, at one point, Warner Bros., owner of the rights to the film, felt it was more advisable to avoid an American release altogether and go directly to DVD. Yet, when all was said and done, a film that cost \$15 million to make grossed close to half a billion dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo).

How is it that a film rooted in the melee of a third-world metropolis achieved this kind of popularity? Given its location, what does it mean that the film was more popular with Western audiences? To answer these questions, I locate the phenomenon of *Slumdog Millionaire* in three sites and sections: the making of the film, its reception in India, and the novel on which it is based. Each section appears

discrete yet each speaks to the others in an effort to illuminate a new understanding of the concept of the global. When momentarily unmoored from its hallowed location in the economic arena, in which it attaches itself to processes of free flow of capital, labor, commodities, etc., and in which it has already achieved a hefty empirical truth effect, the "global" will be seen to apply to the perspective that the film mobilizes and institutes; this global perspective needs to be challenged for its effacements and occlusions so that alternative readings may emerge. In brief, I argue that the film's popularity owes much to the filmmakers' prescient ability to select those aspects of local culture that carried over to audiences in the West/North and, by the same token, to suppress other aspects that might have limited the film's scope or otherwise interfered with its appeal to those audiences. A closer examination of these effaced and occluded aspects reveals the limits of even such inventive filmmaking as Boyles's and suggests something about current practices in the production, circulation, and reception of global cinema. The unproblematized assumption of a street child's point of view, the controversial coining of the title word "slumdog," the conversion of the novel's protagonist from a secular composite—Ram Mohammed Thomas—to a fixed and familiar Other (to the West/North) that is Muslim are all examples of the kinds of strategies wielded by the film's global perspective at the expense of the novel's wider social critique.

The Film

Slumdog Millionaire is not a Bollywood film, though it borrows, at times straightforwardly, at other times ironically, from that storied tradition. (Straightforward borrowing: classic Bollywood plot rich in impossible coincidences and moral messages; ironic borrowing: song-and-dance sequence buried at film's end, unconnected to story.) Boyle cites as influences *Black Friday* (Anurag Kashyap, 2004), a gritty look at Mumbai following the 1993 bomb blasts, and Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (*Truth*, 1998) and *Company* (2002), films about Mumbai's crime world (Tsering). But it is telling that Kashyap and Varma are atypical filmmakers in an industry predicated on formulaic successes. Kashyap's innovative



cinematic techniques of camera angle, lighting, and outdoor shooting, his unsettling alternation of close-up and long shots, and the unrelenting focus on realism are not finessed solely with a view to the box office. To Kashyap

is owed the inspiration for the fast-moving police chase at *Slumdog Millionaire's* beginning, which Boyle chose to shoot with a prototype camera whose hard drive was strapped to the back (Jivani). And though the majority of the film production crew was Indian, as was the co-director Loveleen Tandan, who supplied the Hindi-language dialogue without which it would not have been possible to use actual poor and illiterate street children, Boyles's film bears only a tangential resemblance to Hindi commercial cinema.

Certainly no Indian viewer could mistake the director for an insider either to Bollywood or to the street culture that the film celebrates. For one thing, Boyle's take on slum life is largely comic (for example, the autograph-seeking scene featuring the excrement-coated Jamal). Few Indian filmmakers would tolerate a comic view of urban poverty. Mira Nair, who is only marginally located in the Bollywood industry, had some lighter moments in *Salaam Bombay!* but the general mood remained dark, and entertainment was never the top goal. The reason for this relative absence of humor around poverty in the Hindi filmscape is that poverty is framed within the lens of a middle-class liberal guilt that is ever conscious of having escaped its sting, whether by the accident of birth or by some karmic stroke of fate. The reminder of those less fortunate is always clearly within view, on the streets, through car windows, and from inside comfortably or even minimally appointed flats and houses. And, for their part, the working poor, whose meager income goes to supporting the Mumbai film industry, certainly do not need the reminder of their own grinding living conditions blown up screen-size before them. They go to the cinema to forget their daily problems, not to be reminded of them. This is partly why Bollywood films are so often shot indoors or, in a deliberately escapist vein, in scenic locales in Europe or, increasingly, the US. Liberated from insider guilt and discomfort, Boyle shot on location in the slums of Dharavi and the streets of Mumbai, India's "maximum city," exhilarating in the frenetic madness of the teeming, pulsing, gargantuan Hydra-like creature that is Mumbai street life, allowing himself to be subsumed under something infinitely larger, which is to say the city itself, its denizens, its slums, its gated communities, and the sharp contrasts of rich and poor.²

But if the film's point of view is that of an outsider to the culture it celebrates, then on what basis can it represent its putative truths—namely, that it is an Indian story, that it is told in a realistic way, that it is about real slum kids? How does the film produce a supposedly homegrown narrative that is actually fashioned out of foreign tools? In short, how does it authenticate and nativize its project? One response would be to say that the abiding universal features of the story—the individual against the corrupt social order, the triumph of the underdog—transcend the specifics of the filmmaker's own ideological location (Western/Northern). But almost from the moment this answer is proffered it reveals its ahistorical blinkers (at best) or its totalizing impulse (at worst). Until history produces a level playing field for all, universals should best be received skeptically. Ongoing since at least 1978, when Edward Said published *Orientalism*, the critique of universalism finds its apotheosis in the post-colonial dismantling of Eurocentric thought. In different ways, within a variety of different disciplines and interdisciplinary outlooks, post-colonial critics have shown—convincingly—that what gets thought of today



as universal was, historically speaking, particular to a rather narrow group of privileged (Western/Northern) members. By dint of their superior, God-given qualities of character and intellect, these members then proceeded to foist their colonial values, particularly by way of the rule of law, onto a people who had been bullied or otherwise persuaded into believing that their own culture and values were primitive and backward.³

However, this may be the time to insert some qualifications into my discussion of the film. One simply cannot assign a colonial mindset to Boyle (an Irish Catholic by birth) and Simon Beaufoy, the screenwriter, and this is partly why a straightforward dismissal of their film will miss its mark. For one thing, films tend to be polysemous and open. Viewers construct their own meanings out of the complex sets of arrangements, representations, and interactions that make up a film; differences in audience interpretation are only magnified and multiplied when films move across cultures, as they so quickly do in these transnational



times. One such difference—in the cultural perception of the concept of underdog—is taken up later in this essay. Because it is multi-layered, much as one rails against some of the film's uncritical assumptions about its own ideological conditions of production, one cannot deny that there is also simultaneously a kind of embedded critique of

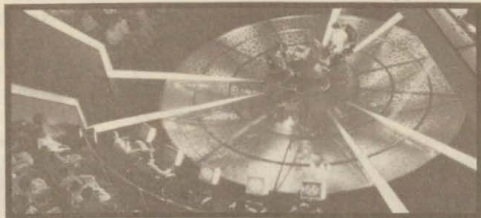
neo-liberal capitalism, as, for instance, in the comic scene set in Agra, where Jamal and Salim have set up as rogue Taj Mahal tour guides. While Jamal is escorting an American couple through the sights, their rented automobile is disabused of its valuable tires by Salim and his gang of thieves. When the driver turns upon Jamal, hitting and kicking him, he raises tearful eyes up to the American couple and says, "You wanted to see the 'real India,' Mister David. Here it is." To which the American woman replies, "Well, here's a bit of the real America, son," mouthing to her husband, "Money," whereupon the husband peels off dollar bills from his wallet to give to Jamal. Obviously, Boyle and Beaufoy are very knowingly undercutting the US's inflated self-image as the richest, most powerful country in the world. In addition to this, Boyle himself appears acutely aware of the historically constituted, racially inflected distance between himself and his subject that, thanks to the lasting imprint of colonialism, threatened to insinuate itself in the making of the film. In an interview, Boyle confesses:

I did not want to make a film where Westerners go around India. But still you are a Westerner yourself, and I wanted to make it as instinctively and subjectively as possible, so you felt like you were looking at it from the inside. One of the dangers of India is that *wow!* factor, where you go, *Wow! Look at that!* And it feels like you are using it, objectifying it, as some kind of thing to just stare at. They hate that, and people asked us not to do that. (qtd. in Beaufoy 136)

Here we have Boyle attesting rather frankly to his Westerner status and to the objectifying potential of that outsider status. Added to this is Boyle's obvious and unabashed love affair with Mumbai; he repeats how he was swept away by its sheer energy and sense of "living in fast forward" (qtd. in Beaufoy 137) and how this relentless forwardness inspired him to do a very kinetic film.

Another caveat involves a rethinking of universalism in some critical circles that may oblige us strategically and selectively to recuperate the term. The pitfalls of universalism notwithstanding (blanket generalizations, appropriations of the Other, etc.), we might ask if some aspects of universalism are worth salvaging. I am mindful of some recent post-colonial theorizing that is moving us toward a kind of "new humanism," what Eric Keenaghan summarizes as "a future commonality, which can preserve yet speak across singular and cultural difference."⁴ In this spirit, we may choose to insist that some universals are worth proclaiming, such as an end to war and oppression in all its forms; we may strategically point out that nations of the North do not have a monopoly on discourses of humanism and universalism. In short, we may reiterate the distinction between modes of uncritical universalism and those of a situated universalism. In this sense, the film's invocation of the universal theme of the underdog at least does not preclude the filmmakers' awareness of the pitfalls of First World sanctimonious pity for the world's dispossessed.⁵ The film acts as a cautionary tale against such ameliorative and, ultimately, doomed impulses by, in many ways, granting a circumscribed agency to its subaltern subjects: the children, who often enjoy flaunting their wits before befuddled or hoodwinked figures of authority.

And to these qualifications may be added a third caveat—that the India which the film seeks to capture is not the Orientalist imaginary of bygone colonial times but a post-1990s, up-and-coming, techno-savvy country which, for better or worse, has one foot firmly planted in the global economy, a fact acknowledged in the film with its anchoring device of the multinational game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. On the face of it, this view of a seemingly new India appears to defy the older truisms of a dichotomous world of haves and have-nots, colonizer and colonized, West and East. The world in which this new India figures is reminiscent of the one Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe in *Empire*: "a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers."⁶



But we revisit the question with which this section began and, with all qualifications suitably in place, now entertain its validity: How does this Western/Northern film project its truth claims from within the interior sphere of the Other? In response, I assert that it does so by the exercise of a certain "global perspective." Because it embeds a critique of American capitalism, invites re-examination of such categories as the universal, and engages in a seemingly open,

non-dyadic discourse about a new world order emphatically does not mean that it lacks in the exercise of a certain controlling gaze, characterized early on in film studies by Laura Mulvey as historically male and applicable, not to women in the case of *Slumdog Millionaire*, but, by subaltern implication, to the children who form the film's subject. This controlling gaze approximates what Sanjay Krishnan has theorized as the "global perspective." Krishnan argues that what we think of as globalization today was historically a certain perspective rooted in the dominant mode, an imperially inflected way of looking at the world that ordered the objects within it and synthesized them according to their exploitative value:

A "global perspective" ought not simply be taken to mean that the world is grasped in its entirety but should alert the reader to the way in which the world is constituted—rendered visible and legible—through a particular style of perspectivizing that is as useful as it is dangerous. In the modern era, which was for the majority of the world's population defined by European forms of territorial and commercial imperialism, the global stands as the dominant perspective from which the world was produced for representation and control. As importantly, this perspective set the terms within which subjectivity and history came to be imagined. The institutionalization in imperialism of this powerful mode of thematizing the world has resulted in the naturalization of this perspective as "correct" seeing; with its naturalization the global ceases to be a perspective and is thought to give access to things in themselves. (Krishnan 4)

How the world is grasped—with what eyes one sees—is constitutively caught up in what is seen. But what is at stake when "the seeing is finessed *as* the seen" (Krishnan 166; my emphasis), when that which is doing the seeing is the colonial subject, and that which is being seen is the colonized object? There is a certain problematic will to power in how the colonial manner of viewing, the colonial "style of perspectivizing," historically was imposed upon the colonized portions of the world and naturalized to the extent that it ceased to be a view, a certain angle, and gave way to an unmediated reality, or "things in themselves."

I pursue the metaphor of seeing into the present discussion on film, where, as gaze, it survives not only as metaphor but also as a crucial component of the cinematic structure. In borrowing Krishnan's concept of the global as perspective, I also emphasize its reproductive potential; for the global to materialize, for "the seeing to be finessed *as* the seen," it must not only be produced but also incessantly reproduced. In my view, Boyle reproduces the global perspective in the way that he acknowledges and then promptly erases his own ideological positioning vis-à-vis his subject. Returning to the excerpt from the interview quoted above, a reader, particularly this educated Indian one, is struck by the contradiction nesting between his words: "But still you are a Westerner yourself, and I wanted to make it as instinctively and subjectively as possible, so you felt like you were looking at it from the inside." It is not only the case that Boyle is a self-professed Westerner; he also presumes to look at India "from the inside." Boyle does not explain how the former accomplishes the latter except by recourse to the language of an intense subjectivity and instinct; "You should always follow [your] instinct because there is something there that you do not really understand fully, and that is a good

thing because you will learn what it is while you are making it" (qtd. in Beaufoy 138). But it may well be that what Boyle refers to as instinctual and subjective is precisely the ruse of the cinema, its ability to render invisible its own operations as it shows spectators a supposedly unmediated reality. In the deft hands of an "outsider," what is placed outside the frame is the entire mediating apparatus of film itself, from the material conditions of shooting to the mechanics of the editing process. The result is a view of the world seemingly unhampered by mediation, a "triumph," says Colin MacCabe of realist cinema generally, "that completely does away with the cinematic process. ... all aesthetic devices are simply there to unmake themselves so that we too can experience, as the artist experienced before us, the moment at which reality presents itself as whole" (11).

The presumption goes even further when we realize that by "inside" is also meant the "inside" of a street child's head. Hence, being specific, we might say that Boyle and Beaufoy reproduce the global perspective in how they efface their



own perspectivizing operation in the supposed unmediated production of a street child's world from the child's own point of view. Boyle has said that "the film was meant to be from the perspective of these kids; shot as a subjective experience. ... [F]rom their perspective, your

chance of changing [poverty] is nonexistent. You have to see it internally, from their perspective. Their view on destiny is keen" (qtd. in Robinson). The repeated emphasis on "their perspective," "their view," a dictum of the realist mode Boyle adopts, contrasts nicely with the phrase "You have to see it." For, of course, in film theory, it is the second look—the spectator's gaze at the cinematic image—that reminds us that it is we who are looking at the cinematic world of the children. In fact, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha reminds us, multiple frames and multiple looking practices are involved in the cinema, and all are inherently unstable; "The actual viewer looks at the screen. An 'inscribed' viewer, already 'inside' the narrative, also looks at the same screen but perhaps differently. And there is a third look that choreographs all the action internal to the fictional universe as 'characters' in the film 'look at each other' inside the screen" (9). This last look further multiplies

as characters in *Slumdog Millionaire* themselves look at screens: Latika stares at the television screen in which she (and we) sees Jamal playing the gameshow; the gameshow audience looks at Jamal within the television screen as an



implied television camera trains itself on the stage. Each "looking" produces a different scene for a different spectator, indeed, perhaps even a different

mode of looking altogether. Yet orchestrating all of these “lookings” is the global perspective, which aims at an unmediated presentation of “reality” yet can only achieve this aim by removing its own extra-diegetic apparatus from view. Returning to Boyles’s insistence on the children’s own subjective point of view, grounded in their own culture’s normative belief system (“their sense of destiny is keen”), we now recognize that their point of view and Boyles’s, or even the camera’s, point of view are not one and the same; indeed, far from identical, they may even be mutually incomprehensible. The point is brought home vividly when Boyle relates how he realized only upon landing in India that the children, who were after all genuine slum dwellers, would be unable to sustain a dialogue in English (“*Slumdog Millionaire* Interviews”). That he even thought otherwise is surely no small testimony to the global perspective that flattens a multilingual world into a monolingual, English one. In the section that follows, the breakdown over English is taken up in more detail.

The Reception

When we turn our attention to the film’s reception, right away it is meaningful to note that the film appealed to a largely Western, not Indian, audience. The Hindi-dubbed version, called *Slumdog Crorepati*, ranks thirty-fourth in top opening weeks of 2009 at the Indian box office, making Rs. 5,28,16,005 or \$1,131,244.⁷ By comparison, the topmost film for 2009, a Bollywood production called *Kambakketh Ishq*, earned Rs. 43,41,12,938, or \$9,298,089 in its first week. Obviously, the relative anonymity of the film’s actors and its cinéma vérité style worked against the film’s mass appeal. But other particularities impinge upon this analysis as well. Take, for instance, the title itself; “slumdog” was coined as an amalgam of “slum” and “underdog” but did not convey well to many Indian viewers, particularly Hindus, to whom the moniker “dog” is deeply offensive. As far back as ancient Vedic times, dogs have been shunned as unclean in the caste-based Hindu taxonomy.⁸ Following the film’s release in India, several protests were led by social activists in Mumbai targeting the film’s demeaning title; Indians related to the project, including Anil Kapoor, who played the gameshow host, and A. R. Rahman, who wrote the soundtrack, were sued by a welfare organizer, according to whom, “[r]eferring to people living in slums as dogs is a violation of human rights” (Blakely). A recent National Geographic documentary about the residents of the megaslum Dharavi, where some of the film was shot, reinscribes the insult unwittingly. Intending to show how the film misses the mark, it conducts a series of interviews with Dharavi residents that highlight the economic self-sufficiency of the enormous sprawling slum, the incredible resilience of its denizens, and their bewildered outrage at being called “slumdogs.” Yet, perversely, in a kind of Freudian “return of the repressed,” the show is titled “The Real Slumdogs!” It is more than simply ironic that a view which aims at a corrective vision ends up further distorting that which it intends to correct. It speaks to the film’s discursive power that even criticisms of it simultaneously reinscribe its truth effects.

In the passage from “underdog” to “slumdog,” from the Dharavi perspective at least, one passes simply from one insult to another. Neither term is able to strike a universal chord that conveys across cultures. The Western liberal gesture

of embracing the world's poor not in their terms but in terms of English slang thus reveals that *Slumdog Millionaire* is not really about poor people but about the representational capacity of the West both to speak for and silence those who exist at the outermost margins, something that repeats itself when the dialogue in Hindi ceases altogether and English becomes the sole vehicle for communication. With its part-Hindi, rest-English status, the film becomes a linguistic mutant, its idioms organic neither to North India nor to the English-speaking West. Ironically, had the entire film been conducted entirely in English, it would have found a ready niche among educated middle-class Indians who are quite accustomed to Indian films using English as the predominant language; one has only to cite the recent success of films like *English*, *August* (1994) and *Split Wide Open* (1999) by Dev Benegal or *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002) by Aparna Sen to bear out the point. Unlike the more or less natural code-switching (between Hindi and English or between Tamil and English) that is the hallmark of these films, *Slumdog Millionaire* applies a linguistic cleaver to its whole, separating into distinct parts its Hindi and English components.⁹ The switch to English occurs roughly one-third of the way through the film, the use of English subtitles obviated at this point. Viewers are to presume that Jamal and Salim have picked up English through their work as tour guides for foreigners in Agra. But the implicit rationalization did not work for India's non-English-speaking audience, many of whom did not recover sufficiently from the aporia to re-enter the film's fictional world. Willing suspension of disbelief was further challenged by the clipped English accent of the male lead, Dev Patel, the British Indian who played Jamal. No wonder, then, that the Hindi-dubbed version, *Slumdog Crorepati*, did better at the Indian box office than its English counterpart.

But beyond the offensive title, beyond even the hegemony of English and the choice of a British Indian to play the lead character, most controversial perhaps was the film's equation of India with rank poverty and depraved cruelty. An oft-cited scene is the one in which a boy is drugged with chloroform and blinded with boiling oil so that he can fetch a higher sum as a beggar for Maman, the overlord of the street children. It was scenes such as this one that Amitabh Bachchan, Bollywood's biggest star, no doubt had in mind when he called the film a stereotypical rendition of a "Third World, dirty, underbelly developing nation" that caused "pain and disgust" to "nationalists and patriots" (qtd. in Blakely). There is, to be sure, a bourgeois defensiveness about some of these (nationalistic and patriotic) responses, a sense that India, shiny and dewy with the satisfaction that comes from producing a rapidly growing economy, is being shackled unfairly to standards that applied in the past, when grinding poverty was the status quo. But we take note when progressive Indian academicians, preternaturally wary of jingoistic and elitist defenses of the nation, nevertheless add their leftist critique to the mix of negative takes on *Slumdog Millionaire*, though for them the problem was not that the film overdoes the seamy underbelly aspect of Third World poverty but, contrarily, that it *undersells* its subject. Hence, while such descriptors as "poverty porn," and "a white man's imagined India ... a poverty tour" (qtd. in Magnier) are certainly seen to apply, as far as these critics are concerned, the film does not go far enough into the other facets of slum life: its vibrancy, its communally driven engine of economic self-sufficiency, and its full-to-the-brim humanity. For

example, watching the film, one would not know that Dharavi's small businesses earn up to \$100 million a year or that, working with NGOs, its co-operative societies provide many basic necessities such as healthcare, schooling, and water to its one million residents (Sengupta). What emerges from the film, these critics aver, is a one-sided view of Mumbai that flattens complexity and ignores the fact that "sensitivity coexists with despair, commitment with indifference, activism with inaction, and humanism with the inhumane" (Nabar).

If Boyle's cinematic treatment of Mumbai's poor appeared problematic, also problematic to many was the manner in which he used the labor and talent



of the child actors, of whom Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail (who plays the little Salim) and Rubina Ali Qureshi (who plays the little Latika) were actually from the slums and who returned there from the Oscars in Hollywood in March 2009. The producers did have qualms about hiring the children, but Boyle overcame their hesitation by reasoning that not hiring them might only work as an

added prejudice against them (Harvey). To charges that they were paid too little, the producers countered by saying that they were paid a salary equivalent to the production company's senior staff in Britain. Additionally, a trust fund was set up for Azhar and Rubina, from which they can draw provided they graduate from high school. Most recently, the children were rehoused by Mumbai housing authorities, not out of any altruistic feeling on the part of local politicians but, more likely, as a bid for votes ahead of elections. Rubina has had her autobiography published in three languages, French, English, and Marathi, Mumbai's spoken language. Each scene of writing is a translation that enacts its own appropriation (and erasure) of the nine-year-old's account of her passage from slumdweller to Oscar recipient.¹⁰

Whether or not the child actors' lives actually improved as a result of their participation in the film, it would appear that they were the victims of an elaborately rationalized exploitation. One also wonders whether and how the taste of life lived "on the other side" may have irretrievably estranged them from life before the film. In any case, Azhar and Rubina now take their place in a growing line of child actors recruited with the help of Hollywood consultants who seem to know little about the local terrain from which they mine their talents. The hunger for authenticity requires the outsourcing of roles to "natives" with scant regard for the wrenching that takes place in the lives of these child actors. Two controversial examples analogous to *Slumdog Millionaire* stand out: Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) and Marc Forster's *The Kite Runner* (2007). In Nair's case, the film's focus on real street children led to her establishing a non-profit organization in 1989 called Salaam Baalak Trust, which provides social services from education to health care to street children in New Delhi and Mumbai.¹¹ The outcome for the actors who

played Amir, Hassan, and Sohrab in *The Kite Runner*, based on Khaled Hosseini's 2003 novel of the same name, was not so rosy. A scene involving the sexual abuse of Hassan by an older boy, Assef, led to a delay in the film's release, during which time the young actors were relocated from Kabul, Afghanistan, to the United Arab Emirates for their safety. They were to be supported financially by Paramount Pictures until they reached adulthood, but of the three—Zekiria Ebrahimi (Amir), Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada, and Ali Danish Bakhtyari (Sohrab)—it is Zekiria who may have paid the highest price; he and his aunt left the UAE after four months and returned to Kabul. Once in Kabul, he was forced to leave his school and change neighborhoods because of harassment and death threats, and shortly thereafter he became home-bound.¹²

In this reading of the local reception of a global film, what is worth recuperating is the interrogatory value of the local, its tendency to put to question what is assumed and imagined at the level of the global. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam rightly insist on "media spectatorship [as] a negotiable site, an evolving scene of interaction and struggle, seen, for example, in the possibility of 'aberrant' or resistant readings, as the consciousness or experience of a particular local audience generates a counter pressure to globally dominant representations" (156). But this is not at all to suggest that the local and the global are diametrically opposed or that they are hierarchically situated, the local acceding to the global on every count. Rather, what the Indian reception to *Slumdog Millionaire* teaches us is the ability of locally mounted critiques to interrupt the habitual processes of the global (the hegemony of English, the quest for authenticity, and so on) so that we may take another position or mobilize a counter reading. It is the possibility of just such a counter reading that energizes the next section.

The Book

I am not interested in making an argument about which is better, the book or the film. If anything, the film has more representational modes in its tool box—sight, sound, image, movement, all of these emerging out of direct spectatorial engagement. Nor am I interested in making any truth claims about the "source text" being the "original" while the "second-order creation," the film, serves as mere "copy." The film interprets the book, yet the book is itself an open and interpretive medium because it is a work of imagination. Nor does it provide the "correct" view that then retroactively straightens out the film's errors. But, even given the textuality of these texts, the reality signified by the book is decidedly not the reality signified by the film. In fact, the reality referenced by the book yields a far more trenchant social critique of contemporary urban India.

But to which work of fiction are we referring? There is a book by Vikas Swarup, *Q & A*, on which the film was based, and then there is a book titled *Slumdog Millionaire*, which appeared after the film, whose authorship is ascribed to Swarup. The change in title signifies a shift in scope, from the relative obscurity of cosmopolitan reading circles to the global circuit of popular film production and exhibition. It is not as if the debut novel of this Indian diplomat, who currently serves as the Consul General of India in Osaka, Japan, received little fanfare on its appearance. *Q & A* was critically acclaimed back in 2005–06, published by premier

multinational trade presses on three continents (Random House, Doubleday, Scribner, and HarperCollins), and recipient of two literary awards, South Africa's Exclusive Books Boeke Prize in 2006 and the Paris Book Fair's Reader's Prize, the Prix Grand Public, in 2007. The author's website informs us that *Q & A* was voted "the Most Influential Book of 2008" in Taiwan. But one imagines that far exceeding these literary accolades are the material rewards accruing from book proceeds following the film's release, and how better to facilitate book sales than to rename the book after the film? Henceforth, I refer to the novel as *Q & A*, to distinguish the novel from the film and to revive literary categories such as "character," putting these in the service of a resistant political reading that the "older" project (*Q & A*) tends to encourage and that the film, by contrast, discourages.

Some of the departures that Beaufoy's screenplay takes from Swarup's novel are striking for what they say about the global perspective, which, thanks to Krishnan, we have defined as a powerful mode of seeing that orders objects into a coherent whole that is naturalized as already there (as opposed to a truth effect manufactured by the exigencies of capitalist expansion). To find where the seam breaks in the fabrication of this coherent whole, to read against the grain, is to "interrupt" the global perspective and release new resistant habits of reading. This is why I turn to the occlusions of the film's global perspective, to those parts of the novel that the screenplay has effaced, blocked, or omitted, and ask what the effect of such erasures might be. There are at least two that are worthy of closer examination: the syncretic national identity of Swarup's protagonist Ram Mohammed Thomas (in the film, the protagonist is decidedly Muslim) and the repeated trope of sexual abuse of minors (in the film, sexual transgressions are replaced with all the exigencies proper to a heteronormative romantic plot). While both of these aspects have been excised from the film's narrative for reasons that may seem obvious, it is their very obviousness that alerts us to the way in which the global perspective places its ideological orientation just beyond view, giving the impression of an unmediated reality while all along regulating that which is viewed.

In *Q & A*, the protagonist is an orphan, abandoned at birth outside a church in New Delhi and subsequently adopted by a Christian priest, Father Timothy Francis. Father Timothy gives the boy a Christian name, but the name is changed to Ram Mohammed Thomas at the insistence of an "All Faith Committee" who, foreseeing the threat of a communal uprising, is concerned that a potentially Hindu child is being converted to Christianity.¹³ (A Sikh name would also have been thrown in were it not for the fact that the committee's Sikh member was absent from the meeting.) Swarup markedly underlines Ram Mohammed Thomas's all-Indian identity as secular and not religious, and in this way gravitates the text toward a distinctly nationalist project:

Father Timothy taught me about the life of Jesus, and Adam and Eve, and this extended family instructed me in the rudiments of other religions. I came to know about the Mahabharata and the Holy Koran. I learned about the Prophet's flight from Mecca to Medina and of the burning down of Lanka. Bethlehem and Ayodhya, St. Peter and the Hajj all became part of my growing up.

This is not to suggest, though, that I was a particularly religious child. I was like any other child, with three main preoccupations: eating, sleeping, and playing.
(40)

In the course of the novel, Ram's syncretic nominal identity benefits him because he is able to draw from it at will, emphasizing whichever aspect suits the prevailing ethnic *esprit de corps*. In this sense, it is strategically unstable and fluid. Some characters, such as his best friend Salim, call him Mohammed, while others call him Thomas. While his identity never really coheres, obviously it is the Hindu component that most often comes to his aid, as when the actress Neelima Kumari takes him in as a servant but not his friend Salim because her mother is anti-Muslim. As a result, Ram is spared a life on the streets, but Salim has to return to their tenement in the Mumbai chawl. By vivid contrast, the film's protagonist, Jamal, is unemphatically Muslim, and Salim is his brother, not his best friend. Their mother died at the hands of hate-filled Hindus in a Hindu-Muslim riot. More than just a bid for sympathy, however, this crucial alteration teaches us how the global perspective locates, norms, and naturalizes its subject. For is it not the case that the recognizable Other in the global Imaginary, post-9/11, is a Muslim, not a Hindu? By fixing a Muslim tag on their protagonist, Boyle and Beaufoy have placed him in a more familiar, if also more fraught, relation to the West. In so doing, they have also given their film a recognizably global (here, read Western/Northern) dimension, one that the film would have lacked were the protagonist a Hindu or a Ram Mohammed Thomas. It is surely ironic that, as the film attempts to articulate a minority position (Muslims comprise 13 percent of India's total population and have often, and especially in Mumbai, experienced violence at the hands of Hindu fundamentalists), it ends up producing the Muslim Other that is only too familiar to Western audiences through acts of global terrorism!

Unlike the film's limited view of Indians, the novel teems with India's multicultural melange of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Christians, and Parsis from practically every walk of life—the rich (actors, television personalities, druglords, princesses), the poor (beggars, orphans, prostitutes, slumdweller), and a sizeable and growing middle class (retired soldiers, businessmen, academicians, pimps). Swarup's novel also takes the length and breadth of North India, both provincial and urban; the Dharavi-Mumbai slums and the Taj Mahal-Agra settings constitute only two loci upon which Ram's life turns. Several chapters are set in New Delhi where Ram first lives at Father Timothy's house and then at the Delhi Juvenile Home for Boys and where he returns after a stay in Mumbai to work at the house of an Australian diplomat. Even the geographical border shared with Pakistan is evoked in a fanciful retelling of the 1971 war between India and Pakistan. As it turns out, Ram's stint as a beggar in Mumbai, the foundational premise of the film, only runs to about eight pages in a 300-plus-page novel. And Ram is never actually destitute; his abiding characteristic is an ability to work his way out of any situation through sheer resourcefulness, opportunism, and luck.

While he plays by an individual code of honesty, it becomes apparent to readers that Ram is a literary device embedded in a neo-liberal nationalist narrative whose morally ambivalent values he often reproduces reflexively. Critics of Indian

neo-liberalism on the left have remarked on its lip service to ideals of secular democracy while it brutally suppresses opposition to its profit-driven ideology of unfettered greed and materialism. For proof, we need look no further than the glaring disparities among the rich and the poor, the current agrarian crisis, the expansion of foreign markets, and, concomitantly, the rise of anti-globalization activist movements. Ram is decidedly on the side of the have-nots in the archetypal good v. evil battles he wages. He helps a young girl escape sexual abuse at the hands of her alcoholic father; he shoots a train dacoit who is about to sexually assault another young girl; he gives a distraught father 400,000 rupees—money that he himself needs badly to free his lover, the prostitute Nita, from bondage to her pimp—to save his son's life; and he gets on the game show not to win the money or the girl but to corner and kill the host Prem Kumar, a classic villain who sexually abused the two women who mattered to Ram.¹⁴ But for all this, Ram is not above maneuvering the system for his own gain. By the novel's end, he has come to realize that “dreams have power only over your own mind; but with money you can have power over the minds of others” (316). In fact, Ram never did reject outright the aspirational and acquisitive goals of the bourgeoisie, accepting as an unquestioned good the premise that with prosperity comes the ease of an all-around better life. The symbol condensing the moral ambiguity of the novel's universe is Ram's one-rupee coin with heads on both sides, which he tosses from time to time to decide key outcomes. In this way, the novel's informing ideology extends beyond nationalism as such to a tacit compliance with India's post-1990s neo-liberal capitalist policies. It demonstrates an obligatory belief in the inherent goodness of downtrodden, disenfranchised, and impoverished people—particularly children and women—but it leaves the status quo unchanged.

Ram's unstable representative status as all-Indian and his problematic reproduction of the profit motive are extraneous to Boyle's film, which has to efface this “other” global (Indian) narrative in order to produce its own global (Western) narrative in which the non-West is configured as Muslim. But also extraneous to the film is any treatment of sexuality outside of the purviews of heteronormative society. By contrast, the novel almost compulsively plays out one act of sexual transgression after another.

Two aspects of the novel's sexual content are noteworthy here. First, that sex is embodied not as an equal exchange between loving partners but, violently, as a display and an abuse of power and second, that it is predominantly expressed in such aberrant forms as incest and pedophilia. For, in the Dickensian world of *Q & A*, children and the marginalized (women and the poor) live with the knowledge that they are the toys that adults and rich men play with. The following examples of sexual violence, all involving children and young adults, stand in eloquent contrast to the film's sentimental view of sex as something that follows naturally and wonderfully once women and men fall in love.¹⁵

The first of these occurs when, under Father Timothy's care in Delhi, the seven-year-old Ram witnesses the associate priest Father John sodomizing Father Timothy's illegitimate teenage son. Then, in the juvenile home to which he is sent after Father Timothy's murder, he aids in his eight-year-old friend Salim's narrow escape from rape at the hands of Gupta, the deputy at the home. While living

in the tenement in the Mumbai chawl, Ram overhears the alcoholic rages of his neighbor, Shantaram, who, we also learn, beats his wife and sexually abuses his young daughter Gudiya. Also during this stay in Mumbai, Ram's friend Salim is rudely divested of his hero worship of the fictitious Bollywood actor Armaan Ali when Armaan, disguised as an old man, gropes him in the darkened hall of a theater (where Salim and Ram have been watching—who else—Armaan perform the iconic romantic lead in a film named—what else—*Betrayal*). And, finally, when Ram falls in love and loses his virginity, it is to a seventeen-year-old prostitute in Agra; Nita comes from a tribal community in Madhya Pradesh in which one girl from each family, the “Bedni,” serves as a “communal prostitute” (266). Ironically (and here Swarup is working with fact, not fiction), the birth of a daughter in the Bedia community is cause for celebration as hers is the primary income for the family, and sons are regarded as a drain on the family income. It turns out that one of Nita's clients is the gameshow host Prem whom Ram recognizes as the molester of Neelima, the actress for whom he had worked earlier in Mumbai. On the bodies of both women Prem leaves his calling card: cigarette burns. It is to avenge both Neelima and Nita that Ram gets on the game show, his plan being to confront Prem with a gun at some point in the taping of the show.



Even through this convoluted set of coincidences, the pattern is clear. Why this trail of abuse if not to highlight the broken links between individuals and the modern societies that have failed them in some very basic ways? Read as social satire, *Q & A* allows us to see that (the critique of) sexual violence is caught up in a larger social grid along whose intersections other kinds of violence erupt—for instance, the abandonment of illegitimate babies by parents and their tragic deaths due to poverty, disease, and neglect; the powerlessness of the wrongly accused who are unlucky enough to find themselves in police custody; or the casual exploitation of servants by their masters. In this way, we see that sexual violence is but one type of a social violence that the dominant culture (the rich, the adults, the men) tolerates, nay, even sanctions. For, put together, these examples amount to a pervasive theme, summarized as the vulnerability of the margins, the malign intent concentrated in the centers of power, and the urgent need on the part of minorities to invent strategies to combat the relentless and systemic abuse of power by those who possess it. All of these Swarup harnesses to a wider social critique of the nation and its failure to deliver its post-Independence promise of ending poverty and ensuring a better life to all its citizens.

Boyle maintains that, without Beaufoy's rewriting of it for the screen, the novel did not have much going for it. It was “rigid and segmented,” whereas the film “flow[ed] backward and forward,” pre-empting and withholding information within a tightly structured framework that allowed for active spectator participation and empathy for Jamal (qtd. in Beaufoy 134). The comment begs contextualizing

in terms of contemporary discussions of the status of temporality in the cinema, given its digital turn and the digital media's non-chronological privileging of space. But, for my purposes, it is simply worth noting that what *Slumdog Millionaire* gains in temporal fluidity it loses in terms of a wider social critique. The film individuates Jamal, making him the mesmerizing center along whose periphery other lives flourish or collapse. It focuses on the individual yet declines to link individual failing to a larger social or national malaise, and its critique of corruption is limited to the culpability of a few bad apples. Conversely, what the novel demands of us is a certain patience that is not reducible to the eternal "now" of the spectator; its protagonist, the composite Indian, is not particularized in any other way than as a site upon which alternative types of Indians articulate their identities.

Conclusion

In an effort to disrupt the habitual processes of the global perspective, this essay has interpreted *Slumdog Millionaire* outside of its intended modes of production and consumption and has examined, first, the film's problematic relation to its (cultural, racial, geographic, linguistic) Other, which is not simply the Third World but, within that world, the subaltern figure of the child (and child actor); second, the film's reception and somewhat dubious reputation in certain "insider" locations and debates; and, third, the film's highly selective adaptation of the novel upon which it is based and its neutralization of the broad critiques taking place there. The goal has been to counter the global perspective not with its corrective opposite (a "nativist" standpoint that is, after all, itself a representation and truth claim) but with its own occlusions and so develop a practice of reading against the grain. In this sense, Swarup's novel does not give us the "full" picture" as much as it affords us an opportunity for a critical reading that may supplement the global perspective of Boyle's film.

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Notes

¹ The film played first at the Telluride Film Festival in August 2008 and the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2008, where it won the People's Choice Award. It had a limited release in November 2008 and a nationwide release in January 2009. It went from screenings in ten theaters originally to screenings in 2,943.

² Boyle relates: "[The production company India Take One] were trying to influence me to shoot in the studios the whole time. It felt to me like the flavor of the film—the city was a character, obviously. It's a bit of a cliché to say it, but it's true. It really felt like it was. It would be like if you did a film about New York, and you did it all in a studio. There would be something apathetic about it, which might be the effect that you were after. But if you wanted a kind of realism, something that felt real and was being told from the point of view of a kid, you've got to film it in the real places. Also, just as a director, it's only by *doing* that you get any chance, as a Westerner, of actually being able to represent life truthfully" (qtd. in Robinson). See also "*Slumdog Millionaire* Interviews: Danny Boyle, Dev Patel and Freida Pinto."

³ For an interesting critique and (partial) recuperation of the universal, see Tanika Sarkar, "How to Think Universalism from Colonial and Post Colonial Locations: Some Indian Efforts," *Collegium* 4.12 (2008): 240-54.

⁴ See Eric Keenaghan, "Newly Discrepant Engagements: A Review of Three Recent Critical Works in Modernist Postcolonial Studies," in *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.3 (Spring 2006): 176-90, 178. In the essay, Keenaghan reviews recent post-colonial modernist projects by Edward Marx, John Cullen Gresser, and Charles Pollard, reading these in the context of the "planetarity" called for separately by Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy and in the context also of Edward Said's modernist humanism in his last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004). In that work, and in Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003) and Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), it is possible to limn a collective project reclaiming humanistic values (such as universalism) on the ground that commonalities must be sought across differences if hope is to exist for a future beyond blatant individual and corporate greed.

⁵ The film's writer Simon Beaufoy relates how "It's absolutely inappropriate to feel sorry for these people—even the guy wheeling around on the skateboard with no legs. . . . I wanted to get [across] the sense of this huge amount of fun, laughter, chat and sense of community that is in these slums. What you pick up on is this mass of energy" (qtd. in Roston).

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2000), xiii.

⁷ The film played first at the Telluride Film Festival in August 2008 and the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2008, where it won the People's Choice Award. It had a limited release in November 2008 and a nationwide release in January 2009. It went from screenings in ten theaters originally to screenings in 2,943.

⁸ See, for instance, Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), especially 43, 267.

⁹ For an engaging and insightful critique of the problem of language in the film, see Mukul Kesavan, "Lost in Translation," *The Telegraph*, 5 Feb. 2009, web.

¹⁰ Narrated to French author Anne Berthod, it was translated into English as *Slumgirl Dreaming* by Mumbai author Maitreyi Joshi and subsequently, in an effort to reach the masses of Mumbai, translated from the English into Marathi by Mehta Publishing House, whose proprietor said, "It is ironic that foreign writers found her a fit subject for a book, but Indian writers ignored a good, inspiring story of the Mumbai girl who worked her way from the slum gutters to the world stage." See "Child Actor Rubina Ali Qureshi Ready to Release Marathi Autobiography," Calcutta Tube, 12 June 2010, web. The article states that Rubina is slated to act alongside Anthony Hopkins in the upcoming Hollywood film *Lord Owen's Lady*. In the meantime, however, she continues to live in the Dharavi slums and commutes to an upscale elementary school in Bandra.

¹¹ See the website of Salaam Balak Trust: salaambalaktrust.com.

¹² Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, "Kite Runner Star's Family Feels Exploited by Studio," National Public Radio, 2 July 2008.

¹³ Readers of Salman Rushdie will readily recognize in Swarup's Ram Mohammed Thomas the character of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*; both are composite Indians whose individual narrative emblemizes and parallels the narrative of the nation. But while Rushdie's postmodern take on the nation was playful and self-conscious, Swarup's realist-modernist mode represents India literally, at face value.

¹⁴ It is interesting to observe the different signifying functions of the game show itself as we go from book to film. Both use the game show as an organizing principle for the plot: questions initiate flashback sequences which in turn reveal the answers, and so the cycle of questions, flashbacks, and answers continues. But whereas the film proceeds chronologically through Jamal's life, the book arranges answers non-chronologically, taking us to different moments in Ram's life. For instance, the novel begins with Ram already having won the quiz show; indeed, it was his victory that led to his arrest on the charge of cheating. The film reserves his victory—the final correct answer—for the ending climax. In addition, the film more aggressively characterizes the game show as rigged. The host feeds Jamal wrong answers and hands him over to the police. In the novel, Ram's motive for getting on the show is personal revenge against the host who, in a bid to prevent Ram from shooting him, obliquely gives Ram the correct answer, as a result of which he wins the show. Boyles's depiction of rigging in the game show industry cinematically echoes, of course, Robert Redford's depiction of actual rigging in *Quiz Show*. While his treatment follows a conventionally Hollywood track (albeit laced with a healthy dose of Third World corruption and police brutality), Swarup's novel lends itself to the melodramatic tradition popularized by Bollywood.

¹⁵ I am ignoring, of course, the abduction of the young Latika and her concubinage by Maman. But note that she is rescued from his machinations in the classic fairy tale plot of damsel-in-distress-rescued-by-knight-in-shining-armor. The novel has a romantic subtext too, but the insistent motif of sexual abuse overrides the instances of heterosexual sentimental love.

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