

## **Seduced ‘Outsiders’ versus Sceptical ‘Insiders’?: *Slumdog Millionaire* through its Re/Viewers**

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### **Abstract**

Amidst continued debates about the commercial success and ‘hybrid’ style of *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. Danny Boyle 2008), this paper reports on a six-month international study of its audiences and reception. The data gathered include 25 half-hour qualitative interviews with randomly selected international viewers and 15 in-depth qualitative questionnaires (administered over the internet) in the Spring and Summer of 2009. While the film had no overt pretensions to being an ethnographic account of life in Indian slums, many of its re/viewers experienced it as having an implicit political agenda and used criteria from ethnography or social science to evaluate, understand and comment on its qualities and their reactions to it. This style of response raises theoretical questions about the textuality, meaning and reception of internationally circulated media products in an apparently globalised arena: how do diverse re/viewer’s pre-existing worldviews, ideological standpoints and intersecting identities inflect their responses? Are some re/viewers more likely to judge the visual and other cinematic pleasures offered by the film positively because of particular configurations of knowledge and identity? What role should anthropological notions of ‘insider knowledge’ and ‘outsider gaze’ play in academic discussions of viewers’ rhetorical analyses? National, class and ethnic affiliations were called upon implicitly by interviewees to attest to or problematise the authenticity of particular sequences and readings. However, experiences of gender, international economic and cultural texts, child poverty and globalisation were also overtly referenced. In its analysis of these reflexive commentaries, this paper draws on critiques of ethnographic film, which are useful in undermining or reinforcing anxieties around representation, class politics, nation and authenticity. It also suggests that while moral and social judgments are implicit in many responses to the film, straightforward assertions of ‘insider’ knowledge in the making and reception of such cinema may be inadequately nuanced when it comes to understanding the impact of complex international cultural products.

**Keywords:** Slumdog Millionaire, Orientalism, Audience Research, Representing India, Cultural Globalisation, Insiders and Outsiders, Children and Film

### **Introduction**

*Slumdog Millionaire* (Dir. Danny Boyle, 2008) is now best known for winning numerous Awards at the Baftas, Golden Globes and the Oscars. After being publicly championed by an unprecedented number of film critics, it caused something of a media sensation when celebrities in Bollywood and some (but not all) viewers in India publicly labeled it exploitative and unfair to India and Indians. Told in flashback from the point of view of a young man, the film narrates the story of two brothers from a shantytown in Bombay, who choose different pathways in life. In the opening sequence of the film, one of the brothers has reached the final of the much-vaunted TV quiz show, the Indian version of 'Who wants to be a Millionaire'. Arrested, apparently for cheating, Jamal Malik 'explains' to his police interrogators how it is possible for someone like him, a slum child with little formal education, to know the answers to the most seemingly esoteric questions: he has learned the answers through bitter experience. And in the process of recounting these, he opens for the audience (what is displayed unashamedly by the film as) a window on the world of two Muslim children born in a Bombay shantytown in the 1980s. Via fast-paced sequences full of jump cuts – depicting communal riots, professional begging and child molesting gangsters – the boys and the camera travel across India and back again. They return in search of an old girlfriend as Bombay's/Mumbai's economy goes neo-liberal and gated communities spring up, isolating the rich from the poor. In tandem, the younger brother, Jamal, stays honest, innocent, hard-working and loyal – a tea-boy in a call centre; the older brother becomes a gangster's lackey, corrupt and aggressive, taking the quickest possible route to what seems like financial success.

A viewing of the film during a year of media hype, followed by a series of random but heated discussions about it, crystallised into an urge to discover whether and how different kinds of *knowledge* and *experience* – about cinema, about Hindi cinema, about India, about Bombay, about urban poverty (Indian style) – played into critical responses to the film, by viewers or by established film critics. Saying that the same film and the same set of circumstances can call up wildly different even contradictory viewpoints from people, or from the same person at different times should no longer be much of a surprise. Meaning does not reside solely in media texts; this has been established over the decades via painstaking theoretical critique and empirical scholarship (see, among others, Austin 2002, Buckingham 1993, Barker and Brooks 1998, Mankekar 1999 and Staiger 1999). Although there are still those new to the subject who might write as though texts are all-powerful and hold ultimate sway, enough has been done to challenge a text-centric understanding of meaning and effects to obviate the

necessity for another paper on this topic. What is interesting about people's reactions to this particular film is not, in fact, the divergence of opinion *per se*. What is intriguing however is, first, the vehemence and types of the feelings called forth by what might seem a fairly prosaic rags to riches story, albeit set in a (to most Western audiences) exotic setting: delight and jubilation, inspiration, tears, disgust, anger and humiliation are only some of the emotions expressed by those who watched it. Second, and more confusingly, perhaps, it was read as an educational – almost an ethnographic – tale by some re/viewers, a contrast to Bollywood glitz and to the mawkish sentimentality of documentaries about India. Additionally, and more problematically, perhaps, opinions expressed about the film contained tropes of quasi-orientalist (Said 1978) or re-orientalist (Lau 2007) cultural and political discourse. Indeed, the quaint assumption of an ethnographic subject when a film or book happens to feature non-white and non-western protagonists is a classic feature of such discourse in relation to fiction genres. In a fascinating paper delivered on this subject, Ellen Dengel-Janic argues that '[w]hat the film negates and helps to mask in a pleasurable visual manner is a translocated fear of poverty and the abject.... the film's appeal reflects not only the West's exoticism of India, but also its repressed fear and paranoia of becoming abject and poor' (2009: NP). But given the wide range of viewers who ultimately encountered the film, can such a critical reading be sustained? Understanding the combinations of *circumstance* and *experience*, *contextual* and *technical knowledge* and *generic expectation* that led to particular discourses or technical sequences in films being picked up and enjoyed or selectively critiqued has been the aim of much of my work on Hindi cinema to date (see Banaji 2006 and 2008) and remains at the core of this paper. However, even these combinations do not capture fully the investments people have in their judgments about films or indeed the complexity of the emotional and cultural histories that inflect these judgments.

### **The wider media context of viewing**

#### ***The Good ...***

Many print reviewers writing at the time of the film's release seemed to take an 'outsider' perspective, reading the film's brilliance in its ability to entertain cinematically and to educate about a particular place or historical moment in India.<sup>1</sup> They write: 'one is staggered by the wretched conditions, the number of the dwellings and how close each one is to the next'; 'The film gets under the skin of the city on every imaginable level'; 'the type of movie experience that inspires moviegoers to become movie snobs'. The discourses in such reviews shift back and forth from 1) praise of the novelty and proficiency of the film's technical expertise through 2) comments on the plausibility and entertainment value of the plot to 3) discussions of more philosophical and political themes. The language of emotion is clearly at play here – to be awed, staggered, inspired, disturbed are some of the pleasures on offer. To learn about something that is authentic, 'under the skin', so to speak, about the lives of Bombay's poor is another of the pleasures described by reviewers. Positive reviews also pay attention to a

fourth category of discourse – critical or less than enthusiastic responses to the film – and attempt to undermine such critiques while continuing to maintain the reviewers' own place as cinematic sophisticates.

***The Bad ...***

Initially much of the negative feedback roused by the film was from primarily middle-class Indians apparently incensed that the film was depicting India in a negative light as a country of gangsters, riots, child prostitutes and filthy slums. One blogger wrote: 'having seen the movie the Indian within me is raging.'<sup>2</sup> The *Times* online<sup>3</sup> ran a piece in January 2009 which explored some of the mixed responses to the film in India, starting with '[c]ritics, led by Amitabh Bachchan, the veteran Bollywood star, [who] denounced it as "poverty porn" that perpetuated Western stereotypes about India'. Others claimed that the term "slumdog" was offensive.<sup>4</sup> Various reports emerged of slum-dwellers attacking cinema theatres showing the film in North-East India because of a misunderstanding of the term 'slumdog', which they read in a derogatory light (sic). In response to praise for the film by Shekhar Kapoor on his blog, one 'Indian' writes:

Though the directors have tried hard to portray reality, at times it was unnecessarily crude – almost sadistic – and so seemed like an attempt to demean India and make the audience go "gosh .. aren't we lucky to be sippin our pesticide-injected coke and eating our fake-butter popcorn"... and it was quite superficial in its so called hearty message. Those slum-dwellers probably live much happier lives than Danny Boyle. There was nothing great about the movie ... any mediocre Bollywood flick easily comes out way superior in content .. Oscars are a piece of crap.<sup>5</sup>

Here, the film's supposed lack of authenticity is cast as residing both artistically in its pornographic (crude, almost sadistic) representations of poverty and also in its lack of national loyalty, its supposedly insidious implication that India has a seedy underbelly of poverty, crime and resentment. But responses to the film in India were by no means all of the same character. Many Indian reviewers and critics saluted what they termed the novel techniques and the subject matter of the film, eschewing nationalist discourses and decrying what they termed the 'insecurity' of Indians who always wanted India to be depicted in a 'good' light. There were, however, also avowed 'insiders' who, like Soutik Biswas reviewing the film for the BBC, noted that the film's popular critical reception might come at the expense both of an understanding of real poverty, real Indian children and other cinemas in India:

Poverty, like a lot of things, is good business in a free market. But India is also exceedingly cruel to its poor and callous towards its children, and is one of the most unequal societies in the world.... Because Indian cinema is synonymous with feckless

Bollywood fare to many in the West, a vast body of critically acclaimed and often, popular, work which has consistently exposed India's underbelly with more ferocity and vigour than any foreign film is routinely ignored.<sup>6</sup>

### **... and the Ugly**

To further complicate matters the off-screen life of the Indian slum child stars and of the slum-dwellers of Dharavi, the shantytown where some of the film was shot, began to make headlines. In an article for the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Slumdog reality', Kay O Sullivan interviewed a man conducting tours of India's largest slum:

Last year, few people would have heard of Dharavi, the Mumbai slum that provides the backdrop for the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. But with the film winning best picture at the Oscars, the area is well and truly on the map. Chris Way, the co-owner of Reality Tours and Travel, which conducts tours of Dharavi, says business has picked up by more than 25 per cent since the movie was released and visits to the company's website have increased threefold in the past three weeks... [T]he aim of the tours is to help dispel the negative images that many have about slum dwellers," he says. The people have little material wealth but are constantly smiling and happy, Way says.<sup>7</sup>

Such ridiculously grandiose claims, and such 'poverty tourism' as it has been labeled, worked for some to further discredit the film's claims to represent something authentic about India and for others to do exactly the opposite.<sup>8</sup> No study can assume that viewers' interactions with such a popular film take place in a vacuum, uncontaminated, so to speak, by the debates, values and animosities outlined in this section. It was, therefore, with this wider media context in mind that this study was designed and carried out.

### **Research questions**

Following my first viewing of the film – which, to lay my own cards on the table, was shot through with a mixture of great enjoyment (the editing, the kid actors, the music), recognition (places I saw growing up, familiar iconography, known political events) and disappointment (implausible romance, weak women characters, British accents, pseudo-Bollywood ending) – analysis of reviews such as these as well as casual conversations with a number of fellow viewers, new questions began to emerge.

1) Who is more likely to judge the visual and other cinematic pleasures offered by this film positively:

- Re/Viewers familiar with popular Hindi cinema or viewers familiar with India?
- Those with an interest in off-screen politics or those with little interest?
- Those living in India or those living abroad?

- Those who have experienced something akin to shantytown poverty?
- Lower- and middle-middle-class viewers who do not live in slums but have some direct experience of them?
- or transnational urban viewers (carefully excluded from the film's narrative)?

2) What role can anthropological notions of 'insider knowledge' and 'outsider gaze' play in film studies' analyses such as this one: can re/viewers' self-positionings vis-à-vis the film or its subject matter contribute to an understanding of its reception?

3) How do re/viewer's pre-existing worldviews, ideological standpoints and intersecting identities inflect responses to the film?

These questions – which are not necessarily specific to this film, but could be asked about our responses to melodramas which build their narratives around gay American cowboys or Japanese Geishas or American soldiers at war in Iraq – and which are evidently much broader than this study, all aim to explore the relationship between what might be deemed 'insider' knowledge and value judgments made about films purporting to convey such insider knowledge. Relating as they do to people's individual experiences, life trajectories and expertise, these questions did not appear to be answerable by analysing reviews in film journals or by viewers writing on internet movie database. The following section therefore outlines the chosen methodology of this study and the theoretical framework via which analysis of emerging themes was carried out.

### **Data Collection**

While written reviews available online in scholarly and film journals, newspapers and the IMDB, for instance, form the backdrop to ideas in this study, the primary method of data collection was via 25 half-hour qualitative interviews which took place either via skype or face to face and 15 in-depth qualitative questionnaires (administered over the internet)<sup>9</sup> in the Spring and Summer of 2009. Respondents were recruited via requests to random viewers at showings of *Slumdog Millionaire* and other films in Bombay and London, questions to friends circles on a number of social network sites, written requests to randomly selected reviewers on IMDB and verbal requests to auto and taxi drivers and shop assistants in Bombay in the summer of 2009. I ended up recruiting 17 respondents actually living in Bombay, 3 living in the United States, 10 living in the UK and 10 from around Europe and Asia. 17 respondents identified<sup>10</sup> as female and 23 identified as male. In terms of class self-descriptors, saliently, participants in India who were evidently working-class by background, education and/ or current occupation were the least likely to describe themselves as such, using terms like 'doing okay', '50-50' or 'in the middle' to describe their financial circumstances, while a few called themselves 'workers'. In the UK, participants in middle-class or professional

occupations tended to stress that their roots/parents were working class. This qualitative study of 40 interviewees, though far from representative of any particular group, is therefore somewhat diverse in terms of social class, gender, age, nationality, country of residence, cinematic knowledge, education and experience of Hindi cinema. The oldest interviewee was 70 and the youngest 17, but most fall into the 25-50 age group. My work with young viewers in India and the UK over the past ten years was immensely helpful in suggesting ways of approaching specific cinematic topics through what amounted to self-narration (Gergen and Gergen, 1989: 255). While some of the written responses to my questions on *Slumdog* are too brief to fall into this category, some do, although they fall short of the interactive and dialogic narratives achieved through interviewing.

### **Analysis and theoretical interpretation**

Interviews took place in Hindi and/or in English and, while some were written down by respondents the rest remain untranscribed.<sup>11</sup> All were coded for key themes and cross-cutting discourses by me at the time of the interviews and again, subsequently re-coded once all the data had been collected and different types of 'insiderhood' had emerged. Chris Barker and Dariusz Galacinski's work on Discourse Analysis within Cultural Studies proved extremely useful in unpicking levels and layers of discourse in the critical reviews of *Slumdog Millionaire* and connecting these to talk and writing about the film produced in response to my questioning. Further, following their assertion of the significance of interconnected factors such as ethnicity, gender and national identification for respondents, the interviews and written responses were tied firmly to respondents' self-descriptions in this regard. In this I followed Shotter and Gergen (1989) and contributors to their collection *Texts of Identity*. Like Celia Kitzinger (1989: 82) who writes about the discursive construction of lesbian identities, I wished to use this approach to focus not on the accuracy of accounts of identity and identification by research subjects but on the social and political (or in this instance critical and evaluative) functions served in relation to their readings of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* and their responses to the depictions of India and slum children therein. Problematically, given the amount of data collected, it is only possible to pay respectful attention to a handful of accounts in an article such as this one. The others, nevertheless, feature in the findings and conclusions, and their tone or ideas support and complicate the accounts discussed below.

Further, and in particular, notions drawn from critiques of ethnographic film, now circulating in visual anthropology (Martinez 1992; MacDougall 1995; Pink, 2001), provided an interesting lens for examining some of the anxieties caused by the film around notions of representation, class politics, nation and authenticity. While *Slumdog Millionaire* had no overt pretensions to being an ethnographic account of life in Indian slums, and was, in fact, openly touted by its makers as a 'feel-good film', many of its re/viewers implicitly used criteria from ethnography or

realist criteria from social science to evaluate, understand and comment on its qualities and their reactions to it. Sarah Pink's discussion of current scholarship on audiences of ethnographic film and video is illustrative of why this approach can prove fruitful:

Visual anthropologists now pay serious attention to the politics of ethnographic film representation and spectatorship... Wilton Martinez has shown how individuals' readings of ethnographic films are embedded in complex sets of existing power relations and cultural narratives that 'conventional' ethnographic film narratives and pedagogic strategies do not challenge....(2001: 145)

Paying attention, then, to power relations, to pleasures, to individual self-narratives and to the groups of discursive readings emerging from viewings of the film, the following section presents a snapshot of the data collected.

***Going on a journey, being surprised and learning something***

One of the largest groups amongst my respondents (roughly 15 out of the 40) were those who lived primarily in the West and had enjoyed the film and saw it as an example of cinema which has the potential to surprise and teach something previously unknown, to make them think in new ways. Their commentaries on form and content were integrated and are presented here following on from self-descriptions elicited via opening questions. Civic, social and intercultural investments in being *surprised* by films, and in discovering new knowledge through the films they watch, can be seen to flow directly into aspects of the movie that these viewers enjoyed or focused on as being particularly salient for them. All of these are also implicitly political, in line with their self-descriptions as highly educated, and in the cases of the excerpts chosen here, also educators.

***Excerpt R [Written], English***

I grew up in middle class, white, suburban, mid-western America. I am white.... My family was extremely conservative and religious and we attended (Baptist) church three times a week and I went to a private religious school.... There are many fascinating cultural differences [between my life in the west and what I experienced when visiting India] - for example in India people do not follow the notion of waiting in line one person behind the other. This was very frustrating at the time (particularly during a four-hour period of physical confrontation in the Agra train station, trying to buy tickets) but this knowledge has helped me understand better people from different cultures that live in the west. I very much enjoy traveling and all the experiences that global visits bring but am very uncomfortable with what I represent to the people in these countries (generally speaking). I often find myself torn between



a curiosity and a sympathy for people living in poverty and an annoyance at how I am approached. I have assumed that my skin color identifies me as someone from the rich west and with this comes a great deal of guilt. I wish I could just blend in and observe – but instead I become the center of attraction. In India, people would simply stop whatever they were doing, take a seat and stare. How to best handle these situations? I still don't know, but I want to learn...I really enjoyed *Slumdog Millionaire* – it was well-constructed, suspenseful, and made a great story. Mainly I recognized the country that I'd visited briefly. I liked that a great deal, because I recognize that although film may be set in 'real' locations, watching something on the screen is never the same as experiencing it in real life. For example, the smells of a place are not present. On my trip to India, I saw beggars in the street coming up to the cars, particularly in Delhi. *While watching the film* [my emphasis] I was skeptical – and also horrified by the idea that these child beggars were so centrally organized. I thought the depictions of the slums were quite real and of the cities – it reminded me very much of my experience in other Indian cities. But are there adults that are so evil to use orphans for their own gain? I thought that may stir cynical feelings from Western viewers. I also found the story of the main character inspiring – how much he had overcome to make it as far as he did, but the fact that the TV host was so determined to put him in his place – I wondered if this was some kind of commentary on Indian society? Either way, the "little guy" triumphed in the end, which was inspiring, particularly at the end of the film when people all over were gathered around their televisions, cheering for one of their own. The love story was typical and irritating. Beautiful woman is helpless to make her own escape and relies on a man to rescue her. I've come to expect that from big films like this.

In the excerpt above, Viewer R moves through a wide range of emotional investments in watching films, many of which are explicitly connected to her enjoyment of travel and of learning about 'people from different cultures' and 'how to handle' situations in which she is perceived as the rich, white foreigner. The language in which R describes her impressions of places, film sequences and emotions is vivid: 'torn' between 'curiosity', 'sympathy' and 'annoyance'. Being inspired, feeling guilt, scepticism and horror also feature, alongside a sense of recognition that facilitates and enhances her enjoyment of the movie: 'it reminded me very much of my experience of other Indian cities'. Notably, and confirming work done elsewhere on viewers' responses to modality issues in media texts (Ang 1985, Banaji 2006), the notion of realism comes up repeatedly, 'I thought the depictions of the slums were quite real and of the cities'; 'I wondered if this was some kind of commentary on Indian society'. This particular comment also carries within it a clue to the way in which the film has been categorised here as potentially able to illuminate real off-screen circumstances and situations. R's comments on films in general and *Slumdog Millionaire* in particular are connected by

references to and a narration of her travels. Although this was how the questioning set up the discussion, more than two thirds of the viewers I spoke with and wrote to did not respond in this manner, which thus constitutes a peculiarity both of this individual viewer and of a couple of other viewers who share certain characteristics with her, notably that they have experience of living in different cultures and have a strong sense of reflexivity about the intersections of national identification, class and ethnicity prior to viewing the film. Perhaps most interestingly for the purposes of this paper, R expresses a wish to 'just blend in and observe without becoming the centre of attention' while touring other countries. For her, and perhaps for a number of other Western viewers (both White and diasporic), the film became a 'window on the world' that allowed an emotional engagement with uncomfortable and perhaps hidden aspects of India without the accompanying practical complications.

***Excerpt P [Written], English***

I am from a northern English town, male, working class, and traveler ... I grew up not knowing I was working class. Upon going to university I learned that indeed I was.... I have lived in SE Asia and LA, but never in India or South Asia. Clearly the standard of living of the broad mass of humanity in those locations has been a central issue in my adult life since university. I have lived and worked with NGO and Charity organizations alongside nationals in so-called developing countries. The greatest difference with my life in the north and life in the south is the focus on work in the north as contrasted with the focus on relationships in the south. Clearly death is more prevalent in the south. The average age of populations is another difference. The sterility of the north can be contrasted with the heaving fecundity of the south....I have always preferred films that are challenging and experimental and surprising in whichever aspect. If for example I *did not understand something*, (my emphasis) that would be good. I look forward to being surprised. To the scenery, to the implications and possibility of showing a new view on something. I have never been to a popular Bollywood movie but I have seen some movies from India...I saw the Academy DVD of *Slumdog*, the day after the Oscars. I've seen it or sections of it maybe 10 times. I saw the film at home first then at school with my students and staff the other 9 times. I really didn't give a toss about what it would be. I had heard maybe a little Bollywood, so I was interested to see how singing and dancing would weave in. I was told it's a gangster movie!! *Slumdog* reminded me of *Oliver Twist*, *Pulp Fiction* (editing) *City of God* ... I loved the political commentary on torture, on media manipulation, on globalism, and on the comparison of official "trivial" knowledge and on the lived organic or connected knowledge. I loved the simple structure to the screen play. The color and texture. The reactions were similar but not as poetic. Moments that I remember are... The shit and the star. The blinding. 'This was our slum'. The gun and the rescue. The bathroom clue and double bluff. The

use of child stars was extra painful and the central characters somewhat hackneyed, but I was glad that the issues of wealth and poverty were getting an airing and I found the depictions of India beautiful.

Similar to R in his enjoyment of the film, but embedded in a different sociopolitical contexts from his working class childhood onwards, P's comments focus as much on the conventions of cinema – 'I have always preferred films that are challenging and experimental and surprising' – and of Bollywood in particular, 'I had heard maybe a little Bollywood, so I was interested to see how singing and dancing would weave in'. Having no specific expectations of the film ('I really didn't give a toss what it would be'), P was then enthralled by it and has seen it or part of it nearly ten times, with different audiences – family, colleagues and students. The films he compares it to are all ones that describe, in sometimes satirical ways, disparities of wealth, power and justice. The themes that animate the film for P are thus overtly critical of existing social structures; what he sees as 'the political commentary on torture, on media manipulation, on global[isation] and on the comparison of official "trivial" knowledge [with] lived organic or connected knowledge'. Although P's commentary is at times excessive in its descriptions of common conceptions of the contrasts between India (or the global south) and the West (the heaving fecundity of the south), his history as a teacher and a worker for NGOs in South-East Asia means that he has gained insider knowledge both of 'the global South' and of poverty in different settings ('I grew up not knowing I was working class. Upon going to university I learned that indeed I was'). Comments made about learning from the film therefore are less about poverty in India *per se* and more about the cinematic conventions that represent something he is interested in from a personal and political perspective.

Viewer Q, like viewers R and P, liked the film, is also more conscious of the surrounding hype and how it affected his expectations:

***Excerpt Q: [Written], English***

My mother is a house-mom, my father is unemployed since I was 2, so rather low class. Money difficulties throughout my youth.... Mine is a very religious family, father is imam, mother wears head scarf. Every problem had to be solved religiously... I reacted against that, kept thinking, and now agnostic, since my 23<sup>rd</sup> year. Politically rather leftist, although I have some more 'right' views, although in my opinion they are not right but left. I vote left nevertheless. In films I look for the surprise, something that makes you think, laugh etc... Something new. Something well said, well acted... The only thing I know about these films [Bollywood] is they are very long, a lot of dancing and music, love plots, tradition versus modernisation, etc. The reason why I hesitated to see it was the way it was presented in the Belgian media, and especially in the weekly film

section on Wednesday during the news on the Flemish public broadcast VRT. It was presented as if it was just a kind of success story, very media related. He plays a televised game, wins and hurray all for the best. I don't like the game-show either, never watch it when it is on, although I generally like quizzes. It's a bit fake. The trailers they showed seemed so superficial, so Hollywood, or rather Disney... I was surprised that it was better than I thought, the song at the end seemed too much 'made', it was like an obligation, with little reference to the rest of the movie. I was surprised that there were more layers, more depth than showed before in the trailers. I felt rather as it showed a country in transition, separate worlds, rich and poor – new buildings versus slums. The fact that the mobster kids, from the slums, are only able to be in those new buildings when they are still being built, was a nice contrast.

Q's background, like that of P, is working class and, more explicitly, his youth was lived in a context of continued financial insecurity. He too lives primarily in the West. However, unlike R and P, Q is of ethnic minority origin, and has experienced life as a working class immigrant, outside the mainstream majority community in his Belgian home city. He has worked with refugees and has some experience of Hindi films, which have not made him a fan. This experience of a marginal position is reflected by a quick and critical reception of the hype around *Slumdog Millionaire* in the mainstream media of his country of residence. Although he makes no connection between discourses in the Belgian media about the success of the film/its protagonist in a media quiz show and his own experiences of childhood poverty, it is clear that the film's running motif about financial success is a weakness rather than a strength. His awareness of class contrast colours the moments that stand out for him, 'The fact that the mobster kids, from the slums, are only able to be in those new buildings when they are still being built, was a nice contrast'. In a similar vein, his comment that the programme *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* is 'fake' and hence unlike other quiz shows links neatly to his distaste for the hype, the Disney-like superficiality of what was shown of the film in its previews. Nevertheless, he finds things to like in the film, particularly what he takes to be its less obvious commentary, played out through visual reference, of class politics and uneven modernisation in India.

### **Nothing Special**

Unsurprisingly, for a number of viewers in this study, it emerged that the film was 'nothing special'. They neither liked it immensely, nor disliked it intensely. There were a few young women in this group, but the majority were youngish men (in the 15-35 age group), who had extensive experience of Hindi cinema, had grown up in and/or still lived in South Asia (and Bombay in particular) and who had experienced or still experience life within a working class community. These young men could be classed as 'insiders' in the sense that they are intimately familiar with a number of the contextual aspects of the film – including, in some

cases, the violence and the childhood in a slum setting. In the three excerpts that follow from this group, distinctions are clearly drawn between their insider knowledge (either in relation to Hindi cinema or to working-class life in Bombay/ elsewhere) and the surmised ignorance or inexperience of the film's primary target audience and possibly its director.

**Excerpt A [Written, English]**

I'm Indian, born and grew up in Bombay and I live there but I've lived in other places too. I've been watching Bollywood movies since I was a child. The impression of a typical Bollywood movie is that it is loud. Lots of drama, comedy, emotions, colours, music, songs – everything is hyper. I watched *Slumdog* once. Downloaded it from the internet! It was a very good copy. I was curious as it was talked about a lot and so I wanted to watch it. I liked it. But I was disappointed by the ending, which could have been more interesting. It was interesting how the background of the main character unfolds during this game show and how it helps him win it. I loved the kids in the film. India as a location was good. The kids were good too. The representations of poverty were quite real. Key moments I remember were the kids having fun playing cricket and the game show as well... I also think that for the west, Bollywood itself is a genre and this film was a different experience for them – if it was made by an Indian it wouldn't have been noticed!

A, who has grown up in India and has a both personal and professional knowledge of cinema and of Hindi films in particular, writes of his disappointment at the ending and his feeling that had the film been 'made by an Indian it wouldn't have been noticed'. There were aspects of the film he liked very much, such as the scenes with the child actors and India as a location and aspects that he felt accorded with his experiences and were 'quite real'. Overall, however, A's curiosity about the film was satisfied by one viewing of and much of his commentary focuses on what he believes others think about Bollywood and about *Slumdog Millionaire*. He has lived in the UK, and his comment that for the West 'Bollywood is a genre' and that this made *Slumdog Millionaire* 'a different experience for them' is an extrapolation from his experience discussing 'Bollywood' in the West. Such cross-over knowledge and experience of such a diverse range of contexts was rare in the group interviewed in this study, and in some ways A became the touchstone defining a particular form of 'insider' knowledge across the study.

An 'insider' in a slightly different way, B recounts not just his own feelings about the film, but also those of his wife:

**Excerpt B [Spoken, Face-to-Face, Hindi]**

I've lived in Bombay all my life – never been out of the city. I'm twenty-seven and I share this auto (rickshaw) with my brother-in-law. I've been driving since I'm seventeen. I live in a shanty-town in (names suburb) and my family lives there also. I saw *that Millionaire* film with my wife when it released because she and I share a passion for films. We must have seen more than one hundred films together. We saw it but we didn't go back to see it again. Usually we go to see good films again and again. We found the children very good – they were not actors, did you know that? They were just real kids. The director must have done a lot of work with them, credit to him. One thing that irritated my wife very much with the film was that it is named about people who live in the huts (jhopdis) but actually the children become orphans and most of the time they are without a home in the film, wandering from place to place. I grew up here (in a shanty-town) and the worst we do is we drink a bit we don't join in a gang and we didn't suffer like some of the children on the street. Their life is ten times as bad. Maybe this director did not understand the difference between us, because we are all poor in his eyes and he wants to make the American people (sic) feel pity on us all. There were some bad things shown in the film but these are nothing unusual for us [poor people in India]. Have you seen *Company* or *Zeher*? So many Hindi pictures are made on interesting topics.

In B's description of his viewing and his own history, the fact that he watches and enjoys Hindi films stands out. He positions himself as an ardent film fan, but claims no authority further than that of knowing which films he likes and which do not merit a second viewing. He names his wife as a viewing companion and speaks about her also in his description of responses to the film (We saw it but we didn't go back...; We found the children very good...). However, at one point he clearly distinguishes his wife's opinion – and her feeling that the film smudges out important distinctions between different strata and lives amongst those who are poor in urban India. He goes on to support his wife's opinion about *Slumdog's* clichéd reduction of urban slum poverty to a gangster-victim binary by referring to his own experience: 'the worst we do is drink a bit we don't join in a gang'. Here both knowledge of films and of life work to de-exoticise the narrative and techniques of *Slumdog*. Here also another common discourse emerges that views the director as 'inauthentic' in a way that, perhaps, even the most elite Hindi film directors might not be regarded. And this, as Atticus Nairn points out, is a complex matter, however one feels about the film itself:

*Slumdog Millionaire* is *City of Joy* for the twenty-first century, informed by an anthropological attempt at readdressing inequalities of representation by "giving" the camera to the Other and erasing the need for white protagonists – well almost. If

Boyle's ethnicity was different would all this discussion be taking place?

[\(www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/03/09/rethinking-post-colonial-representation-after-slumdog-millionaire/\)](http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/03/09/rethinking-post-colonial-representation-after-slumdog-millionaire/)

F, a viewer raised in relative poverty in a small village in South-Asia exhibits some similar feelings and opinions:

**Excerpt F [Spoken, Face-to-Face, English]**

I grew up in Bangladesh, in a village, not Dhaka, how did you know?...My father is dead. I have an uncle in Dhaka, so yes, I have been there and it is not quite like Bombay but it is – there are same kinds of places [slums]. I've never been to India. I just came to UK something, now maybe three years ago. I've worked in this place (London fast food restaurant) since then. I went to see *Slumdog Millionaire* because it was like a Bollywood film and I am a big fan of Bollywood films. Did I like it? Why not? What was there not to like? It had a happy ending, didn't it, so we can forget the bad things shown in the beginning – they actually do not leave much of an impression on the mind because it happens very fast and we know that he is telling the story now so he is alive. He didn't die in childhood, so that is good. But actually, now you ask, I found [the film] quite normal [average]. The music was not much good... the songs were very few. Then it became boring with the same question answer, question answer again and again – that thing I found interesting at the beginning I found tiring by the end. In the middle I was thinking about getting up for my shift in the morning and I was wanting to sleep (laughs)... Yes, I was alone watching it. I prefer to watch real Bollywood films – *Singh is King!*

F's pointedly sardonic summary of one of the film's significant pulling points – its telling of the horrors of Jamal's childhood in flashback, so the audience is comforted by the fact that 'we know that he is telling the story now so he is alive' – is striking. It is possible to see what F means when he says 'so we can forget the bad things shown in the beginning'. The events taking place in the 'present', for instance, the gangster Jamal's brother is involved with or the policemen questioning Jamal, are so much less intensely unsettling than the riots, or the cartel who turn orphans into disabled beggars. As in B's commentary, F's comments about the film are framed by the reality of a working-class life – driving a rickshaw/waking for an early shift in a kitchen. These comments are also set within a shared Hindi cinema fandom, by whose standards *Slumdog Millionaire* falls somewhat short ('Usually we go to see good films again and again'/I prefer to watch real Bollywood films'). In a similar manner to several of the other working class South Asian interviewees in this study, F began by making neutral or politely positive statements about the film, hoping to ascertain my taste and impressions

and not to contradict me. However, by the end of our interview, which in his case was conducted in an intermittent manner as he served customers at his place of work, his feelings about the film had become much more apparent – from ‘what’s not to like’ he had moved to ‘boring’, ‘tiring’ and ‘not real Bollywood’.

N, in an almost identical manner recounts her viewing (fragmented by work), her enthusiasm for (Hindi) films and her divided feelings about *Slumdog Millionaire* (an ‘okay’ picture):

**Excerpt N: Hindi, Face-to-face**

I am 24 and I live in the local juggi (shantytown) with my husband, he has a vegetable stall. I clean for six families, but this is my best job. She lives out of town and comes once a month. I have two children in the village with my mother. My son is eight and he misses me very much. My daughter is two. I don’t see her so often. I last saw my son five months ago. I feel like crying all the time when I think of them, but what can we do? There’s no place for them in our hut here, already my husband’s sister lives with us [inaudible]. I saw that *Slumdog* picture two times when I was in Mrs G’s house, her family was watching it. I didn’t watch the whole thing then, but later I watched the rest of it. I missed some parts. I love to watch films. I see Hindi films whenever I can but that is not a lot because I can’t go on my own and my husband is only free in the daytime when I am at work so he then goes on his own to the pictures but sometimes we watch on TV at night and sometimes I go with my sister-in-law on Sunday. *Slumdog* seemed like an okay ‘picture’ (English). I could understand how it showed the life of common people. You don’t get that so much in the Hindi films. Half of me thinks well you don’t want to just go to the pictures to see crying and sad stuff like that with children begging and what happens to the poor (bechare) girls. The other half of me thinks that it is good to show that as well, so everyone knows how it is. Of course it is not always that people think about what they watch is it? Some of them might just watch that for fun. In fact everyone was just waiting for the poor boy to become rich. It was in his stars, so he won. Most of us are not so fortunate. In the end I think I would not waste my money to see a film like that, I would prefer to see a Hindi film. But I did cry when the children’s mother was killed because I thought of my son, and what would happen if that was him and he was alone and I felt very bad.

N talked much more about her own life than some of the other viewers, and obviously found this painful. Her separation from her two children and her anxiety about them were issues to which she returned several times during our discussion. Her comment that during the film ‘everyone was just waiting for the poor boy to become rich ... most of us are not so fortunate’ sums up her sense of the film’s core weakness. However, unlike some of the other viewers in



this category, she reflects on the process of viewing itself, rather than on the ideological stances of viewers (some watch for enjoyment, some for the message, some want to ignore any message) and on the fact that Hindi films rarely show the life of the 'common people', finding in the film some merit as well as some emotional resonance. Her comment 'it was in his stars so he won' sounded straightforward – almost as if she believed in fate – but it could have been ironic or even slightly accusing: a director who does not believe in fate using fate as a gimmick to reinforce for most poor viewers the uselessness of trying to change anything in their lives. 'D - It is written'.

### **Unable to 'let go'**

Another subset of viewers within my study were united by their dissatisfaction with the film. I quote here only two excerpts, as these were some of the longest and most heated analyses provoked by my questions. These excerpts are characterized less by the implicit class politics that animates some of the preceding accounts and more by quite specific and detailed references to aspects of *Slumdog Millionaire* which prevented these viewers from enjoying it or relaxing and being entertained during their viewing.

### **Excerpt M: Hindi, face-to-face**

About me ... I'm 39, I work part-time, my husband is quite strict but I can work from home and I also get to watch a lot of movies. We are from a good – I mean middle class family. It's surprising to me how much everyone likes this picture. I went with my husband and son (he is grown up) and his friend. We paid a lot for the tickets and I felt that we had wasted the money. Yes, it shows a very bad side of Mumbai. We all know Hindi pictures do not tell the whole story. Yes, some people live like that also. But that was not my main reason for not liking. It mixed up everything – children and poor people and gangs and rioting and religion and brothers and betrayal and begging. It never stopped to consider each thing. Life is a mixture. What I like about Hindi pictures is that they don't just remain in the same style – there are so many new and interesting topics coming out. Have you seen *Dev* (about riots)? *Kabhi Alvida na Kehna* (about adultery)? Have you seen *Kaminey* (about gambling, drugs, horse racing)...? I could go on talking to you all night about the issues in these pictures. But this Danny Boyle *Slumdog* picture became so famous. I was upset about the way this picture got so many awards but it had no heart, unlike our pictures. I couldn't relax when I was watching. I was very furious and irritated.

M, who locates herself as middleclass (and is indeed middleclass in terms of education and income) contests almost every aspect of *Slumdog Millionaire* from its representations and its structures of feeling to the way in which it appears to her to have grabbed praise and renown

from Hindi films which are more deserving. She situates her criticisms of the film within the context of the debates she has encountered about its supposed misrepresentation of India and Indians, its portrayal of unmitigated filth and corruption, distancing herself from what she thinks might be interpreted as middle-class chauvinism and narrow-mindedness ('We all know Hindi pictures do not tell the whole story'). M's critique raises issues related to a perceived correspondence between reality and the film and related to the film's style ('it has no heart'). Like some of the viewers in the previous group, she points out that if realism or social critique is something one looks for in films, there are Hindi films too that deliver, in a variety of styles and genres. I debated issues around social class and representation with M, and found her somewhat unwilling to dwell on anything that appeared to place a burden of responsibility for poverty in India on the shoulders of the middle-classes. However, in this excerpt, her critique is leveled at the exploitative way in which she felt the director and the film use stock ingredients (or masala) to spice up their takings ('It mixed up everything – children and poor people and gangs and rioting and religion and brothers and betrayal and begging. It never stopped to consider each thing') and in this critique M is not alone. Several other interviewees commented on the pace of the film in dealing with the 'serious' issues, that 'might entertain some people but made me first sea-sick and then just sick' (as one viewer asserted). Evidently, a number of viewers felt the film's voice and perspective was that of a voyeuristic outsider, one who grabbed and narrated bits and pieces for effect but did not have any lasting emotional investment in the subject matter of the film. M's 'fury', lack of relaxation and 'irritation' and her feeling of having wasted her money may indeed in part relate to the way in which the film was written about as such a success story rather than to the film itself. But what was variously described as a 'lack of heart', 'British coldness' and as 'exploitation-for-profit' had little to do with any avowed feeling of insult at the representations of India mentioned in the opening section of this paper and has to be seen as a legitimate – if not entirely justified – critique. Cultural critic Chitra Sundaram in an ironic commentary writes much the same thing: 'Bizarrely lucky for Mumbai, India's much flaunted capital of commerce: one of its biggest sores – "Asia's largest slum" – gets bared to the world, and it pays off handsomely. (For whom, though?)' (Sundaram 2009, 4).

The first group of viewers quoted in this paper – R, P and Q – are outsiders to the film's context in numerous ways but relate to and enjoy it because to them it both entertains and informs in an ironic and socially critical way. T is also an outsider to India and to Hindi films. She engages fully with *Slumdog's* setting and imaginary only to be 'embarrassed' and 'depressed':

**Excerpt T [Face-to-Face, English]**

I'm 48, single, female. I grew up in South Africa and came to UK when I met my ex-husband. I should explain probably that my knowledge of poverty like that shown in *Slumdog* dates back to my time in SA. I was growing up at a time of struggle and economic transition, I recognize some of that from the film, the buildings built on places that have been bulldozed so that you can wipe out the memory of the people who lived there before and the people who made them live like that. I'm not saying it is the same in Mumbai, there's no apartheid, but there is a kind of class partition, at least that's what I believe. I know people who lived in Shanty-towns, slums, whatever you call them here. It was not as ghastly as shown [in *Slumdog*] in some ways, because there is more of a sense of community and your friends are there, and probably your aunty, and many people you know, but it was more ghastly too. To describe this to you, the only thing I can say is that the film hero would have to be a girl to understand the kinds of fear women, young women go through when there is nothing but a piece of cloth or tin between you and being raped, or being robbed. It is not like that everywhere but it is like that a lot. I worked at a rape crisis centre for some years. *Slumdog Millionaire* – you can tell full well that it is made by a man, and for men and it has very unexceptional characterizations of masculinity and femininity – that is something that I usually wish films to challenge if they are to grip my emotions. How can I explain this? I watched it, and I was enjoying it a bit – rather I felt entertained, and I was also feeling very upset at the same time and angry with the film maker because he puts across the boys' experience and the men's experience but it isn't real. It is pretending to be something. And I know this because of the girl. They just drop her in the middle just like that. She is the bravest character and then suddenly she is a nothing, a pathetic woman who needs to be saved by someone who looks much younger and weaker than her. One brother is physically strong. One brother is mentally powerful. But the girl is pathetic. An object ... how can I explain? I didn't want her to be shown so beautiful when she grew up – it is very hard to stay looking like that when you live the life she lived, so it was all a lie.... And the ending! I could honestly say I had stopped enjoying the film, I was no longer gripped, I was just embarrassed and depressed. I recognized this kind of film immediately like the one where there is a happy ending because finally the African boy can marry the white girl – Romeo and Juliet – while apartheid continues around them.

While her comment that the film is 'pretending' to an authenticity of experience that it fails to represent strikes a chord with earlier critiques, for me most poignant of all here is T's sense of the ways in which sites of struggle and oppression are erased or censored in similar ways in countries like India and South Africa as neoliberal economic policies are entrenched by the elites. Her second point too, that the film may seem to play fair in representing some poorer

Indian boys and men, but that it does so at the expense of poor Indian girls and women: ‘that the film hero would have to be a girl to understand the kinds of fear women, young women go through when there is nothing but a piece of cloth or tin between you and being raped, or being robbed’ speaks to the experience of a number of other women viewers. Although I myself do not feel that the complex and terrifying experiences of young boys living on urban streets are revealed by the film, Latika’s apparently passive acceptance of things required of her by men throughout the film does indeed merit scrutiny. T’s commentary intimates that insiderhood can transcend nationality and ethnicity, as well as age, class and place. A 48-year-old Black South African woman with a higher degree steps across space and time to link aspects of *Slumdog Millionaire* to her experiences and those of her friends. In doing so, she becomes acutely aware of what she and a number of other viewers term the film’s core weaknesses – its hackneyed representations of gender (‘the girl is pathetic. An object ... how can I explain’); its refusal to allow any grown up women space within the narrative (‘I didn’t want her to be shown so beautiful when she grew up – it is very hard to stay looking like that when you live the life she lived, so it was all a lie’); its individual solution to collective problems of violence and poverty (‘I recognized this kind of film immediately like the one where there is a happy ending because finally the African boy can marry the white girl – Romeo and Juliet – while apartheid continues around them’). This sense of an ending that does not match the beginning, and that undermines the avowed motives for the film’s initial representations of slum life has been picked up by other critics, among them American sociologist Bernard Beck. Beck tries to understand the film’s success in the United States by placing it amongst those narratives which (intentionally or inadvertently) find new ways of justifying and normalising inequality:

[*Slumdog Millionaire*] allows us to rejoice in the ultimate success of members of society whose oppression is now apparent to everyone. Not only do we feel free of the unreasonable prejudice against them; we are amazed and chagrined to recall how they were considered worthy of such ill treatment until now. So far are we from feeling trapped by the inexorable logic of inequality built into the story of society itself, we wonder that anyone could have thought that way. The poor, orphaned, exploited Muslim youth living in the worst corners of the glittering international city of Mumbai is as dear to the audience as any hero could be. And we are reassured that merit, love, and a good heart will find a way to overcome such flagrant and insufferable bigotry. In American culture more than any other, we are charmed by the success of individual perseverance. That’s the kind of happy ending we believe in’. (Beck, 2009)

This commentary and Beck’s earlier comment that ‘[s]ocieties that rely on inequality to organize the complex activities of daily life require explanations and justifications’ suggests that in his view *Slumdog Millionaire* is ultimately a reactionary fable. It invites sympathy for the

underdog's sufferings only when such an underdog is a single tame individual who can legitimately be rewarded. In this, the film is on par with many Hindi films that do not deal at all with issues of wealth and poverty.

### **Discussion**

When we encounter *Slumdog Millionaire* through its re/viewers, a number of discourses on filmic style and social authenticity emerge. These are sometimes predictable and sometimes surprising. Like the viewers who watch films for what is new, for what can surprise and teach, my pursuit of viewers' narratives is largely motivated by an interest in the unpredictable responses. The ones I expect, however, also have the power to enlighten and confirm. Listening to interviews such as the one with T (previous section), I am acutely aware of the fact that many of us seem to be taking this film very *seriously* – in fact taking the cultural artifact of film in deadly earnest, as if it represents an intervention in politics rather than 'mere entertainment'. Looking back through the transcripts and notes to find instances of people who had watched the film as 'mere entertainment' I discovered one or two, but these were exceptions, rather than the rule. In my study at least, most viewers' accounts revolved around meanings connected both to their own experiences of reality and of film and to their pre-existing ideological frameworks. In almost all cases these are deeply political – whether with reference to cultural politics and globalization, or to the politics of religion, gender and social justice. So, what if anything do these re/viewers tell us about films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* and about film more generally? Are insiders critical and outsiders complimentary? Are some viewers vacuous dupes while others are perceptive critics? Does nationalism and ethnicity colour all critiques of the film?

Looking across the group of viewers in this study, an intersection of cultural knowledge and social class clearly inflects the ways in which this particular film's depictions and stylistic features are enjoyed or rejected. In tandem, there are evident connections between the ways in which respondents encounter films collectively and the ways in which they allow themselves to feel and make meaning at an individual level. Partly because they are keenly aware that some re/viewers experience *Slumdog Millionaire* as an entertaining but authentic account of social reality in impoverished urban India – a spicy, modern ethnographic film – others recoil from it. The thought that others might think they have learnt something authentic about India from the film, or something about slum life, clearly makes some viewers cringe more than the film as an artifact. On a similar note, whether or not the film sets itself up as 'feel-good movie of the year (2008)', the fact that it made millions by representing the gravest poverty emphasizes its hypocrisy and inadequacy for some viewers. Most of these critics, these unimpressed, detached or neutral viewers, could be described as cultural 'insiders' in relation to Hindi cinema and to this film's subject matter. And yes, it is true; this is a simplistic and perhaps misleading description in the world of popular cultural consumption.

Even working with such a simple notion of insiders and outsiders as an axis along which to code a range of perceptions and declarations about the content and form of *Slumdog Millionaire*, it is possible to see that vis-à-vis the film there are a range of different ways of *being an insider or an outsider*. Clearly, knowledge of street-life and poverty counts as one type of 'insider' experience while knowledge of the conventions of cinema generally and Hindi cinema more specifically counts as a very different type of 'insider' knowledge. Knowledge and experience of poverty or working-class life differ in the West and in India, in ethnic minority communities in the West and amongst communities in locations such as the Philippines, Bangladesh or South Africa. The commonalities between these experiences, however, appear to be a factor connecting a sizable portion – perhaps twenty viewers – of my study who, for various reasons, recognize and feel connected to or recognize but distance themselves from the representation of the children's experiences in *Slumdog Millionaire*. The children who act in the film were seen as one of the film's most praiseworthy features even by less enthusiastic viewers. Overlapping this knowledge but quite different is experience of Hindi films and filmmaking. A smaller proportion of my respondents had such accumulated fan, producer or viewer experience, and almost uniformly they were less congratulatory about and less enamored of the film. Basically, they could take it or leave it. One could see this as a more sophisticated view of the film that positions it accurately between Hollywood and 'Bollywood'. But this is not the whole story. Simply thinking of insiders (viewers, reviewers or directors) as those with more or greater knowledge and experience on which to base judgments about 'authenticity' does not do justice to this or any other film.

Quite understandably a number of viewers spoke about how they were engaged by aspects or sequences of the film but were sceptical about the neatness of the ending. The lack of solidarity and the shallowness of the success depicted, while pleasing for some was also irritating to others. As one viewer put it: 'Feel-Good film? The ending was the only feel-good aspect of the film and I hated it'. The number of different positions from which pleasure and entertainment are experienced and constructed in relation to the film is at once constrained and multiplied by its public (marketing) and critical context. Those who might simply have dismissed the film as good or bad entertainment engaged more fully with its narrative and representations because it was a commercial and critical success. The opinions most heard in the public debate about *Slumdog Millionaire* were generally not particularly nuanced – and regardless of what they said, they helped to market the film. This brought it to the attention of more viewers as in its apparent popularity in turn has spawned a number of de facto ethnographic films about Bombay slums and slum children.<sup>12</sup> But viewer discussions of the film outside the limelight elicit critiques about life and cultural production that would not otherwise have been made.

## Conclusion

Discourses around the ethnicity of *Slumdog Millionaire*'s director, which played a role in polarizing opinion and drove yet more viewers to see the film, are ultimately not the primary concern of most viewers in the study discussed here. Ethnicity itself or rather some particular, essential Western and Non-Western way of viewing did not stand out as much during in-depth discussions as it threatened to in media soundbites or in the early reviews of the film.

Representation, however, proved to be an issue that could not be sidestepped. Discussions of representation – which included both overt and more guarded questions about *ways of seeing the world* – provided a focal point for those viewers interested in gender, ethnicity and justice as well as globalization, poverty and childhood. Although the group of viewers in this paper is too small to provide any statistically significant pointers with regard to gender and reception, it may be interesting that only women interviewees commented on the misrepresentation of women by the film and decried the pathetic excuse for a woman character. Perhaps this was just too obvious a fact to get in the way of most viewers' enjoyment. Few interviewees, however, failed to comment on the child actors. And this, for me as for a large portion of the people I interviewed, is one of the film's unquestionable strengths. It takes a group of disenfranchised people in a much represented country, India – working class children – who are by and large given meager space in either fiction or non-fiction media or in civic life, and acknowledges their existence.

Whatever the film's failings in representation and emotion, this cannot be a bad thing for the millions of children falling into this category. Growing up without ever seeing yourself or someone like you represented coherently in any fictional cultural form – particularly at a historical moment when cultural representations circulate via the most ubiquitous technologies and almost all leisure is given over to their consideration – has many possible consequences, psychological, social and educational. Some of these consequences are described passionately by bell hooks in her piece on Black female spectators of Hollywood films in the 1950s and 60s. I have written elsewhere (Banaji 2010) of the urgent need for the realistic, nuanced and wide-ranging representations of children from different classes, communities and locations in India. In this context, *Slumdog Millionaire*, like its (more downbeat) predecessor *Salaam Bombay* (1988, Dir. Mira Nair) plays a role in introducing relatively psychologically coherent and appealing Indian child characters to an international audience in the context of a film that successfully negotiated, even transcended, a usually entrenched popular culture/elite culture divide. There is no doubt that *Slumdog Millionaire* could have been more emotionally realistic, respectful and moving in its treatment of its subject. There is no doubt that many reviewers were and still are ill-informed about Bollywood and about wider Indian cinema – and that they judge from positions of ignorance. But whether greater knowledge on the part of reviewers, affective engagement and respect on the part of the director would have curtailed or increased *Slumdog*'s appeal for the broad range of

viewers encountering it is something that another film, and another director trialing such subject matter, will have to discover.

At a broader political level, and returning to the question of whether *Slumdog Millionaire* lends itself more problematically than other recent popular films in the West to charges of orientalism, it is worth considering some people's tendency to view *Slumdog Millionaire* as entertainment but also as ethnographic documentary within a broader historical and theoretical context. The reflections of several writers in Stokes' and Maltby's collection, *Hollywood Abroad* (2004) emphasise that the use of popular fiction films to 'access' and gaze at 'the other' is distinctly not a one-way process, although the actual power of those who gaze and those represented on screen varies widely in different situations and should always be borne in mind. For instance, writing of popular films and colonial audiences in Central Africa, Charles Ambler notes that 'African audiences often disturbed European officials by the ways that they used material from films to make judgments about the outside world, the nature of imperialism and the character of European culture' (2004: 145). In particular, Ambler stresses that particularly in respect to judgments about the character of White women as a whole, European and Colonial film censors were most anxious that Western films might give 'natives' the wrong impression of European women's morality. The moviegoers in Ambler's study clearly did not simply view fiction films as entertainment but also sought in them opportunities for social engagement and critique – some of which was directed at colonial oppressors, some of which can only be seen as authoritarian in and of itself.

Likewise, Nezhir Erdogan, writing more of the whole institution of cinema rather than of individual cinematic moments, in the context of conflicting national cultures and settings, argues that '[w]herever national culture has to articulate a difference and fantasy has to play on this difference, the distance between the object... and the subject must be continuously and carefully maintained and disavowed at the same time' (2004: 126). Arguably, this dialectic in opinion formation between (national, rational) self and the (exotic or despised) other is common to ethnographic documentary and to fiction film, thus making it far less noteworthy than it might seem when some viewers apply an overtly ethnographic or sociological imagination in assessing *Slumdog Millionaire*. I suggest, then, that instead of simply accusing Danny Boyle's film of contributing to orientalist discourses – which it does at times, for a variety of reasons mentioned by viewers in this article and for some which are not – it is equally important to recognize the moments in his film and in others like it that draw us into dialogues, both real and imaginary but always political, about things and with people we never realized we hold at arms' length.<sup>13</sup>



### **Biographical Note**

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

#### **About you**

- Tell me something about yourself.  
(Where did you grow up? Your race/ethnicity. What class you think you are from and why. What do you do now? How would you classify your political views if you had to? Is sexuality an important issue in your life?)
- Do you live in or have you ever travelled/lived in South Asia, South, Central or Latin America or Africa? (Say a bit about when/where and what your impressions were. In your opinion, were there any notable differences between people and your life in the Europe/America and your life in South Asia/South America/Africa?)
- Have you ever been to India? If yes, in what capacity – to live, work, be a tourist, etc?
- Have you ever been to Bombay? If yes, for how long and describe what you recollect of your impressions of the city.

#### **About you and cinema**

- Are you an experienced film viewer? What's your preferred style of cinema?
- What do you look forward to most in a movie?
- Have you ever been to see Hindi popular films (Bollywood)? If yes, can you describe a few of your experiences of film viewing. If no, could you give me an idea of what you think about 'Bollywood' and where you got those impressions from?

#### **About you and Slumdog general (if you remember, of course!)**

- Had you heard about the film before you saw it? What had you heard/read/seen?
- How many times have you seen the film?
- Where did you see it first and with whom?
- What kind of film/plot/experience were you expecting when you went to see Slumdog?
- Did Slumdog Millionaire remind you of any other films? Could you name two, if yes.

#### **About you and Slumdog – specific**

- Can you describe your reactions as you watched the film and just after you finished

viewing.

- Were these reactions similar to those of the people watching it with you? Did you discuss the film?
- Did you feel differently about the film (if you watched it more than once)
- Can you describe how you feel about the film now, on reflection:

- o The plot
- o The main characters
- o The stars/actors
- o The cinematography and style
- o The music
- o The depiction of India as a location
- o The use of slum children as actors
- o The representations of children/
- o The representations of gangsters
- o The representations of religious pogroms/ riots
- o The representations of poverty and wealth
- o Key moments in the film that you focus on when recollecting it
- o The first twenty minutes
- o The last twenty minutes
- o The 'who wants to be a millionaire' format.
- o The romance
- o Language use and dialogue in the film
- o Gender issues
- o The director
- o Anything else...

**About you and your response to Slumdog millionaire:**

- I would like you to tell me if you think there are any particular aspects of your responses that you'd like to explain to me in relation to
  - o specific experiences you have had in your life that I don't know about and/or
  - o the way the film was and has been hyped and/or
  - o Any of the other aspects of your life and identity that you've described to me.

**Lastly:**

- Does it matter to you whether I felt the same way as you did about the film?
- If people feel very differently about films than you, do you put that down to a) individual tastes b) their lack or amount of life experience c) their differences in film

viewing knowledge and experience d) fundamental aspects of their identity such as their age, class, race and gender?

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<sup>1</sup> Take, for instance, these three contrasting reviews of the film:

'The most interesting and satisfying section of the film treats Jamal's early childhood in the Mumbai slums. One aerial shot, in particular, makes a strong impression as the camera pulls back revealing an impossible number of shacks with rusted tin roofs. One is staggered by the wretched conditions, the number of the dwellings and how close each one is to the next. In another of the film's stronger moments, the predominantly Muslim community is invaded by Hindu-chauvinist thugs. The horror of the moment is communicated with feeling, although the film lacks social and historical context regarding Hindu extremism in the country. These images, and others showing an orphaned Jamal and his brother Salim living in makeshift tents on a landfill or sleeping in empty railroad boxcars to avoid a rainstorm, are significant and valuable. They have clearly made an impact on many viewers, despite the serious limitations of the film's approach.' (Hiram Lee, *World Socialist Website*, [www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/slum-j16.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/slum-j16.shtml))

'The fairytale power of the film is the way Boyle manages to capture the evolution of the city through the eyes of a child. It's visually astonishing. The film gets under the skin of the city on every imaginable level. The cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle is an insouciant genius with a camera. You could hang his lush stills of garbage heaps, frowning waifs and skeletal tower blocks in any respectable art gallery. By the same token the film must have been murder to edit....The director has never been shy of manipulating emotions and characters to crank out the maximum screen emotion. The scented backdrops and flavours of Mumbai dilute the crude liberties that Boyle occasionally inflicts on the melodrama.' (*The Times*, James Christopher, [entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/film\\_reviews/article5461351.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/film_reviews/article5461351.ece)).

'I am beginning to see the same annoying trend in the backlash to *Slumdog Millionaire*, a truly remarkable film that is starting to become the victim of its own popularity. Discovering few faults with the actual film but unable to embrace a film so unabashedly uplifting, pretentious critics have reverted to the hoary Kubrickian argument that the only movie you can make about terrible subjects like the Holocaust, 9/11, or the ghettos of Mumbai is a movie of utter despair. This line of reasoning has no merit whatsoever, but fuck me if they're not going to try and shove it down our throats anyway....In short, ignore the bullshit. *Slumdog Millionaire* is the type of spiritual experience that inspires casual moviegoers to become movie snobs, a film with decidedly indie sensibilities that nonetheless has its finger firmly on the pulse of the mainstream.' (John K's blog, John's Useless Opinions on Films: [another-useless-site.blogspot.com/2008/12/slumdog-millionaire-95-out-of-10.html](http://another-useless-site.blogspot.com/2008/12/slumdog-millionaire-95-out-of-10.html))

<sup>2</sup> [neelmanijbhatia.sulekha.com/blog/post/2009/01/slum-dog-millionaire.htm](http://neelmanijbhatia.sulekha.com/blog/post/2009/01/slum-dog-millionaire.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Page, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009, [entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/article5622148.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article5622148.ece).

<sup>4</sup> Taking the Slum Out of 'Slumdog' by Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava, [www.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/opinion/21srivastava.html?\\_r=1&ref=opinion](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/opinion/21srivastava.html?_r=1&ref=opinion).

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<sup>5</sup> [www.shekharkapur.com/blog/archives/2009/01/slum\\_dog\\_millio.htm](http://www.shekharkapur.com/blog/archives/2009/01/slum_dog_millio.htm)

<sup>6</sup> [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/7843960.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/7843960.stm)

<sup>7</sup> [www.smh.com.au/travel/travel-news/slumdog-reality-20090304-8nyl.html](http://www.smh.com.au/travel/travel-news/slumdog-reality-20090304-8nyl.html)

<sup>8</sup> [roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/the-real-roots-of-the-slumdog-protests/](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/the-real-roots-of-the-slumdog-protests/)

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix for a full list of the questions asked.

<sup>10</sup> Although I can vouch for the gender of 32 out of my 40 respondents because I either interviewed them face-to-face or knew them prior to the online interviews, doing research via the internet can mean, as it does in this case, that it is not possible for me to say with certainty that everyone was the gender they said they were. This does have implications for the research, since many of the questions I asked were about self-revelation and personal experience.

<sup>11</sup> Given that this research took place unfunded, transcription of what were sometimes 40-minute interviews was confined to relevant sections. I have, however, transcribed or copied extended passages from these in an attempt to give a flavour of the different perspectives emerging and to honour the time spent by respondents in thinking through the issues.

<sup>12</sup> Among these 'Slumdog children of Mumbai' and Kevin McCloud's 'Slumming it'

<sup>13</sup> Be these India's shameful class stratification *or* cultural producers attempting to portray (and make money from) things we secretly feel are somehow the job of an indigenous elite to represent!