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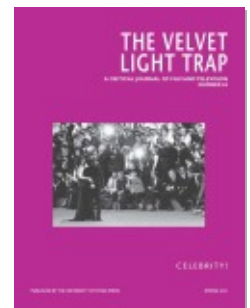
Slumdog Celebrities

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Slumdog Celebrities

Three child actors from British director Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (henceforth *Slumdog*, 2008) walked the red carpet at the Kodak Theater in Los Angeles for the Oscar ceremony on 22 February 2009. The celebrated feel-good film about a boy from the slums of Mumbai, India, swept the Oscars. It won in eight categories, taking home the award for best motion picture and best director of the year. It was a picture-postcard moment for the triumphant promise of transnationality in cinema. By way of pitching for its success and explaining its timeliness, Fox Searchlight, one of *Slumdog*'s distributors collaborating with producer Warner Bros. in the United States and Celador Films and Film4 of the UK, pronounced *Slumdog* "Obama-like" in its "message of hope in the face of difficulty" (Lim).

On Oscar night *Slumdog*'s six young actors were undoubtedly an unusual presence. They look wonderful in a photograph that tempts us with the seductive neoliberal promise of egalitarianism. Equally and in an opposite way, it tempts us to distance ourselves from the machinery of fame, putting at risk the potentially breakthrough desire to make structures malleable to change. Celebrity culture thrives on voyeuristic self-validation and disenchantment as configurations of feelings to attach to narratives of a personality's ascent to fame and disappearance into oblivion. I want to track these emotive configurations surrounding *Slumdog*'s child actors as a series of disjunctures around the idea of celebrity across the contexts of the United States, the UK, and India.

Disjuncture is Arjun Appadurai's word to rethink the world outside the center-periphery model, as an irregular scalar global landscape of connections and difference across the realms of economy, culture, and politics. The film and its child stars animated debates that expressed links between communities and disjunctures within nations.

How does a focus on the celebrity accruing to *Slumdog*'s child actors impact these questions?

The photograph has some answers. It depicts six young faces with, to use a concept from the film, different *destinies* of stardom scripted into their social space. Each plays the characters of Jamal, Latika, and Salim at various stages of life. Loveleen Tandon, credited as codirector of the film, suggested to Boyle that they scout for talent not merely in India's "parks, residential areas, football grounds, line-dancing classes" but look at "slums, streets and non-governmental shelters" (Maher). The use of Hindi, the film's realism, and the city's energy are linked to this production decision, leading to the use of a digital movie camera and sync-sound to convey immersion and speed in the 360-degree space of external locations. Mohammed Azharuddin and Rubina Ali (front row, left and middle) were selected from Mumbai's shantytowns to play the young Salim and Latika, respectively. Ayush Khedekar (front right), son of a Bombay Port Trust employee, was young Jamal. The others were from English-speaking schools, with Tanay Chheda (rear right) already a star in Aamir Khan's *Taare Zamin Par* (2007) and Farhan Akhtar's *Don* (2006).

Two of the actors lack access to the upward mobility available to the other *Slumdog* children and adolescents. Whereas U.S. broadcasts of the Oscars focused on the children's darling status, the blogosphere has been rife with stories of their abjection: their homelessness in contrast to the film's lucrative transglobality.¹ In the Oscar broadcasts the children are adorable; online the children are framed by stories of razed homes and sales into prostitution rings. Both popular television and blogs, dominated by opinion rather than fact, have been premised on the indistinguishability of the children from each other relative to their difference from the universe inhabited by the telecasting or blogging narrators. Any effort to look at the image of



Figure 1. The young stars of *Slumdog Millionaire* (Associated Press, 2009).

the young *Slumdog* cast must be based on disaggregating the characters from the actors and the actors from each other to account for how each child may have encountered the red carpet and the film's narrative against his or her own experiences and future expectations.

Ali's and Azharuddin's silence when faced with Ryan Seacrest's patter offers a commentary on the surreality of the moment for them.² This surreality also has an audience. Nine-year-old Rubina Ali has already published a memoir, *Slumdog Dreaming: My Journey to the Stars*.³ Highlights from the book include her escape from and return to the slums. Ali also reputedly discusses Nicole Kidman as "strange" for avoiding the Indian sun. This news appears with links to "More Famous Catfights" on the *US Weekly* site ("Slumdog Star"). A girl from Mumbai's slum at the Oscars is made explicable through alliances between the spectatorial spaces of Western paternalism, girly trash-talk, and Schadenfreude at the inescapable clutch of poverty. The visual and moral functions of abjection are inextricably

linked in today's global culture of the confessional, but despite memoirs, blogs, and internal narratives, it remains impossible to speak of the intractable experience of a child subject to these visual and moral regimes. Familiar encasing discourses (paternalism, voyeurism, confessionals) are one way to mitigate the obscurity of the children, which the film must alleviate as well. This it does with the transnationally familiar television format of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* produced by UK's Celador Productions, which cofinanced *Slumdog* through sister company Celador Films. The Indian version, *Kaun Banega Krorpati?* has been hosted by Amitabh Bachchan (superstar of the 1970s and 1980s who "appears" in the film) and Shah Rukh Khan (reigning megastar since the 1990s who introduced *Slumdog* at the Golden Globes).

Unlike Khan, Bachchan condemned *Slumdog* in his popular blog for getting "global recognition" by portraying India as a "third-world, dirty, underbelly . . . nation," though the West also has a seamy side.⁴ The *Guardian* denounced Bachchan with equal stridency: "Having failed miserably at cultivating a western audience [in *The Last Lear*, 2008], it must hurt him to be so monumentally upstaged by white folk on his home turf. The bitter truth is, *Slumdog Millionaire* could only have been made by westerners" (Dhaliwal). The question "whose view does this film represent?" is important but leads to a belligerent impasse that hides the partial truth of both sides, and a focus on the children clarifies this. The *Guardian* is right: Ali and Azharuddin would never be cast in a commercial Indian film. Bachchan is right: the equivalent British social group—underclass immigrant kids from council housing, mainly South Asian Muslims—don't have a chance at the same success. *Slumdog's* children are palatable to the production of global celebrity because they participate in several familiar visual regimes: of children living in Third World poverty, of universal romance, and of a liberal meritocracy. The film's punctum to the meritocracy narrative is that Jamal's success at the game show comes from knowledge gleaned by street life. This, for Boyle, is India's schizophrenia: inescapable poverty simultaneous with a fantastic inner life of emotions and ambitions promoted Bollywood and globalization. So Boyle shows slums and makes them fantastical.

If *Trainspotting's* Scotland had the worst shit-hole toilet scene followed by pure *photogénie*, when the protagonist dives into luminous fluids for his suppository fix, *Slumdog's* shit-hole doesn't lead a new cinematic vision. The cosmically mobile camera is not rooted in any singular

subjective experience but offers an exhilarated objectification of its surroundings. This vision has boosted “reality” or “slum tourism” in India, with foreign tourists eager to see Dharavi.⁵ Like the quarrels, the connections made by the film—some inhabitants of Dharavi welcome tourists; some Indians see an opportunity to attract more U.S. companies—have not led to structural or perspectival transformations. A joyous photograph of the children at the Oscars chastens us to think that such high expectations are not the point. The trouble is, the image nevertheless sneaks in claims to a new global order of empathy and interest in the ordinary person.

Notes

1. Various threads from the Huffington Post lead to articles, blogs, and commentary on *Slumdog Millionaire*'s children. As a start, look at Katherine Thompson's post on 18 May 2009, Web, 22 July 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/18/slumdog-millionaire-kid-a_n_204929.html.

2. A video of the interview is on the Huffington Post. Rubina clearly articulates her name and falls silent. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/22/ryan-seacrest-and-the-slu_n_168979.html.

3. The memoir was released on 16 July 2009 by Transworld Publishing and Random House. It is available on amazon.com.

4. <http://bigb.bigadda.com/>.

5. See <http://www.shubhyatra.com/maharashtra/slum-tourism.html>. You can book discount tour packages through several Web sites.

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