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**Romancing the Slums: *Slumdog Millionaire***

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The controversial reception of Danny Boyle's film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, is well attested: there were negative reviews in India and beyond, especially by influential Indians in the diaspora, a huge showering of honours with eight Oscars awarded in early 2009, followed by screenings and acquiring blockbuster status in the west. The east/west partnership—with Danny Boyle and Indian scriptwriter and co-director, Loveleen Tandan seems to define a turning point in the west's fascination with the east by creating a postmodern, mediated vision of India, one that draws on yet overturns, shared fictions of the nation .

*Slumdog*, with its rags to riches story whereby someone from the most impoverished stratum/caste of Indian society reaches the pinnacle of wealth because of his cleverness and brains, invokes the opposite of the Raj nostalgia aroused by films of India made in the 1980s like Alistair McLeans *A Passage to India*, and which provoked criticism by guardians of the Indian culture industry like Sir Salman Rushdie, of western commodification of India's exoticness.<sup>1</sup> Indian audiences objected to the scenes of slum poverty, the indulgence in 'slum pornography' says Salman Rushdie and others. Further complaints included that a trivial entertainment based on a popular real life TV media game, 'Who wants to be a millionaire?', largely popular (and therefore exploitative of) among the

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<sup>1</sup> See Graham Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 58-82.

rural poor, showed a drive for mere profit. Danny Boyle was criticized for lack of knowledge and understanding of India's poor. His gesture towards representing the 'real' India, the use of slum children for his protagonists, of Hindi with subtitles, and the adaptation of Bollywood song and dance routine in the Jai Ho sequence at the end, were also criticized as 'false' authenticating mechanisms. But as Guillermo Iglesias-Diaz points out, such comments are partly a consequence of some confusion about the film's realism, a view with which I agree.<sup>2</sup> Boyle's most recent film, *Trance*, about a contested gang heist of a famous painting, is also deliberately obfuscating in its retrospective reconstruction of events.

I argue in this paper that the film is both more postcolonial in its orientation than has been given credit for, in stressing poverty and the discriminatory treatment of slum-dwellers, while its techniques of adapting narrative formulae associated with the TV quiz show to new codes, its blurring of different cinematic genres, including an implicit critique of the realistic style of documentary, show a radical anti-realism that makes it elusive of interpretation. Boyle's hallmark style articulates cinematically the accelerated pace of globalization, transforming the urban spaces of Mumbai into a city of infinite possibility for the lowly individual. In particular I examine the film through the lens of its narrative structure and construction of a hero who can be described as a local, regional or vernacular cosmopolitan.<sup>3</sup> In Jamal's Malik's

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<sup>2</sup> E. Guillermo Iglesias-Diaz, 'Being Independence: Images of Global Capitalism in *Slumdog Millionaire*', unpublished paper.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of these terms by Malreddy Pavan Kumar, "'Cosmopolitanism Within': The Case of R.K. Narayan's fictional Malgudi', *Tracing the Urban Imaginary in the Postcolonial Metropolis and the 'New' Metropolis*, ed.

journey through the cityscapes of Mumbai, oscillating between the slums and the TV media centre in which the quiz show takes place, the film offers more than a snapshot of India's emerging into globalization although it can be read in that light, as a kind of national allegory. Jamal's story suggests the birth of a new kind of subject, who in the Schehereade-like fantasy overcomes his abject origins, through work, ingenuity, and as we see in the quiz, through memory and story telling. I link this angle on story telling and memory with reference to recent anthropological field work on slum-dwellings in Delhi and Dharavi in Mumbai which use new approaches to social science research to break down the interviewer-interviewee relationship in order to avoid the social stratification that is implied in research based on models of inequality.<sup>4</sup> The subaltern subject is invited to tell their life story and is thus guaranteed greater authority and 'voice'. With reference to this kind of research we can see that the film offers a position for the Western viewer similar to that of the ethical cosmopolitan, i.e. to become interested in the fate of the ordinary 'other', and so move further towards a postcolonial position.<sup>5</sup>

I frame my argument with reference to an article by Simon Gikandi in which he shifts the semantic focus of the term cosmopolitan away from its traditional association with cultivated and wealthy elite transnationals, to consider the fates of those refugees who are evacuated from their deprived

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Ines Detmers, Birte Heidemann, Cecile Sandten. Special issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.5 (December 2011), 558-69 (560-1) .

<sup>4</sup> See Boaventura De Sousa Santos, 'Science and Politics: Doing Research in Rio's Squatter Settlements', *Journal of Law and Social Society* 261-290. FULL REF TO COME

<sup>5</sup> See Priya Jaikumar, 'Slumdog Celebrities', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 65 (Spring, 2010), 22-24.

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/vlt/summaryv065/65.jaikumar.html>. Accessed 5 May 2013.

states of residence (usually in Somalia, Africa) –usually by global charity organisations-- to affluent cities and centres in the North.<sup>6</sup> The circumstances of such subjects, he argues, can be described along cosmopolitan lines that are also local, because despite their new status as transnationals now redomiciled in more prosperous urban environments, they retain affiliation and loyalties to their places of original belonging -- and he contrasts their continued affiliation with their local roots with these more global routes and the and pathways. Jamal's life pattern conforms to that of Gikandi's cosmopolitan refugee subject, in that he uses his slum roots in order to make a pathway into a new global sphere -- for although he does not return to the slums of (in the end they are demolished). Although he is not a transnational, he uses the information he gained as a slum child—common knowledge available to the rural poor who watch the TV reality shows, not the official information that is produced and authorized by the educational institutions and training centres -- to find the correct answers to the questions. The tension between the binaries of local /universal and homeland/ wider world, which informs most debates on cosmopolitanism, is also an important one in the film.

Jamal expulsion from the slums after the death of their mother along with his brother Salim and Latika (played by Rubina Ali who has already published her memoir, *Slumdog Dreaming; My Journey to the Stars*), all victims of the violent attacks on Muslim communities by Hindu mobs that took place in the 1990s, links their story to a moment in Indian history, which is part of the

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Gikandi, 'Between roots and routes: cosmopolitanism and the claim of locality', in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Direction for the New Millennium*, ed. Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh (Routledge, 2010), pp. 22-35.

national narrative of caste and ethnic division and turmoil. The three children, Jamal, Salim and Latika might be described as refugees from their original home, like Gikandi's migrants. The ultimate destination for Jamal, of course, is the global media centre, the TV host room, a unifying metaphor that gives the illusion of a cosmopolis, a Kantian federation of diverse audience types and viewers--the unseen global TV audience that watches, as well as the audience of the film itself -- knitted together into a single community of reception. The film's analeptic structure--the quiz show and the questions (along with the various forms of official corruption which we witness, the torturing of Jamal, temptation, bullying, and other forms of harassment) alternating with shots of Jamal's childhood, reinforce this life trajectory from his local beginnings to a globally mediated space in which he achieves his transformation into a national hero .

According to Iglesias-Diaz, the film's foregrounding of the narrative act exemplifies Boyle's anti-realist mode of film making, by contrast to western forms of representation associated with the transparency of classical cinema. The subject of enunciation is more visible, his subjectivity is given some representation, so exposing the textual (i.e. constructed) nature of the film, and opening it up to interpretation, establishing what Gianfranco Bettetini calls an 'audiovisual' conversation with the public. This is characteristic of Boyle's postmodern techniques and his use of formal and narrative devices to create metafictional texts; that is, the documentary images in the film are not there for 'reality' or authenticity', but to question the alleged veracity and objectivity of the documentary image. As Iglesias-Diaz says, 'The extreme fragmentation of the film and the blurring of different genres draws our attention to narrative

form , to its construction and how the difference between fiction and non fiction cinema is merely aesthetic.’<sup>7</sup>

The film’s narrative structure which foregrounds the subject of enunciation, the hero, can also be linked with the contemporary emphasis in social science research on telling stories, because the act of story telling is seen as form of self empowerment. The anthropologist Cressida Read who has interviewed slum dwellers on the clearances and resettlement following the Emergency under Indira Gandhi in 1975—77 (when many of slums were cleared in a beautification programme and slum dwellers were offered the option of sterilisation in exchange for some kind of access to land), found that their retrospective narratives, through using devices of emplotment. introduced a discourse of survival and a negotiation of agency. That is, looking back to a time of no state support, casualisation of employment, diminishing government jobs, privatisation, insanity and a fear of social disintegration, they realised that in opting to stay on and to buy their dwelling, they had made the right decision.<sup>8</sup> Similarly Jamal’s return to his childhood, and the remembering of key episodes in his life enables him to arrive at the correct answers, and ultimately to win the prize . The extreme mobility of the camera and fragmentation of the narrative , emulates the way that the human brain moves when gathering memories, jumping from one setting to another, using ellipsis, and mixing factual versions of events through documentary like images, with more fantastic ones.<sup>9</sup> This process of renarrativisation in order to define new pathway and help legitimize

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<sup>7</sup> Eglesias-Diaz, ‘Being In-dependence’, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Cressida Jervis Read, ‘A place in the City: Narratives of “Emplacement” in a Delhi Resettlement neighbourhood’, *Ethnography*, 13.1 (2012), 87-101

<sup>9</sup> See Eglesias-Diaz, ‘Being In-dependence’, p.

for hero-in his desires and ambitions as he comes to the correct answer for each question, might also be described in parallel with the slum narratives the Read records, as also a narrative of emplacement. as he tells his stories he simultaneously he learns to avoid pitfalls presented by the corrupt practitioners who are controlling the global TV stage, and to occupy centre stage by the last question.

Finally, the film shows, through the retrospective gaze it offers of Jamal's movement through different vocational positions from tourist guide to IT coolie/cyber coolie, the shift in the 'opportunity structure' in Mumbai's changing city scape.<sup>10</sup> Jamal takes on a representative role (e.g. in relation to India's emergence as a global power) of the professionalization of the lower sectors/classes of society in ways which suggest a breaking up the social hierarchy as established through caste and kinship. His fluid employment status (moving from tourist guide to chai wallah to temporary phone operator in an IT call centre) represents a road of self empowerment, that is, between the extremities of the slum and the quiz showroom. From this angle the film can be read as an image or allegory of India's newly emergent economic power in a global age, partly due to the function and impact of the service industries, the skills and assets which are acquired from training institutes, through gaining official government recognized credentials, all in response to the new world wide demand for IT and cyber coolies.

Furthermore the three spaces that Jamal inhabits in the film's narrative, correspond to what Emmanouil Renault defines as the three spheres of

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<sup>10</sup> See D. Parthasarathy, 'Of Slumdogs, Doxophers, and the (In)dignity of Labour(ers)', <http://ssm.com/abstract=2096954>.



recognition (for *la reconnaissance sociale*), the peer group of family and friends who evaluate the individual (i.e. the slum beginnings from which he is forcibly evicted, and the adventures as 'three musketeers'), secondly, the workplace, (as a tour guide and in the IT location) where he confirms his usefulness to society, as functioning within the national/global economy; and third on the nationally broadcast quiz show in the show room itself, where in winning against the odds he comes to be identified with the nation and its shared principles and rights.<sup>11</sup> The struggle of Jamal concludes not just with his acceptance at all three levels of society, but conveys the sense that through him and his story, their essentially interlocking character can be witnessed.

Therefore, through Jamal's success, the film articulates a shift in perception that slums are associated with poverty by foregrounding past media images but then moving away to introduce new perspectives. Obviously slums testify to poor planning, mismanagement of the economy, and caste/class discrimination, yet they are not always associated with poverty. Some who have professional vocations are known to live in slums. Yet as we heard yesterday from Sanjay Srivastava, if India is increasingly a post-national state in that national solidarity is being transferred from the state to the middle classes, there is reason to believe that with middle class self identification and the embourgeoisement of Indian society, and the reformation of urban space, the slums are increasingly a source of anxiety and embarrassment. This shift in perception is reinforced in the film by its black and white moral structure: the images of blatant official corruption from the police officers and watchdogs of

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<sup>11</sup> For an outline of this theory, see Francois Kral, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 116, citing Emanuel Renault, *Mepris Sociale: Ethique et Politique de la Reconnaissance* (Belges: Editions du Passant, 2000).

the quiz show, that can be linked to the discourses of encroachment, illegality, criminality that in the past had been used of the slum dweller to limit their rights to urban residence.

**CONCLUSION:** The film's saturation of the global with insignia and images of the local, as emblems of the nation's access to international markets, means that Jamal resembles the native cosmopolitan who remains within national borders.<sup>12</sup> Although not a transnational he might be described as an enriched citizen, due to his resistance to bribery and corruption, his instinct for the right answer, and his destiny, emerging concurrently with the romance with Latika, in which he has to guess the prize winning question. The film offers a moral of youthful endeavor rewarded [CHECK REF]. In its conclusion with the Jai Ho Bollywood routine on railway platform, we see a new collectivity, a regional, vernacular cosmopolitanism played out within national borders but expanded by the global status of the TV programme. The Jai Ho dance provides both closure to one story and suggests the beneficial affects to others of Jamal's new world of opportunity ; so the film closes with a benign circle of good will between dancers and spectators.

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<sup>12</sup> See Jessica Berman, 'Toward a Regional Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Mulk Raj Anand', *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.1 (2009), 142-62. (147)

