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## **The Altruistic Blockbuster and the Third-World Filmstar**

Analysing the representation of Third-World Subjects in Oscar-Winning Humanitarian Documentaries 'Born Into Brothels' & 'Smile Pinki'

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# The Altruistic Blockbuster and the Third-World Filmstar

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**Olina Banerji**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This essay is set in the larger context of *Slumdog's Millionaire's* phenomenal success at the Oscars in 2008. The aim was to discern how a hierarchy of knowledge created about the Third-world sufferer is reinforced through images that are historically relevant and operational. By analysing two Oscar-winning documentaries – *Born Into Brothels* (2004) and *Smile Pinki* (2008), this essay looks at how a 'regime of meanings' about Third-World subjects is created through cinematic mediums that make claims to 'realistic representation', and to what extent the image economy of the suffering 'Other' is enhanced.

Furthermore, this research topic connects 'truth-claims' made in the documentaries to ideological narratives surrounding Third-World development, and how post-modern critiques of both have led to an academic and political distrust in the 'facts' they produce. This essay is especially concerned with the relations of dominance and resistance within First-World representations of Third-World sufferers, when viewed through the lens of post-colonialism, Orientalism and stereotyping. These documentaries, both of which deal with the plight of children in India, are contextualized within the 'politics of pity' and the larger humanitarian ethic that creates geographical zones of givers and receivers. The '*cinematic space of humanitarianism*' is put forward as a theoretical/conceptual tool to assess the levels of agency given (through voice and images) to Third -World subjects in representing themselves.

These films are read discursively to deconstruct the rhetorical strategies behind image – making, which both reflect and are constitutive of global power structures. It was found that these humanitarian documentaries transcend their traditional roles of observation and enmesh themselves in political relationships of responsibility and control over their subjects. Through the use of children, the gaze upon the Third-World infantilises it, and creates the 'need' for an intervening Western philanthropist. However, simultaneously, the First-World gaze is countered when the children appropriate the screen-space to create their own narratives. The theme of self-empowerment runs through both these films, even though they never reach completion because of implicit tensions of agency in representing the 'Other'. The essay concludes with the need to analyse through audience research, how viewing positions can help empower communities within the Third-World.

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## INTRODUCTION

“It’s worthwhile to remember we did not tell an Indian story and force the world to recognise it. They told us an Indian story and forced us to applaud it.”  
- Tarun Tejpal, Tehelka Magazine, 2009

As the narrative of Third-World suffering unfolds across Western screens of representation, identity-creation becomes a function of those that lie on the other side, those who are given the power to observe from a distance, who have the agency to tell the ‘truth’ about the disaster-struck, the perennially poor, the a-historical victims of a savage and exotic world order. While cashing in on its success at the Oscars in 2008, what Danny Boyle’s mini-epic *Slumdog Millionaire*<sup>1</sup> also did was to expand the contentious political debate behind representation of a Third world society by a ‘foreign’ filmmaker, thus creating ‘spectator’ positions within the global hierarchies of viewing (Chouliaraki, 2006).

The critical statement that opens the discussion summarises the crux of this debate and berates *Slumdog* as an ‘unrealistic’ picture of Indian modernity. What irks the writer especially is the phenomenal success the film had in rousing the world’s desire to know more about India. Ironically, this imagistic representation, he claims, did little to actually improve the West’s conception of India as anything beyond an irrational world of Oriental despots, destitute children and social inequalities- while being hegemonically concealed in a cinematic super-story of hope and the ‘underdog’. The emphasis on ‘telling a story’ about India is extremely pertinent to the questions that this essay hopes to raise and make relevant to the current debates about representing the ‘Third-World’. The concept of telling stories about ‘them’, who are seen as frozen in a timeless inferiority to the West (Said, *Orientalism*, 2003), is a fascinating one, and needs to be evaluated in context of major economic and political shifts in global power.

My research agenda, set within the broader context of *Slumdog*’s controversial success, moves away from popular culture versions of the Third-World, focusing instead on the genre of documentaries, and evaluates how even a ‘neutral’ space of representation and observation is marked with political, social and economic power relations. The two documentary films chosen for analysis are a) ***Born Into Brothels*** and b) ***Smile Pinki***. Both Oscar winning, these films are evaluated as commentaries on the state of humanitarian infrastructure in India, and the predominant characterisation of the post-colony as a society of sufferers. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), in combination with Visual Analysis and

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<sup>1</sup> Won the Academy Award for ‘Best Motion Picture’ in 2008.

Chouliaraki's (2006) 'Analytics of Mediation' are employed to discern whether attempts made towards self-representation by Third-World subjects in these films open up alternative ways of defining them. Set within the frame of historical depictions of suffering that inform international aid campaigns and developmental practices, the research agenda involves looking at the **choices** made in representing the Third-World sufferer, and whether these choices are constitutive of the 'politics of pity' (Boltanski, 1999) that dictate global viewing patterns of the 'Other'.

The cultural capital (Barker, 2004) of documentaries, while inarguably much less impacting than conventional Hollywood productions, are equally relevant cinematic spaces of study and more challenging terrain to analyse the residual ideologies of colonialism and development in. Documentary images are self-validating, by virtue of their genre (Nichols, 1991 ; Ruby, 2000), and thus are often placed above debates over agency, voice, narrative authority and power relations with the 'Other'. My argument here is that they promote *one version of the truth*, and the violence in representation is made pertinent when these 'truths' become part of rigid knowledge and belief systems (Shohat & Stam, 1994) about the Third-World.

Rosenthal's (1998) claim that this documentary space, when it intrudes a Third -World 'reality' must be ambivalent and fragmented, is evaluated as part of the research design, in order to discern whether the constant struggle over meanings and images is a challenge to homogenous Western superiority - how far they reaffirm or deconstruct conventions of agency and voice within the 'cinematic space of humanitarianism'.

Ranked 78<sup>th</sup> in the Newsweek Poll for the 'World's Best Countries'<sup>2</sup>, India grapples with the dual identity of being an emergent global power, while wrestling with issues of stark income, class and gender inequalities, and social exclusion within communities. Thus, the translation of the country into images creates an unavoidable split between the various 'realities' of modern Indian life, as both empowering and disempowering images are used as frames for viewing India.

Tejpal's (2009) accusations against *Slumdog* become part of a larger debate over the cinematic practices used to represent India on a (decidedly) hierarchical global media platform. My argument is that to dismiss these representations outright as negative or false, is to 'fossilize' India (like we argue these documentaries do) by denying the material conditions of poverty and underdevelopment. Thus this project is undertaken to determine if there are means of alternative representation, (while still within the subjective parameters of

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<sup>2</sup> For this special survey, then, NEWSWEEK chose five categories of national well-being—education, health, quality of life, economic competitiveness, and political environment—and compiled metrics within these categories across 100 nations. ( <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/08/16/best-countries-in-the-world.html>)

global viewing) where the Third-World can create its own narrative of development and progress.

On a personal level, the disjunction between my own reception of *Slumdog* and that of my First- World colleagues pushed me towards a research question which deals with the epistemological portrayal of India on Western screens and whether there are other ‘ways of looking’ at Third-World reality. On being questioned about ‘what India’s really like’, I have failed each time to satisfy myself with a comprehensive answer. Thus the drive and purpose behind this research is to evaluate why humanitarian narratives necessarily undermine the role of Third-World actors as agents of their own emancipation and whether these documentaries open up spaces for subverting global power positions. The aim is also to evaluate if there are any means by which the complex fragmented identity of a nation can be presented through the genre of the documentary any better than a grand, Hollywood fairytale like the one Danny Boyle, according to Tejpal, forced us to ‘applaud’.

## THEORETICAL CHAPTER

### Background to the Documentaries

I – **Smile Pinki**, (dir. Megan Meylan, 2008), produced by HBO films, is a 39-minute documentary that deals with the story of Pinki and Ghuttru, among several other Indian children born with cleft lips. The film is based in one of India’s poorest states, Uttar Pradesh and documents the journey undertaken by these children from their villages to the city of Benaras, where a charitable hospital, funded by the SmileTrain organization, provides free surgery to children born with cleft lips. The film is an exploration into the social circumstances of the sufferers before and after the surgery and ends with the assimilation of the ostracized children into their respective village communities. The film won an Oscar in 2008 for the Best Short Documentary and has become the principle promotional tool for the **SmileTrain**<sup>3</sup> organization.

II – **Born Into Brothels**, ( dir. Zana Briski and Ross Kaufman, 2004), produced by Red Light Films, in association with HBO, is a 85 - minute documentary feature, which revolves around the children of sex-workers in Sonagachi, and their interaction with an American photographer from NYU, Zana Briski. The film documents the lives of these children inside the brothels and their attempts at emancipation and escape through Briski’s photography classes. The film is shot over several years in the red light district of Calcutta and won an Oscar for the Best Documentary feature in 2004. The makers of the film since then have been instrumental in starting **Kids-with-Cameras**, a charity that auctions the photographs taken by the children of the brothels, the proceeds of which go towards funding their education. The film was not released in India to protect the identity of the actors in the film.

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<sup>3</sup> SmileTrain is a single goal international charity dedicated towards eradicating the problem of cleft lips from all developing nations. They work by training local doctors with the surgical procedure and work through international donations.

## **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed for this essay is presented in a concentric pattern of exposition, with the outer most layer dealing with 'development practices' and the hegemonic conception of what 'progress' means in Western terms - how these processes are supplanted into Third - World contexts without the anticipation of resistance and a cultural perspective on development (Tucker, 1997).

The second concentric circle focuses on the genre of documentary as a medium of communicating images and narratives about the 'Other' to the Western world. 'Truth-claims' made by conventional documentaries and their problematic conception of 'reality' is intrinsically tied in with the issues and challenges of representation. Third circle combines the issues of Third-World development with media projections of humanitarian aid efforts. The argument is that humanitarian appeals, which mostly employ pictures or videos of the most vulnerable of these impoverished communities, i.e. its children, promote the idea of Third-World Dependency on foreign aid. The impact of these tele-visual strategies are discussed in an attempt to deconstruct the liberal-humanist claims of 'universal' good done by charitable organizations and the contribution they make to the disempowering image economy of the Third-World. The stereotypical relationship between saviours and victims in these images undermines the documentary strive towards equal representation.

This concentric approach looks at the documentary films from several theoretical/conceptual positions in order to avoid 'essentialising' one interpretation over another.

### ***The Development Paradigm***

*"Poverty is not the problem. Our idea of prosperity is."*

- Satish Kumar( 1999, quoted in Nandy, 2002)

At the very outset, it is imperative to point out that the development debate has been raging since the end of World War II and colonial power across the world. Escobar (1995) notes that one of the major objectives of the United Nations, in 1951, was to design concrete policies and measures "for the economic development of underdeveloped countries." (pp.4). A dissenter

of the Modernisation<sup>4</sup> approach, he deconstructs the developmental strategies of the First-World as mostly top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic, which ‘treated people as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of “progress”’ (ibid pg.44).

Development, according to Wolfgang Sachs, “... is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, a fantasy which unleashes passions, perceptions... fantasies...”. (Tucker, 1997, pg.3)

This definition creates the space for a visual interpretation of development. Escobar (1995) deconstructs the teleological notion of progress in western society and posits representation to be an integral part of the development discourse. In context of films then, whether conventional or documentary, a discussion of the debates concerning the ‘progress’ of the subject country, is paramount. The developmental claims of the West, being translated into images, have become part of a ‘regime of truths’ that ideologically create the Third world, which then becomes basis for action.

### *Deconstructing Development*

*“Development is the last and failed attempt to complete the Enlightenment in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.”*

– Arturo Escobar, 1995

The Modernist practices and beliefs, understood in terms of a discourse (Foucault, in Hall, 1997), established a hierarchy of knowledge: **who can speak, from what points of view, with what authority and according to what criteria of expertise.** This discourse invented the categories of the ‘poor’ or ‘underdeveloped’ and gave it a place in the regime of meanings, by creating “abnormalities like illiteracy, underdevelopment, malnourishment (Escobar, 1995, pp 41) which the ‘experts’ attempted to treat and reform. The world being divided into knowledge systems with a definite center and periphery, the idea of indigenous growth was replaced by the sheer power of foreign aid. These world relations thus became intensely complex and politically motivated between those that held the resources and those that needed them. According to the modernist paradigm of growth, “underdeveloped” societies had to undergo a complete restructuring, and by the 1950s, this belief had been turned into policy within the circles of power. The knowledge economy merged with imagistic

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<sup>4</sup> The Truman doctrine of introducing the conditions necessary to replicating the world over the features that characterized the “advanced” societies of the time- high levels of industrialization and urbanization, rapid growth of material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education and cultural values. (Escobar, 1995, pp4).

representation and the 'Others out there' became iconic (Barthes, 1993 ; Chouliaraki, 2006) figures of poverty and suffering.

Viewed through the Western gaze (Mulvey, 1989) of progress, terms such as overpopulation, famine, poverty, illiteracy operate as the most common signifiers for the Third-world, already stereotyped and burdened with the development signified . These signifiers (Barthes, 1993) developed an unchanging picture of Third-World subjects as persistently powerless, passive and ignorant, and, as Mohanty (Escobar, 1995) claims, "oppressed by their own stubbornness". These discourses point to the potency of Third-World imagery at the hands of neo-colonialist developmental agencies.

### *Picturing the Under-Developed*

The very existence of the Third-World, as a sphere of action far removed from the center of the knowledge system, has been waged around a politics of representation (Escobar, 1995). Adopting an objectivist stand, these representations created subject positions which corresponded to the dominant world-view of the developed nations. The claim to objectivity and neutrality of development narratives link very closely to the aim of ethnographic filmmaking, and the 'truth-effects' it hopes to achieve. The idea of documenting the socio-economic progress of a community is in itself problematic since it implicates both the filmmaker (like the development agency) and the subject (like the underdeveloped peoples) in a relationship of power and production of 'objective' knowledge. According to Tucker (1997), in developmental practices, the subject people are stripped of their identity, no longer considered capable of self-determination, and whose future and past are imagistically supplied by others.

However, as Escobar (1995) claims, these subject positions under the discourse of progress are sites of constant imbalance and struggle and resist the uni-dimensional categorization accorded to them under Modernisation. These representational sites are thus areas of both subversion and dominance even though primarily, the agency of image production and dissemination lies with the West.

## ***Documentary filmmaking***

Contextualizing Mulvey's (1989) concept of 'looked-at-ness' for the purpose of the research topic, the argument behind its employment is that the gaze often coincides with the position of power that the filmmaker (consciously or unconsciously) adopts. This section, in addition to connecting back to the previous discourse of development, introduces the discursive schema associated with documentaries.

### *The Truth about Truth Telling: Camera as witness*

The ideological role of documentaries was to put the social function of the film on the market by opening up the screen to the 'real world' of man. As summarized by Dogra, (2009) the debate over the nature of documentaries is a result of the distinction formed in the 1970s and 1980s between cinematography and scientific ethnographic film. Intended to be used only as archival material, traditionalists such as Heider (Dogra, 2009) argued that ethnographic film should document 'objective reality'. The genre however shifted away from being a 'research film' and was increasingly informed by what Macdougall (Barbash & Taylor, 1996) claimed were 'cultural narratives', where the structural- functionalist approach to studying communities was surpassed by the emergent interest in cultural and post-modern studies. As Ruby (2000) argues, the crack in the wall of positivism appeared and documentaries were brought into the cinematic 'episteme' about the Third world, and were thus implicated in power hierarchies they unselfconsciously reflected. The development of academic Marxism, feminism and other oppositional forces led to paradigm shifts in the study of the 'Other' and anthropology's unproblematic representation of the Other as a consolidated *object of study* was undermined by new challenges to the authority of the discipline.

The superiority of the documentary genre over conventional cinema was based on the inherent nature of documentaries to capture reality on the run "without material interference or intermediary." But as Chanan (2007) emphasizes, the notion of the camera as an objective bystander changed to an acknowledgment of the personal dimension of filmmaking, thus leading the documentary debate into the territory of *identity politics*. He claims that the truth they [filmmakers] insist on telling no longer pretends to omniscience as it used to, and is no longer delivered as if from on high, but is told from a personal point of view- which makes them more persuasive (Chanan, 2007). This shift is particularly important in the context of documentary films made about the 'Other' in The Third World because the first person singular in the film can make claims on behalf of the first-person plural, i.e., the viewers can either be positioned as the 'we' that go into observe and document, or as 'they'

who are observed and documented upon. And it is ultimately the relationship of control between the maker and his subjects that undermines the neutrality of Western humanitarian documentaries.

Bill Nichols (1991) speaks of documentaries as a more traditional vista of representation couched in the style and rhetoric of classical realism, where only one view of the world is presented. There is a quality of 'obviousness' that is accorded to documentaries which makes the presence of the 'gaze' seem unimportant and provides the necessary illusion of complete independence and agency on part of the social actors involved. Nichols (1991) disagrees with the objective claims made in documentaries and instead implicates them in a historical world of *power, dominance, control, struggle, resistance and contestation*.. Since technology grows out of a particular ideology, Ruby (2000) claims that reality, as an ideological project can be controlled, and the truth about anything, including the Third-World can be told through images not of its own making.

### *Capturing the Other*

'It is a world in which We *know* Them, a world of wisdom triumphant.'

– Nichols, 1991, pp.218

Documentaries, about those who lie beyond the geographical and conceptual parameters of those filming, are implicated in the processes of knowledge-creation and categorization of 'victims' and 'saviours'. In effect thus, the act of filmmaking itself becomes a philanthropic act of exposure. The problematic association of documentaries with the 'regime of truth' is made more complex when informed by discourses of post-colonial representation and development. As a frame of comprehending the Third-World, Orientalism (Said, 2003) becomes a *systematic means of dominance* over the 'Other', by authorizing knowledge that emphasizes the civilisational inferiority of those filmed. It proves to be a useful tool for analysis here, where the Oriental (under-developed) Other becomes the 'negative imprint of the Occident' (Pickering, 2001, pp 151), thus locking both into historical patterns of unequal representation.

Waldman and Walker (1999) argue that while documentarians like Brian Winston put forward the 'Image Ethics' theory<sup>5</sup> to evaluate and ameliorate inequalitarian power relations in representation, the fact that they concentrated only on what **the filmmakers could do for their subject** reiterate the very inequalities that they set out to redress. This critique is important in light of the inherent problematic of agency and representation associated with filmmaking about the Third world. The view of the morally responsible filmmaker also, as they further argue, arises from the preconception of a given, empowered self in opposition to the silent Other, who is only seen as a result of the 'operations of the [filmmaker] self' and not a 'self' i.e. in terms of an agent. This fragile if not completely insincere effort to represent the Other on celluloid (Renov, 1993) is constantly undermined by what Trinh Minh-ha describes as '*anthropological gossip*', where the film is a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' (Nichols, 1991).

*The zero-degree style: Speaking 'For', Speaking 'With' or Speaking 'alongside'?*

The repositioning of the documentary filmmaker as the bearer of "socially constructed knowledge" (Ruby, 2000) and post-structural readings of cinematic representation have made issues of representation even more relevant in a cosmopolitan age of mediated 'global flows' (Appadurai, 1990), where the quantities of distributed images in no way assuage the damage done by exaggerated differences.

Cinema-verite (or direct cinema) is considered an advantage over the 'Voice-of-God' documentaries, where the subjects are filmed in the process of leading their 'normal' lives, where this detachment of the filmmaker and apparent lack of editing is proof of disinterested filming. However, as Rosenthal (1998) argues, questions over the privileged position of the filmmaker (in relation to those filmed) are irreducible in the process of filmmaking. The elimination of narratorial authority in direct cinema does not relinquish the power of the filmmaker over his/her subject. Such controls are present in latent forms both on and off screen, and the rhetorical discourse of *truth* which informs such attempts, works in order to sustain the notion of neutrality. As Nichols (1991) argues, distance and difference both exercise control over the documentary subject, despite the promise of escape.

By giving the Other a chance, through collaborative filmmaking to represent the *self*; by acknowledging the existence of an alternative subjectivity, the bias in documentary

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Winston (Waldman and Walker, 1999) put forth the 'Ethics Theory' which emphasized the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker towards his subjects, "to [call]attention to an important ...domain of moral accountability."( ibid, 14).

filmmaking maybe corrected to some extent. However, both Nichols (1991) and Ruby(2000) argue against the pendulum swinging completely the other way, where a lack of all editorial control does not necessarily annihilate power and inequality in representation. The ideal collaborative gesture, as Ruby(ibid, pg.218) argues, would be to involve the 'Other' in every stage of production, that these attempts be self-reflexive, where the 'constructed-ness' of reality is made clear in the process of self-representation. Barring this ideal, Nichols (1991) suggests the opening up of an in-between space for self-representation by the sufferer, whose parameters remain undefined owing to the constant flux in identity under economic, social and cultural forces (Bhabha, 2004). Feminist theorization of documentaries (Waldman & Walker, 1999) also argues in favour of this ambivalence, which both blur and reinforce the speaking positions (power relations) of the First- world 'saviour' filmmaker and the stereotypical Third/Fourth World humanitarian 'victim'.

### ***Humanitarianism and the Other***

This section is the last dimension to the theoretical model and deals with how the *need* to help the Other is created through the use of images- which imply power polarities between the First and the Third-World.

As Said (2001) argues, these images cannot be viewed from a vantage point outside of the actuality of relationships between cultures, unequal imperial and non-imperial powers, and interpretations do not occur without the play of interests, emotions and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves. While Said's over-emphasis on the intentionality of such power-structures is problematic (Ahmad, 1992), Orientalism as a theoretical tool is useful in studying the *persistence and neutralisation* of power structures that underline Third World representation, which Said calls 'latent Orientalism.' (K.Bhabha, *The Other Question*, 1983)

There is a "history" (Tester, 2001, p.87) of reading images of the suffering Other, which are always implicated in the narrative of 'moral universalism' and the West's ability to create a need for intervention through appropriate representation. The representation of suffering is heavily dependent on the transformation of difference into understanding, i.e., the Other must be transformed into figures that belong to a definite image repertoire (Minh-ha, 1989). This imagery must reflect the 'need-help' relationship and requires the constant production of *abject images* both as a justification of intervention and as the necessary restatement of a basic difference between donors and recipients (Taylor quoted in Tester, 2001). The mediation of these images across geographical borders and into different cultural contexts

brings the sufferer face-to-face with potential First World benefactors, inviting them to either act themselves or watch (and support) the interventions of a substitute (the documentary filmmaker) on their behalf. This 'need' is less evident in ethnographic filmmaking where the main aim is non-intervention. However, the implicit inequality in 'looking' over/ into the Third world persists.

### *The Geography of Suffering*

'Without the Other, I am Lost.'

– Silverstone, 1999

Like *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Born Into Brothels* and *Smile Pinki* were both Oscar-winning films. The recognition of these films as the best in their category makes questions over their agency and authority to represent the Third-World extremely pertinent. The argument being forwarded here is that cinematic representations of the East are watched through the lens of 'geographies of need' (Simpson, 2004). These geographical zones have multiple sites in the developing world and are a creation of Western media-framing. This concept also coincides with Chouliaraki's (2006) 'zones of spectatorships', which are discursive spaces inhabited by the Western world's Others, a hierarchical ranking of 'places' on a global map which directs the viewers' response to humanitarian crisis. A third and extremely strong parallel can be drawn with Said's notion of the Orient being the site for 'Europe's oldest and grandest colonies' (2003, pg.1). Those that inhabit these zones become natural 'Others', accessible only through mediating agencies, such as cinema or humanitarianism, or as in this case, both.

The internationalization of concern (Cohen, 2001) is meant to diminish geographical and imaginary barriers. However, as Dogra (2009) points out, such a relation is necessarily problematised by the location of the givers and receivers, as most 'givers' are Western, thus causing material aid and cosmopolitan compassion to travel in a particular direction, giving rise to channels of power and making it difficult to study sites of resistance or agency on behalf of Third -World 'receivers'. The community of sufferers is incarcerated in their poverty (Appadurai, Putting Hierarchy in Its Place, 1988), awaiting the arrival of the white, Western philanthropist, who is necessarily located outside the sufferers' space, and whose intervention is the only conceivable help that can change their circumstances. These spatial divisions are an important part of understanding how humanitarianism works and the patterns of pity and empathy it follows.

*The humanitarian morality play and the 'star' victim*

The meta-construct of the humanitarian morality play<sup>6</sup>, which echoes the Enlightenment ideals of universal humanity and justice and the discourse of the 'suitable victim' make it arguably impossible to neutralize any depiction of the Third World by the West. The trope of a morality play also links to the 'performance' element of these documentaries and those they feature. Imposing a Manichean division between these actors helps delineate the 'star' victims from the perpetrators, thus creating the need for protection and care.

Dogra's (2009) study marks the 1985 Live Aid concert<sup>7</sup> as a crucial event which brought the debate over representing the suffering 'Other' into the fold of global image making processes. In light of the cultural and humanitarian awakening of the West to the famine, an image economy arose from the existing episteme of knowledge about the Third world and led to a market for 'Consumer Aid' (Lidchi, quoted in Dogra, 2009). Westners, with a regular intake of the suffering 'Other', compartmentalized 'them' on the basis of these representations.

The repeated use of the *starving child syndrome* by a plethora of aid agencies consolidated two major conventions about the Third World. Firstly, as Escobar (1995) argues, it made apparent the symbolic and material power of the West over the Other through schemes such as 'adopting a child' by paying a few dollars. This also links back to the developmental thresholds established by the West for the rest of the world. Secondly, it became an unchallenged narrative about the *infantalisation* of the Orient, where the native mind is a 'clean, blank slate' over which the West could etch its dominant narrative through active intervention ( Nandy, 1983 quoted in Dogra, 2009). Dogra further claims that the Third-World, symbolised by a child can, and is intervened upon by the international humanitarian community. "Such portrayals also fit into Rostow's model of economic growth that puts a Third-World nation [like India] at the first stage of 'underdevelopment' / infancy that should evolve into a 'developed, adult-like stage just like the West.'" (Dogra, 2009, p. 158)

This universalizing trope of children undermines potential opportunities of agency to speak for oneself through self-representation. Without action, the sufferer remains outside the agora of humane understanding (Chouliaraki, 2006). However, the argument here is that even when given the agency to speak, the voices of the Third-World only reiterate their

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<sup>6</sup> A form of Medieval Theatre, with moral overtones, where the characters often personified the seven deadly sins. It was an educational medium of entertainment where the difference between good and bad was taught to the audience.

positions as victims of a morality play, and all First-World viewers hear are cries for aid and intervention.

## Research Statement

This research is framed around two main theories of representation:

- a. Micheal Pickering's (2001) argument that representing the Other is an unfair process, since it is a knowledge of 'us' refracted through 'them', and thus promotes an epistemic control over such knowledge, eventually leading to consolidation of stereotypes about the 'Other'.
- b. Stuart Hall's notion of Representation (1997) where it employs Foucauldian discourses to language and images to create and exchange meaning, thus shattering the myth about capturing *mimetically* the 'truths' of development and humanitarianism through a documentary lens.

The aims of this research are:

- a. To ascertain the *level of agency* provided to the characters in these documentaries to intervene and negotiate his/her own representational space within a medium and script controlled primarily by filmmakers from outside the space of 'Otherness'.
- b. To introduce the concept of the ***Cinematic Space of Humanitarianism*** as a theoretical tool for analyzing the space of representation by looking at - the geographical and moral distance from the 'Other'; voice and narratorial authority of the speakers; stereotyping involved in representing the Third-World; and the potential, in this space, for manipulation or subversion of set identities.

The following sub-questions,

- What role do these films play in reproducing relations of power and dominance between the West and the Third-World? ;
- Does 'objective' filmmaking neutralize any power relations embedded in cinematic representation? ;
- How do the discourses of Orientalism, and humanitarianism and the 'Other' inform Third-World representation?

helped me frame my ultimate research question:

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<sup>7</sup> A multi-venue musical concert to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia, Live Aid followed on the heels of the initial 1984 Canadian T.V. report on the catastrophic dimensions of the famine.

To what extent do First-World humanitarian documentaries create spaces of empowerment and agency for their Third World subjects?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Rationale:**

The rationale behind selecting *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)* as a primary method of research relates to the nature of documentary filmmaking as a ‘truth-telling’ science. To study the issues of voice, authority, agency and narration in these films, it was necessary to use a method that helps discern the power relations implicit in representing the Third World.

Since all knowledge is discursive and all discourses are saturated with power (Foucault, quoted in Rose, 2001), the social effects of these discourses depend on their claims that the knowledge they produce is true. Power over the ‘Other’ stems from knowledge production about the ‘Other’, and one of the primary means of doing so is through **images**. Gillian Rose (2001) notes that Foucauldian discourse theory is not limited to verbal/linguistic analysis and applies to visuals as well, where images work by producing effects every time they are looked at. Fyfe and Law (Rose, 2001) claim that to understand a visualization is to enquire into the social work it does, to note its principles of inclusion and exclusion, and to decode the hierarchies and differences that it naturalises. These ‘frames of understanding’ (Macdonald, 2003) help study media images as discursive constructions that belong to a predetermined domain of social practice, influenced by a prior knowledge of how the world functions.

The pre-suppositions in any text make it interdisciplinary (Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 1995) which requires the use of a methodology that helps carry out research across various disciplines. Since discourses do not exist in isolation and work together to create ‘truth-claims’, it is imperative to employ CDA to analyse the power-structures behind meaning-making processes. The study of discourses, as Gill (1995) notes, should also go beyond analysis to make ‘political interventions’, without which, she argues, the inequalities and injustices in and through representation will continue.

The second methodology used for analysis is *social semiotics* which falls under the wider concept of CDA but concerns itself primarily with the relationship between images and texts. Jewitt and Van Leeuwen (2001) claim that while film analysis can be done through several methods such as ‘Auteur’ theory, psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, social semiotics as method is superior since it has little to do with establishing what the film is ‘really-about’. Social semiotics makes praxis its priority and avoids “theoretical abstractions” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 186) by analyzing how the text situates its readers/viewers and how certain social allegiances and values are promoted over others. This is particularly important since these films deal with the representation of the Third-World in the West and thus implicitly, viewing positions become central to the analysis. In its detailed study of camera positions and editing styles, social semiotics works in collaboration with CDA to discern the choices involved in representation and production within specific cultural fields. An over-emphasis on conventions (semiotic coda) can, as Lister and Wells (2001) note, restrict the productive tension inherent to image analysis. This research methodology thus does not confine itself to reading the films merely in structural terms, but goes beyond to contextualize them within issues of power and reproduction of discourses, thus helping the researcher in analyzing film sequences as both sites of resistance and conformity to master-narratives.

A third approach to visual analysis, in collusion with CDA and social semiotics is Chouliaraki’s (2006) ‘*analytics of mediation*’. In studying the depiction of the suffering ‘Other’, this method is helpful in determining the ‘regime of meanings’ that is constructed through particular combinations of words and images on-screen. The analytics of mediation is a semiotic study of representational practice with real world effects. By placing these images in a historical context of global hierarchies, this method provides an all-rounded approach to studying these documentaries.

## **Alternative Methodology**

Traditionally, as Gill (2007) claims, the study of images of women in mainstream media has been carried out through content analysis. By extending the analytical scheme to images of the Third World ‘Other’, Content Analysis (CA) was considered as a possible alternative to CDA. However, as Macdonald (1995) and Gill (2007) argue, CA does not suit the purpose of a study that attempts to deconstruct the ‘obviousness’ of a media text. CA is only able to study what is given as part of the text, instead of questioning the premise on which this text claims authority over a certain representation or set of facts. Not being able to tackle the ideological

dimensions of media representations, CA cannot deconstruct the ‘truth-claims’ that documentary images make. This method can also miss the latent meanings of certain discursive formats as it only concerns itself with manifest content. Further, the belief that CA is not ideologically informed is undermined by the fact that the coding frame and questions are based on the subjective preferences of the analyst. CDA, on the other hand acknowledges the social/cultural positioning of the researcher and the contingency of the analysis on his/her environment.

## Research Design

### *Selection:*

These films were selected on the following basis:

- ***Their award winning status:*** Both these films were Oscar winners, i.e. validated at the highest level of cinematic achievement. My rationale behind choosing these rest upon their celebration as ‘successful’ representations of the Third-World and what this felicitation means for the process of ‘image-creation’ in the West.
- ***The use of children:*** The contact zone of humanitarianism is created by and through the images of children of the Third- World.
- These films also go beyond their primary role as representations and create a larger social purpose for themselves. This is indicated by the links between these films and the charities they promote. The association of these documentaries with humanitarian action- in the form of financial aid to the respective charities- breaks through the barrier between art and reality. In effect, it raises the authenticity levels of these representations of the Third world and its inhabitants.
- Finally, when compared, these films differ over depiction of the characters involved, their speaking positions, their interaction with the camera and the inclusion of the filmmaker as part of the action on-screen. An effective method of analysis is thus contrasting these techniques of representation so as to discern the level of neutrality in their attitudes towards the Third World subaltern figure.

### *Analysis Sheet*

The research design is based on Fairclough's simple question: '**what motivates one set of choices over another?**'. Additionally, '**what**' are the choices made and '**who**' makes them? For this purpose, it was necessary to develop an Analysis Sheet (**Appendix 1 &2**) based on which the sequences selected were analysed.

Smile Pinki (SP) was analysed as narrative whole, without the privileging of particular scenes over others. This was done because owing to the length of the film, there was not much to leave out on grounds of irrelevancy.

Born Into Brothels (BIB), owing to a longer running time, was subject to scene selection. The scenes that depicted children- in conversation with either the maker Briski or their parents, or their individual expositions to the camera- were selected for review. Selection of the scenes was thus not random and based on how they:

1. Presented children as a metaphor for the Third-World nation, i.e., India
2. Reproduced the relations of dominance over the Third World through particular arrangements within the screen space.
3. Represented Briski as the agent of development
4. Portrayed daily existence, i.e., the social-cultural-economic surroundings of the children and the sex-workers
5. Portrayed physical movement in and out of the brothel.

For both films, the scenes selected are based on semiotic details captured by the camera and conversation pieces between the characters. However, a major drawback of this method was that scenes were selected purely on discretion of the researcher whose own socio-cultural position as an Indian and minority group in the U.K. may have lead to the selection being influenced by pre-conceived notions of First-World developmental/ humanitarian agendas. That fear, even though countered to some extent by the findings, was made relevant with every new site of analysis.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

In an attempt to share power over representation by re-distribution of cinematic space, documentarians have attempted to alter filming styles (Shohat & Stam, 1994) to create a more equitable balance between those filmed and those filming them. This however, is a tall order when the identities of the subject and the filmmaker are implicated in pre-existing power relations. It is imperative to note throughout this analysis that the 'mediasphere' created for the Other, into which s/he is invited (Silverstone, 2007) to act or express the conditions of their existence, undergoes constant change and negotiation, reinforcements and reversals.

### **The Geography of Need**

As was discussed in the Theoretical Chapter, humanitarian claims over Third World development begin with locating 'need zones' on the global map. Recognition of these areas as such, 'naming' them at the very beginning of the film makes it easier for the viewer to fit their location in the cognitive hierarchies of post-colonial places (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992) which effects the flow of humanitarian compassion and developmental strategies towards the distant 'Other' (Boltanski, 1999).

The point of comparison between the films begins with the establishing shot itself. While in SP, the geographical location of 'Uttar Pradesh, India' is mentioned before any image is shown, delaying to some extent the visual representation of the location (thus delaying immediate cognitive reference to the Third-World), in BIB, the images frame the written introduction to the locale. This collaboration of the textual and visual devices, or the disjunction between picture and words (Chouliaraki, 2006) serves the ideological purpose of locating 'India' within the discursive 'regime of meanings', that has intertextual links with prior knowledge about the country, via other media ( For example, a Hollywood film like *Slumdog Millionaire* or news reports ). The introduction of the 'locales' create a contradiction from the very beginning ,making the story and its subjects particular and universal simultaneously- i.e., while the story is clearly about Indian children, the trope of the suffering child is a universal metaphor of sorrow (Moeller, 2002). The argument here is that the Western viewer is embedded in the spectatorial zone of safety, both conceptually and physically removed from the suffering 'Other', while simultaneously being invited into an ethical relationship of reciprocity (Silverstone, 2007) with the Third-world sufferer.

These spatial metaphors contribute towards discerning power relations between the characters and the need *created* for ‘developing’ these people and places, constantly highlighted by the absence of basic humanitarian infrastructure. Beginning with Smile Pinki, the camera pans the ghats of Benaras,<sup>8</sup> but without dwelling on the abstract shot almost immediately narrows in on the first actor of the film, the informer Pankaj, who begins the story, action and dialogue. The camera pans the scene as Pankaj sees it and is almost exclusively positioned as his point of view. The ‘problem’ or plot is established early in the opening scenes and the agenda behind documenting this process is made clear from the very beginning. Having contextualized the larger problem, the camera follows Pankaj into Pinki’s social space, from which she is barred on account of her cut-lip. The viewer is made to empathize with this absent girl-child even before she is brought into the narrative, embedding her in the tradition of the ‘worthy victim’ (Chomsky & Herman, 2002). It is important to establish here that despite creating a hierarchy of Third-world personas, the film does not necessarily destroy the potential for victims to self-represent through the documentary. This is evidenced later in the film when all other forms of authority, both Western and native, are erased from the social space of the village and only Pinki and her father are left speaking intimately, creating a temporary illusion of objectivity in filming the ‘Other’. The scene provides a glimpse of ‘emotional realism’ (Chouliaraki, 2006) thus establishing a connection between Western viewers and Third-world subjects, briefly suspending the economic, cultural and social markers of difference through the universal discourse of the parent-child relationship.

The space of the village, despite its abject poverty is an idyll, with the conspicuous absence of the degeneracy shown throughout in BIB. The characters are made to leave their social space, only to return promptly and become a more active part of society. While the Hospital<sup>9</sup> forms the ideological nerve center of development and progress, the hierarchy of spaces within the humanitarian zone (Smith, 2009) is challenged by the return to the home-space, thus making it possible for both narratives of Western “progress” and Third-world subjectivity to co-exist.

Contrastingly, the humanitarian zone that SP enters and then exits is ‘created’ by Zana Briski in her account of the suffering Other in India. This space, a legacy of the Modernist development paradigm (Escobar, 1995), becomes the primary location for Briski’s characters, herself included. BIB as an expository account fits perfectly into the discourse of Third-world poverty and depravation. This is a space exclusively populated by children and their parents are admitted only on their or Briski’s terms. The geographical location of evil (Berking, 2003)

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<sup>8</sup> Varanasi (Benaras) is the one of the oldest and most spiritual center of India. This shot is a common introduction to narratives about Indian spirituality and is also a popular destination for the spiritual Western tourist.

– the ostracized space of the Brothel – is an extremely important indicator of the social, economic and cultural positioning of the children involved in the film.

The title of the film and other stylistic details, the excessive use of montage, the non-diegetic mournful music, the dim-lighting and constant juxtaposition of the children's faces with the inner lanes of the brothels communicate a sense of entrapment and evoke sorrow and helplessness amongst the viewers, thus leading to an 'otherness' separated by an 'unbridgeable' distance (Tester, 2001). The technical manipulations in the film, in terms of lighting, camera angles and close-ups are extremely varied and more prolific than in SP. The argument being put forward is that these representational practices are employed to transition from one physical location to another, and also to shift implicitly between the 'frames of understanding' (Macdonald, Exploring Media Discourse, 2003) put forth by the film. Additionally, all movement away from the brothel is represented through immense activity and enthusiasm on the children's part and is shot mostly in daylight, without the manipulative effects of lighting or montage. In contrast, all movement returning to the brothel is marked with a sense of heightened tension and anarchy, where the children are constantly enveloped into darkness.

Even within the brothel, BIB creates a hierarchy of spaces where the children shift constantly between locations of empowerment and exploitation. The physical manifestation of these spaces is created through 'Before-After' categories that inform the narrative of humanitarian development.

## **BEFORE—AFTER in the Cinema Space**

According to Dogra (2009), the categories of 'before' and 'after' are especially important in the imagery of developmental work. The contrast is stressed in order to validate the presence of an intervening authoritative body that claims to improve substantially the state of Third-World sufferers. In SP, the category of after plays a significant role in recording the change effected by humanitarian aid since it involves a physical alteration of Pinki's face. The corrected cleft lip is a clear indicator of a better life, where her social ostracisation from the village community comes to an end. This is depicted through the universal 'happy schoolchildren' (Tester, 2001) symbol, a lack of which brings about the intervention in the first place. The images of despair, economic deprivation and social exclusion change to one of

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<sup>9</sup> The treatment center run by SmileTrain in Benaras that provides free surgery to children with cleft-lips.

assimilation, thus concretizing the need for an external agent to help sufferers transcend from 'before' to 'after'. Cinematically, Pinki is no longer filmed in isolation in the 'after' sequences and becomes a physical part of the 'happy-schoolchildren' image.

BIB does not register clear-cut before and after images and the transition from one to the other is not a procedural matter, which can be, for example, solved by the means of an operation. While the after effects of the photography class are fore-grounded through the children's interaction with the camera, the 'before' category, populated by prostitutes and pimps forms a consistent background to the children's learning attempts. The cinematic space of 'afterness' puts Briski at the centerstage of positive change in the children's lives while the space of 'beforeness' that surrounds them is a constant reminder of a life before Briski's intervention. The children flit from one category to the other, under the imminent danger of lapsing back into the before-space of underdevelopment and oppression. The intermingling of these spaces makes Briski's role in creating a permanent 'developed' after-space for these children central to the empowerment process. This space is partially achieved when the children are moved into boarding schools and when one of the kids, Avijit is sent to Amsterdam as a child jurist for the World Press Photo Competition.

In both films, the before –after categories concretize the imbalance between the First and Third-World, the distinction being that while SP obscures this relation with emphasis on indigenous agents of development, in BIB, the agency of change lies primarily with the First-World creator and bearer of this 'after-space'.

## **Agents of Change/Regime of Sufferers**

The absence of an over-arching narrative in SP is beneficial to the progression of the story-line, without the presence of an intervening 'explanation', thus keeping the viewer under the illusion of complete objectivity. The filming style, by the maker's own admission is 'observational'<sup>10</sup> and attempts to escape any implication in the process of filming the distant 'Other'. The narrative is in the form of an information bulletin, and its impact on the lives of these poor farmers. It becomes a 'how-to-do' manual on children born with clefts, the cleft itself being (arguably) a metaphor for India's under-developed status. The icon of the suffering child figure (Dogra, 2009) reiterates the infantilisation trope surrounding Third

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<sup>10</sup> Smile Pinki – An Interview with the Filmmaker (HBO), see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiwuVZAUywo&feature=search>

World representation and creates the 'need' for intervention. The children on the posters carrying information about the surgery, undermine the exclusivity of Pinki's cleft lip, turning it into a wide-spread phenomenon, situating Pinki within the cult of the suffering 'Other'.

The camera as a privileged observer is positioned above the illiterate villagers, while Pankaj gives them the necessary information about the hospital. The sequence is split into two competing narratives emerging from within the social space of the Third-World, where their co-existence makes it difficult to delineate any one narrative as superior. While the villagers blame an 'eclipse' for Pinki's unfortunate cleft-lip and put forward the discourse of Oriental belief in myth and fate (Fanon, 1963), which Escobar (1995) claims was the predominant reason attributed to under-development in the Third world, this discourse is immediately countered by the discourse of scientific solutions and hospitals put forth by the agent of development, Pankaj.

This egalitarian discursive space established by the competing world-views is, however, under-cut by the constant positioning of Pinki and her family at a level lower than Pankaj. In effect, the viewer looks down on these subjects, thus creating feelings of sympathy and benevolence, where a politics of pity (Boltanski, 1999) merges with a pre-existent notion of Third-world poverty, hunger and deprivation. The constant reiteration of their economic condition and the social exclusion faced by Pinki (and as we learn by several other children with cleft lips) situates them within the discourse of helplessness. Alternatively read, the decision to combine the narration of their problems with an immediate solution (the free treatment) undermines the earlier discourse of pity and brings in the possibility of change and agency. The representational space in SP is both symptomatic of the power relations between the First and Third World, as well as curative of its imbalance and unidimensionality.

The predominant discourse created by this film is inarguably one of humanitarian aid and a progressive, scientific, First-World 'rescue' operation, but its execution at the hands of Indian doctors and agents situate the film in an alternative discourse of self-reliant development practice. The film is ostentatiously silent about its links to the charitable organization that funds these cleft-lip operations in several developing, Third-world nations. By obscuring the charity SmileTrain for a large part of the film, the maker consciously privileges the idea of native development and the image of the Indian care-giver becomes predominant over 'White agency'. This choice is significant in the light of the geographical positioning of First-world donors and Third-world subjects (Dogra, 2009) thus pushing into the background the *giver-receiver* relationship of power between benefactors and beneficiaries.

With the introduction of the *messiah figure* in SP, a new layer of meanings and symbolism is added to the pre-existent hierarchy of Western spectators and Third-world sufferers. While the film goes a long way in establishing what Smith (2009) calls a humanitarian space of action and populates it with figures that can and do wrest agency for themselves, the introduction of a Doctor figure creates a sharp split within this space. The interaction between the sufferers and Dr. Subodh becomes a uni-dimensional process of ‘providing’ medical treatment, where the metaphor of ‘performing surgery’ stands in for practicing development on the Third-World. All agency is transferred to him, and in the absence of a narrator, the information given out by Subodh becomes the holy grail of the Smile project. The power associated with ‘knowing’ what to do creates the savior stereotype, visualized mostly in isolation from those he treats, as a supervisor. Chouliaraki’s (2006) account of mediated suffering rests heavily on ‘who acts on whom’ and the presence of this social-worker/doctor figure challenges the attempt at egalitarian representation made thus far.

A hierarchy of natives is established where Dr. Subodh in many ways replaces the ‘white saviour figure’ associated with humanitarian aid, taking the agency to save lives in his own hands. The doctor acts ‘on behalf’ of the First world benefactor, who cannot be physically present in the cinematic space (or outside) it to provide care to the children. The Third-World poor are hence still captured within the dominant narrative of ‘being helped’ and prerogative of progress belongs to the appointed agent of the West.

Through the imbedded tool of interviews with newspapermen, Subodh contextualizes the problem of children born with cleft-lips in India, simultaneously providing the viewers a referential, historical framework against which to judge and alter opinions about the Indian ‘Other’. As Subodh speaks, the viewer is given visual proof of his Samaritan project as the camera pans the row of patients in the room. The patients are a pictorial representation of the success of this operation. Despite the relative lack of agency of the sufferers at this point, the choice of not reducing them to mere statistics or by erasing them completely from the screen while speaking about them to the reporters is a significant improvement over most humanitarian representations of sufferers, where subjective speaking positions are annihilated. The discourse of science and progress makes itself persuasive in this sequence by foregrounding the doctors’ testimony as news reportage and using the backdrop of satisfied patients as confirmation of his testimony. The absence of any First-World authority and the creation of an indigenous philanthropic figure, though problematic, is a step forward within the representational schema depicting the Third-world.

Representation in BIB works at various levels: firstly, as an ethnographic diary, recording the daily lives of the children of sex workers; secondly, as a bildungsroman for the White saviour

protagonist Briski, who embeds herself in the action; and finally, as an awareness raising, humanitarian plea on behalf of the 'Other' to the international media sphere (Silverstone, 2007). The underlying narrative of the film is the creation of humanitarian infrastructure, transferable to other Third- World contexts. Briski is thus both pioneer and settler (at the time of shooting, she informs the audience, she has already lived in Sonagachi for several years) thus giving herself a historical dimension, offsetting the a-historicity of the suffering that surrounds her. Shohat and Stam (1994) argue that the First-World figure acts like an intermediary, initiating spectators into otherised communities; Third-World and minoritarian people, it is implied, are incapable of speaking for themselves. Unworthy of stardom either in movies or in political life, they need a go-between in the struggle for emancipation.

Her own commentary immediately follows that of the children, thus clearly positioning her with and in service of the suffering 'Other'. The film is layered with multiple subject positions that inform its narrative - that of the Third-World prostitute, her child, and her White anti-thesis - all of whom exist within the same cinematic space. Yet the onus of developing these children's' future lies solely with Briski, while the mother figures are made to vacate their roles as care-givers and only exist in the uni-dimensional role of sex workers.

The viewing position is informed by two simultaneous discourses of an *ideal childhood* and responsible *parenthood*. The use of the child as a symbol of a vulnerable society is further intensified when used within the discourse of universal humanitarian values of child protection.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of an ideal childhood space and responsible parent figures, in equal measure, creates a narrative and ideological lacunae within which Briski decides to wrest cinematic action and take on the role of a teacher/savior (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 206) and empower the children by teaching them photography. In direct contrast to SP, the mother (or parent) figures in BIB are only represented through abusive language and behavior towards their children and each other, or as victims of the sex trade, without any opportunities of betterment. Briski's initial project of 'photographing the lives of the women in Sonagachi', she informs us, was abandoned in favour of teaching their children, thus indicating the marginal position of the women from the very beginning. The representational strategies that depict the women distance them as the 'Other', first only through silent pictures and then moving images, which deny them the multi-dimensional speaking positions offered to their children. While the film

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<sup>11</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 2, Sec.2 states, ". States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members."

has been commended over the decision to not depict the women graphically in an attempt to maintain their dignity (D.Greydanus, 2005), the complete lack of eye-contact with and point-of-view shots of the prostitutes, eliminates any possibility of association between them and the viewer. Thus the discourse of pity necessarily excludes these prostitutes from the humanitarian cinematic space, turning them into inhumane sufferers who cannot (and do not) engage with 'our' sympathy or sense of injustice. These women form a part of colonial imagery surrounding the Third World woman (Doezma, 2001), which oscillates between the 'child bride', 'burnt widow' or 'prostitute' and exclusive emphasis on the 'suffering body' reduces them to a-historical victims, without any cinematic devices of self-empowerment. Additionally these women are also established as anti-pieta symbols, with their particular lack of regard or care towards their children. The constant juxtaposition between their mute images and the testimonies of their children creates the need for an intervening agency to ensure that the children do not become part of the imagery that represents their parents.

In contrast, the parent figures in SP, though illiterate and destitute, communicate a basic affection towards their children, where the film is abundant with pieta figures whose physical and emotional proximity to the child is consistent with the discourse of responsible parenthood. Even though these Third-world parents are uni-dimensional, cardboard figures, and stereotypical (Pickering, 2001) believers of myth, they demonstrate the ability to 'care' and thus act on the basis of this care. The parent figures in BIB are either conspicuous by their absence or silenced by the narrators (Briski and the children) of the film.

The sequences where Briski switches roles from teacher to social worker turn her into an icon, reminiscent of the aid campaigns in the 1980s where the poster-child of development was always pictured being led by White saviour figure (Dogra, 2009). The force behind this analogy places Briski's endeavor clearly within the discourse of humanitarian aid and Third-World development, while the iconic image resonates with Western audiences. In her attempt to get them admitted into good boarding schools, Briski underlines constantly the apathy of the State and the local authorities towards the children of sex workers, where the agency to express disappointment is exclusively hers. In contrast to her organized attempt at saving these children (she puts together a photography class as well as the required procedures and documents for the children's' escape), the bureaucratic offices are an organizational wasteland fitting in with the discourse of the chaotic, corrupt and dysfunctional Third-World. The State's officials become the second band of authority figures that abandon these children, and the logic of the narrative reiterates Briski's central role in helping her students. The camera angles in these sequences serve to obscure the faces of these officials, depicting only Briski's face clearly in her interrogation about "regressive" government procedures.

## The Power of Looking

Shome (1996) argues that in cinematic representations, the White Body is almost always exempt from the gaze of the camera, and concealed from the 'looked-at-ness' associated with the 'primitive' body. The bodies of the 'Others' are viewed through fixed tropes of exoticism and savagery. The representation of the women in BIB is done almost exclusively through the apparent or hidden abuse of their bodies, thus diminishing their agency to act as 'humane sufferers' (Chouliaraki, 2006). This fetishism works differently in SP, where the children are 'Othered' because of their cleft-lips and their identity as sufferers is defined by their medical condition. The spectator's gaze becomes that of the '*narrator-focalizer*' (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 206) defining Third-World subjectivity from outside the sphere of its operation, marking the sites of representation with power over both the sexualized body of the prostitute and cleft-lip of the Third-world child.

This privileged and a-historical cinematic gaze is countered by the 'oppositional gaze' (Hooks, 2003) of the cameras that the children use to capture the brothels with. Functioning as an anti-panopticon, the camera becomes an empowering tool of self-expression in their hands and under Briski's guidance, they are able to narrate their own stories with the help of these images. The photographs frame the entire narrative, beginning with Briski's own and moving to the ones that the children took, emphasising their role in the exposition and structure of the story. The pictures are, additionally, constant proof of the development process, as material evidence of advancement, which culminates with an exhibition of their work in New York.

Contrastingly, SP does not give its children the agency of a consistent counter-gaze. They are always looked at or upon by the camera, and the point-of-view shots mostly belong to the intervening development agents. The children do not play an active role in bettering their condition and are thus cinematically absent from the scenes when the corrective operation takes place, only identified with in a reduced manner, through their cleft-lips, devoid of the power to speak or self-represent.

It is important to note, however, that while the children in BIB are seemingly empowered in the teaching sequences, with the dialogue and both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds indicating a positive development in action, it serves to obscure the residual power relations (Shohat & Stam, 1994) that inform this particular teacher-student association. Etched within the post-colonial discourse, the act of imparting knowledge to the subaltern is inherently political. Entering into a 'responsibility structure' with the subaltern, Spivak claims, necessarily entails a quick-fix frenzy of doing good, with an implicit cultural supremacy,

legitimized by 'unexamined romanticism' (During, 2007, p. 293). The 'zones of spectatorships' (Chouliaraki, 2006) are left unchallenged as the western viewers engage both emotionally and cognitively to Briski's endeavour. The rigidity of the sufferer stereotype, being put into play through learning the art of photography, is arrested at the very moment it is released, fragmenting the cinematic space of action with a constant power struggle. The children, as Third World sufferers, are admittedly not reduced to cardboard figures of suffering, even though recourse to their suffering comes only through a foreign agency.

The sequence at New York, where Briski auctions the children's pictures at Sotheby's adds another paradigm to the already complex relationship of viewers and sufferers. The lives of these children, mediated through their own work are looked over by wealthy New Yorkers within a cultural milieu far removed from the brothel. There are two levels of 'looking' that operate in the sequence at Sotheby's. At the first level, the West beholds the post-colony through the photographic eyes of its children. The second level is established when the scenes from the gallery are juxtaposed with images of the children, still in the brothel, watching their art being appreciated through a video conference. This layered sequence creates several levels of mediated meanings and is potentially empowering as the voyeuristic gaze of the West is reversed. The camera becomes a Faustian tool (Ginsburg, 1991) of representation where the children possess the agency to 'shoot their own reality', an emancipatory gesture towards securing a better future.

However, this sequence too creates a tension where agency to self represent is undercut by the fact that this agency only emanates from the 'looked-at-ness' of the Western spectator within and outside the cinematic space. Looking at 'them' through the camera (or photographs) becomes the central motif of this sequence, thus undermining the potential of the 'counter-gaze'. In a self-defeating move, the viewers are informed that the photographs taken by the children have been selected to feature in the Amnesty International calendar, thus re-appropriating the gaze over poster-children from the Third -World. The narcissistic notion of 'self- regard', Cohen(2001) argues, cuts out the 'Other' completely, makes him absent by the very virtue of representation and builds an inherent inequality into these viewings.

## **Discussion: The Business of Reality**

The Oscars awarded to these films places them within the cultural capital of the West, making their representations 'authentic' and connected to real-world effects through the charities they support. The task of diverting attention to a 'charitable' cause simultaneously brings forth the marginalized status of the Third-World 'Other', thus complicating 'truth-claims' that are inherently disempowering to 'them'. The showcasing of the most vulnerable in Indian society is intricately connected to the kind of narrative privileged by Western filmmakers about the Third-World. However, representations only become hegemonic when they close alternative spaces for interpretation, and resist reading these films only as a *version* of Third-world reality -objectivity itself being a point of view (Nichols, 1991, p. 127) in documentary representation.

The West's control over image production about India has been challenged by the Indian elite, critiquing its over-emphasis on the 'photogenic poor' (John Hutnyk quoted in Dogra, 2009, p. 49) thus creating an unchanging reference point for the Third-World. SP recognizes the multi-faceted nature of the Indian 'Other', and despite showing inherent power relations between the different social groups, undercuts a monolithic view of the Indian identity. In contrast, BIB eliminates to a large extent any social group or class other than those of brothel owners, prostitutes and their children, hence creating a single dimension through which to view the Indian 'Other'. The few middle class figures featured are background props (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 206) to Briski's humanitarian endeavour.

The cinematic space of these documentaries are fraught with tension- oscillating between attempting to give the subaltern agency to speak while simultaneously reproducing , in different ways, the cinematic corollary to humanitarian aid programs and modernization development theories, that maintain the split between the First and the Third-Worlds. An effective counter-claim (see Banaji, 2010; Narain, 2010) here is that a film like *Slumdog*, while justifiably critiqued for its over-representation of urban poverty and degraded slum society, is also responsible for representing a group of "...disenfranchised people [the slum children] in a much represented country, India... [who] by and large [are] given meager space in either fiction or nonfictions media or in civic life, and acknowledge[ing] their existence." (Banaji, May 2010, p. 23). However the debate over reality and power cannot be concluded on this note since, as the analysis of representational strategies employed in the films depict, even this focus on a previously ignored sub-community is political in nature and does not lead automatically to empowerment. The 'choices' made in representing the 'Other' are still central to questions of agency within the cinematic space of humanitarianism.

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## CONCLUSION

This essay attempted to look at the cinematic space of humanitarianism as a theoretical tool, to assess the levels of agency achieved by Third-World actors in documentary representation. The aim was to discern how a hierarchy of knowledge created about the Third-world sufferer, is reinforced in and through power relations that are historically relevant and operational. Set within the context of the Oscars, the essay also examined to what extent the image economy about the suffering 'Other' was privileged by these cinematic representations. For the purpose of discerning 'meaning-making' processes in these texts, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis was used, in combination with Social Semiotics and Chouliaraki's 'Analytics of Mediation':

The actors of the First World have a predominant role in deciding subject positions for those they film. The image of the Third-World sufferer is epistemologically informed by the Oriental conceptions of 'Otherness' and this stereotype becomes a part of 'truth-telling' about the Third-World. These humanitarian documentaries transcend their traditional roles of observation and enmesh themselves in political relationships of responsibility and control over their impoverished subjects. The question of voice, those who have it and those who 'need' to be spoken about, become a central subtext to the reading of these documentaries. The heightened tensions in these speaking positions is caused by deploying subaltern children (both orally and pictorially) as Third-World actors, thus reinforcing the infantilised/underdeveloped status of the Indian subjectivity. Having said that, it is also imperative to note that the agency to talk into the camera, and more importantly 'look' through it helps the children in the brothels to break partially with their victimisation, though completely etched within the narrative of benevolent First-World intervention. Contrastingly, Pinki and Ghuttru are given smaller roles in their emancipation by the filmmaker, while all developmental agency rests with Dr. Subodh. Despite the use of stereotypical symbols of poverty and destitution, these representations are challenged by competing discourses that involve multiple ways of 'looking' at Third-World identity- constantly shifting positions from empowering the Indian subaltern, to disempowering them through the 'politics of pity'; from telling material truths about the nation's poor, to enhancing the myth of the exotic 'Other'.

India's position as one of the fastest growing economies is in complete disjunction with its HDI score<sup>12</sup>, which reinforces its identity as an under-developed country. These First-World 'knowledge tools' are, arguably, new sites of power and inform the image-making processes

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<sup>12</sup> According to UNDP's Human Development Report 2009, India's Human Development Index (HDI) score is significantly low at 0.612, making it 134<sup>th</sup> of 182 countries.

which dominate global viewing positions. But despite being over-arching narratives of Third-World needs, these representations bring attention to the stark social and material inequalities within the Indian demographic, which are often papered over by the indigenous elite in self-representation. The argument here is that this relationship of giver-receiver cannot be annihilated in view of global material disparities, but **HOW** these are represented, and whether all actors involved in representation have the agency to construct their own social, historical and political identities, determines the patterns of looking at the 'Other'.

The schizophrenia of a post-colony, its patterns of social exclusion and fragmented identities needs more attention in such a project, for which, conducting an audience reception study of these films is recommended. A similar research design is employed by Banaji (2010) in her study of *Slumdog* and its global viewing audience, which better explains the multiple sites of viewing a film, sites that create empowered subject positions within the audience, and in turn lend credibility to the self-representations of Third-World actors.

What is required is a complete reevaluation of how one addresses the issue of representing the Third-World. These documentary narratives about India must be studied as a combination of 'fact' and 'fiction', in order not succumb to the mystification of "reality" or to the '...ironic scepticism common to many critiques.' (Escobar, 1995, p. 20). When viewed by heterogeneous cultural groups in both First-and Third Worlds, images and narratives about the 'Other' are put into play, and can be appropriated by both subaltern and mainstream audiences, both within and outside the cinematic space of humanitarianism - who can and do articulate their own versions of 'reality'. In a world of globally mediated representations, this research design may provide new ways of analysing and negotiating the power structures behind image-making practices.

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# APPENDICIES

## APPENDIX 1: ANALYSIS SHEET

<p><b>CAMERA ANGLE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High/low</li> <li>- Level of contact with characters- close-ups or long shots?</li> <li>- Point-of view shots (center of consciousness)</li> </ul>	<p><b>LIGHTING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of shade and light</li> <li>- Shooting at night/day</li> <li>- Artificial vs. Natural lighting</li> </ul>
<p><b>ICONS/SYMBOLS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Symbols that denote India</li> <li>- Intertextuality</li> <li>- Repetition</li> </ul>	<p><b>LOCATION/FRAME</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Characters' surroundings</li> <li>- Introduction to the locale</li> <li>- Background/foreground</li> <li>- Inclusion/exclusion of characters from the frame</li> <li>- Interaction of characters with their surroundings</li> <li>- Moving away/coming into the locale</li> </ul>
<p><b>MUSIC</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diegetic/Non-diegetic</li> <li>- Part of evolving the narrative</li> <li>- Indicator of mood</li> </ul>	<p><b>EDITING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of montage</li> <li>- Juxtaposition of scenes/characters</li> <li>- Combination of narration and picture</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 2: *Interpretation Sheet*

The “image” of the social group was evaluated further through a second round of analysis after the tabled categories: (Shohat & Stam, 1994)

- How much space do they occupy in the shot?
- Are they seen in close-ups or only distant shots?
- How often do they appear compared with the ‘White’ figure and for how long?
- Are they active, desiring characters or just props?
- Do the eyeline matches identify us with one gaze rather than another?
- Whose looks are reciprocated, whose are ignored?
- How do character positionings communicate social differences or changes in status?
- How do body language, posture, and facial expression communicate social hierarchies, arrogance, servility, resentment and pride?
- Is there an esthetic segregation whereby one group is haloed and the other villainised?
- What homologies inform artistic and political representation?

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