

Visual Culture and the Politics of Panopticism

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Abstract:

This essay discusses the racially inflected nature of visual culture and its mechanisms of 'othering' through a politics of panopticism and stereotypical representations. It contests the notion of camera as neutral medium and discusses the issue of hegemonic gaze as evidenced by films like *Slumdog Millionaire* and *City of Joy*. While acknowledging the potential of camera as a powerful weapon in the guerilla warfare that the underprivileged can launch against the hegemonic classes, it tries to bring out the inherent dangers in a vastly asymmetrical equation.

Key words

Visual Culture, Other/ Othering, Panoptic/ Panopticism, Race, Anglo-Saxon

It was in 1967 that Guy Debord described Western world as a 'society of spectacle' (Mirzoeff 2002, 295). Actually humanity has always lived in a world of spectacle. As Banks says visual metaphors and images have been important across cultures (Banks,2001:8). But the disproportionate importance and dominance visual culture gained at the expense of oral and performative spheres mark out modern times as peculiar. In this essay I discuss the power dynamics prevailing in visual culture by focusing on two films based on life in Indian slums, viz. *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle 2008) and *City of Joy* (Roland Joffè 1992). I will then be drawing an analogy between them and the semiotic content of a photograph that recently appeared in a British newspaper (*Daily Mail* 2009).

The conceptual frame of this essay is largely based on Edward Said's perspectives on *Orientalism* (1978) and Ziauddin Sardar's (1998) critique of post-modernism. Both Said and Sardar (in differing ways) are critical of western cultural representations that present a distorted view of the Other. According to them, both the Oriental and the African, are portrayed by western culture industry as inferior, effeminate, corrupt, and infantile. In this essay, I analyze

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how these familiar tropes are recycled in more market-friendly equations in the two movies.

The (I)nnocence of Visual Representations.

At the center of visual culture and visual representations lies the camera. It was with the ushering in of camera that the visual culture took its present material and aesthetic dimensions. According to Richard Dyer, camera technology is inherently political, loaded with its own racial and gender inclinations. He discusses how camera representations, because of particular technological effects thus manipulated, always work to the advantage of white male characters. Quoting from *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography* that specifically mentions how white individuals with 36% skin reflectance fare ideally well for photographs, he elaborates upon the racist nature of photography (Dyer, 1997: 90-5).

Whether we subscribe to Dyer's arguments or not, the fact that technology is embedded in the wider cultural structures and hierarchies is undeniable. It is this 'embeddedness,' rather than technology per se, that makes it a powerful weapon in the hands of imperialism, both in cultural and political manifestations. To understand the fact that visual culture is as politically loaded as other representations and never innocent, we need only look at the national museums and picture galleries in various tourist cities. In his study based on Fremantle Prison - a former prison used for detaining aboriginals, now converted into museum- Miller shows how it is set up to give a sanitized account of Australia as a liberal progressive state; a state that has shoved its unholy genocidal past into the shelves of history: this, he points out, is done at a time when the majority of the prisoners in Australia is still aboriginals. They are only three per cent of the population but constitute forty per cent of its prison inmates (Miller, 2002: 314-22).

There is a common notion that cameras do not lie as pen or tongue does. But in the age of film-toasters and computer imaging technology, this no longer holds good. Computer simulated images of fanciful and awe-inspiring scenes have become staple commodities for online rumor-mills. Ours is a world where cameras can not only lie but create their own versions of realities. Besides this ability to produce 'lies', lies the fact of vision as a 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Like all other discourses, it can create and sustain its own version of truth. Gillian Rose writes:

It is possible to think of visuality as a sort of discourse too. A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision...Some historians of photographs have

argued, for example, that ‘realism’ of the photographic image was produced, not by new photographic technology, but by the use of photographs in a specific regime of truth, so that photographs are seen as evidence of ‘what was really there.’ (Rose, 2001: 137-38)

It is with these basic premises in mind that I analyze ‘*Slumdog Millionaire*’ and ‘*City of Joy*.’ My argument is: Both these films belong to the imperial discourse in which the white male - not all white male but the Anglo-Saxon variety of it - is privileged against all others and the particular Other, in this instance: the Indian.

The *Slumdog* and the Imperialist Tropes:

Slumdog Millionaire draws its energy from familiar imperialist tropes. The movie narrates the tale of two orphan boys Jamal Malik (Dev Patel) and Saleem Malik, who grow up in one of the teeming slums of Bombay. Early in their childhood, they lose their mother in a Hindu-Muslim riot. While wandering homeless they befriend a girl named Latika, an orphan like them, with whom the younger Jamal develops an affair. Jamal and Saleem go through a series of adventures and trying experiences.

The film portrays Indian poverty in its most lurid colors. India’s poverty is showcased to be not only exclusively Indian, but the country itself is equated with demeaning poverty and other negativities. Not that poverty in India is not real; it is. But the film frames it in an imperial narrative built on the dualisms of well-off us versus the endemically poor they; the clean us/ the dirty they; the benevolent us/ the cruel they; and the smart us/ smartasses they. In keeping with the director’s legacy as an heir of the old colonial masters, the tone of the film throughout is one of ill-concealed contempt and superciliousness.

One of the scenes has the young Jamal Malik dive into an open toilet tank and emerge from it covered in excreta; he dashes forward past a thronging crowd to collect an autograph from Amitab Bachan, the Indian film icon. Neither for the crowd, which instinctively clasps its nostrils shut, nor for Bachan, who readily obliges the child with an autograph, the sight of the child in such a condition is unusual! It is only a bit out of the ordinary. *Slumdog* thus paints the Other in most execrable colors. But what is left unsaid is more poignant here than that is stated: you are unclean and dirty and wallowing in filth. We gave you independence many decades back; but you have not been able to civilize yourself!

The infantilizing of the other is also evident in the way the characters switch from their mother tongues to English. Following the death of their mother and escape from the hands of Maman (Ankur Vikal), the underworld Don, the siblings Jamal and Saleem lead a perilous life as petty thieves and

small-time hawkers on trains. Chance takes them to Agra, the city of Taj Mahal. Working as tourist guides at Taj, Jamal and Saleem learn to speak fluent English. From then on, they speak English most of the time. Besides the commercial imperatives of the box office, this language shift has a cultural subtext: Saleem and Jamal are no longer as infantile as they used to be and are now capable of speaking English which indicates a step towards emotional maturity.

Using the Taj scenes, the film creates a stereotyping effect with a few deft brush-strokes. India is portrayed as a country eager to satisfy the voyeuristic western tourist; it is a country of shoe-stealers and fawning beggars. Working as an unauthorized guide, Jamal once takes an American couple on a tour of Taj; He is chased off by a policeman who starts landing him with kicks and blows. The American couple is overcome by compassion as Jamal mutters: 'This is real India'. The benevolent Americans cannot stand the sight of Jamal being subjected to police brutality. At his wife's prompting, the husband produces a hundred dollar bill and hands it to the policeman who is more than pleased. The white lady mutters: This is real America.

The semiotics of this scene pervades the entire movie. America is benevolent and kind, whereas India is cruel and barbaric! But the message is not so straightforward; it has some added twists that operate on the delicate fault lines observable in western societies. Not everybody in the west needs necessarily be kind: It is the white Anglo-Saxon American who epitomizes the Christian spirit of kindness; it can't be as a rule a black American. Besides, the kindness is also gendered: the woman is more angelic and kinder than her male companion. Dyer explains how the manipulation of lighting in visual representations creates subtle race and gender effects. In all the photographs of Princess Diana and Charles, he says, Diana appears basking in a halo of light. When there is non-Caucasian character, the light that falls on him/ her will be much lesser in intensity compared with the amount of light on the Caucasians. These lighting arrangements create a politically loaded semantics: The white female is nearer to angel and hence less capable of firm decisions and resolute actions. The non-Caucasian is nearer the animal of which his darkness is symbolic. The white male stands between the two as the norm of humanity (Dyer, 1997: 72-90). The 'real America' scene in *Slumdog* operates at this discursive level.

The Foucauldian notion of the 'regime of truth' is evident in the scene if we further unpack its ramifications: India and Indians can be bought for a handful of dollars. This is what Americans and its giant corporations have been doing for long. The Other is too weak to resist the temptation of the all powerful Dollar that rules the world and represents true America. If *Slumdog* were made some six or seven decades back, in stead of real America, we would have had a real Britain there. In stead of the bulldozing Dollar, we would have the bulldog

of a pound. But Daniel Boyle recognizes Hudson to have grown wider than Thames! The changed global equations demand a reframing of the narrative within a new, nevertheless, imperial logic.

In fact, Boyle the director has much in common with Maman, the villain of *Slumdog*. Maman is a character like Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. He entices children into his orphanage where he feeds them, trains them to sing and then either 'delimbs' or blinds them to be 'employed' in his vast begging racket. Blind children, thus trained to sing, bring him a good fortune. The scene in which he entices the Jamal- Saleem- Latika trio to join his 'orphanage' is remarkable. It is a bottle of Cola that he uses to lure the children. Here is a strange concatenation of Cola, imperialism, Maman and Boyle. Just as Maman runs his empire exploiting the slum children, Boyle earns his profit using them. If Maman trains them to sing, Boyle trains them to dance and act. For the starving children who get a few morsels to eat at the 'orphanage,' Maman appears to be 'a saint'. God knows what Boyle appears like to the child actors from the slums!

As Alloula says no fantasy is complete without sex (Alloula,2002: 519-24) and *Slumdog* offers it with its depiction of Bombay's red streets. Again, it is the imperialist trope of the licentious Other that gets highlighted. The frame of the good and noble us versus the corrupt 'Other' places the film squarely in the league of those great imperialist narratives like *Passage to India* (1924) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966). There is no Indian character in the film who is noble or virtuous. All of India's police are corrupt; its industrialists are nothing but underworld dons and its sport stars are shady figures involved in betting rackets, remote-controlled by the underworld. There is a scene where Jamal meets Saleem several years later after the brothers fell out following a quarrel. Saleem tells his brother, how he is now the assistant of Javed, the underworld Don and how his boss is among those having considerable business stakes in the emerging modern metropolis that Bombay is. The sub-text is not hard to decipher: the civilized image that modern India projects thanks to its expanding cities and rising prosperity is a thin veneer. Beneath it lie the massive underbelly of crime, poverty and prostitution. Thank God, but there are two noble characters in *Slumdog*, the American couple! But for them the world would have been a graceless place!

City of Joy

The privileging of the 'real America' is more evident in *City of Joy* directed by Roland Joffè, a movie based on Dominique Lapierre's novel by the same title. However, it departs from the novel in significant ways. It is in these departures that the movie makes the greatest compromises to market imperatives and American ego fancies. To begin with, there is no American in the novel. But Joffè imports an American to act as his protagonist: Dr. Max (Patrick Swayze), he meets all the American requirements of a blockbuster hero:

He is a ‘Tarzan-Rambo’ type figure with a body builder’s frame and no flab. Dyer notes how a well-trained and well-groomed body is used in American movies as a symbol of protestant virtues of self-control and abstinence (Dyer, 1997: 148).

Dr. Max is no ordinary doctor. His failure in the operation theatre caused the death of a young girl. Frustration takes him to Calcutta to seek spiritual solace. But the very day, he lands in the city, he loses his passport: no doubt, the city is notorious for pickpockets. Dr. Max’s Calcutta life has all the ingredients of a Hollywood thriller: fights with the musclemen of the local Godfather, nocturnal encounter with a whore and a bit of romance with an Irish sister named Joan Bethel (Pauline Collins) running a charity clinic in Anandnagar (literally ‘City of Joy’).

Dr. Max is modeled after Stephen Kovalski in the novel. He is a Polish Catholic priest engaged in relief and missionary activities in Anandnagar. Joffè recasts him as an American doctor. Lionization of America and Americans is one of the prerequisites of success for the American culture industry. Sardar notes how even ancient characters are given an American frame, and often made to speak with a pronounced American accent, in Hollywood films (Sardar, 1998:114). Changing of the Polish priest into an American doctor also has racial implications: Poles are not as high on the evolutionary ladder as the Anglo-Saxon; so an adventurous Tarzan-like figure needs to be an Anglo-Saxon and the name ‘Max Lowe’ suggests such a pedigree. Joan Bethel is modeled after Mother Teresa. In the fiction, Mother Teresa is the actual historical figure who is well into old age. Again the demands of the market dictate a younger woman: Joan is young and unlike Mother Teresa, she is no Eastern European but an Irish Catholic. This is another compromise to race – if not racist- sensibilities of the dominant American public. For Charles Kingsley writing in nineteenth century, Irish were nothing more than chimpanzees. He was horrified by the fact that there could be white chimpanzees who, but for their skin tan, fully resembled the Anglo-Saxon (McClintock, 2002: 514). However, in the changed global paradigm, in which the United States with its sizeable Irish population, is at the top demands a realignment of the racial hierarchy and an Irish nun is certainly preferable to an Albanian lady with wrinkled face²¹.

Indians do not fare well in *City of Joy*, either. The only Indian characters that are portrayed as humane are the Pal family members. But the Pals, with the exception of Kamala Pal, are infantilized to a degree that they consider the American doctor to be a demigod. Hasari Pal, Kamala’s husband comes out as an innocent Oriental good man with a lot of heart but little brains.

²¹ Mother Teresa was originally an Albanian.

His children, whom Dr. Lowe regales with tales of the American hero Rambo, seem more mature by contrast. All the other Indians belong to some clean-cut categories: pickpockets; greedy renters, whores, pimps and crippled lepers.

The racial and cultural divide is articulated using the familiar dualistic tropes on which imperialism relies. Dr. Lowe and Sister Joan are always clean though they are living in a 'shit-hole' as Max puts it. They are brave and courageous, courteous and generous. The Indians, even those who are comparatively well-off are near animals, if not fully so. This animalization is most evident in the scene where Hasari Pal goes to meet the rickshaw renter. The rickshaw renter's son, Ashok Ghatak (Art Malik), asks him whether he has come to be a human horse. If he wants to be a horse, he has to learn how to neigh. As a bewildered Pal looks at him blankly, Ashok neighs, the way only a real horse and 'Orientals' can. In the film *Midnight Express*, we have a scene where the American protagonist, arrested for drug trafficking in Turkey, blurts out at the judge thus: for a nation of pigs, it sure is funny you don't eat 'em (Sardar 2005:106).' In *City of Joy* no character says thus about Indians but the tone suggests something not wholly dissimilar.

If 'real America' was shown only in a quick flash in *Slumdog*, we have an abundance of it in *City*. This America is: conscientious (it is a failed surgery that prompts Max to abandon his lucrative career); morally upright (Max does not want to have sex with the prostitute that was brought to his hotel room); sexy (Patrick Swayze, who played Max was chosen as the sexiest man by *People* magazine in 1991 (Wikipedia-2009)); skeptic (the post-modern virtue is underlined in the scene where he voices his doubts concerning religion to Joan); self-righteously belligerent (Max flexes his muscles and creates a scene at the greedy rickshaw renter's house); masculine (this quality is highlighted by using Joan and Kamala as perfect feminine foils to Max) and infinitely courageous to boot.

In short, the white race in general, and America in particular has a monopoly of human virtue: they are on a missionary enterprise to the Third World to set up its retail outlets while their companies do the corollary job of furnishing poor markets with necessary cosmetics and toiletries. I shall further elaborate on how this 'regime of [constructed]truth' is maintained in the visual culture in the penultimate section, where I discuss another major digression in the movie from the novel. Here, let me take a brief detour to discuss the semiotics of the press photograph mentioned earlier.

Appropriating the Other: the Madonna Style

The photograph that appeared in the British newspaper, (*Daily Mail*, 2009) shows the pop icon Madonna introducing her adopted son David to his biological father in Malawi (see appendix-1). The newspaper informs us that

David was seeing his father for the first time since being adopted by Madonna as a baby. Dyer's theorizing of photography and camera as both gendered and racist is readily applicable in this context (Dyer, 1997). The camera light mainly falls on Madonna who is invested with an angelic halo. She appears like Mary, the ultimate representation of feminine virtue in Western iconography. Mary is represented in western cult as a virgin with an inerasable youthfulness; her face is as fleshy and wrinkle-free in the depictions of crucifixion as it was in the nativity scenes more than thirty years earlier (Dyer, 1997: 77). The Madonna photo is cast along the same patterns

The snapshot talks as much about the appropriation of the Other by the Center as reams of the two movies do. Madonna's adopted child has been so completely appropriated that he doesn't even know who his father is. He has been cut off his roots and moorings. It will be interesting to imagine a photograph with an opposite syntax: A rich man from the East, Africa or Arabia or India, coming to the first world and adopting a child from the UK or the US, someone like a "Baby P" whose parents want to get rid of their child. It will be simply inconceivable and would have caused a media furor with graphic invocations of pedophilic oriental cultures. In the case of the Malawi child, he is someone who can be bought with money. In *The Holy Terror*, Terry Eagleton sarcastically observes how it is possible for a country to have satellites that survey every inch of the planet and yet produce schoolchildren who think Malawi to be a Disney character (Eagleton, 2005:85). The idea that a Malawi child is purchasable like a pet animal and not protected by any copyright or patent rules comes from this constructed ignorance. Visual culture, which has produced a generation of 'screen-junkies,' has contributed in no small degree to the creation of this ignorance.

Panopticon

According to Mirzoeff, panopticon is the 'willed form of seeing in which the refusal to see certain objects or people [is] as constitutive of its success as the perception of self or others' (Mirzoeff, 2002:11). Panoptic media vision is comparable to this: it sees only certain objects that fall into its field of vision; and certain objects are seen only the way that the camera-wielding authority wants them to be seen. The camera, in this sense, is not a neutral or politically innocent instrument: all lenses do warp reality and the camera lens does it in myriad ways. The fact that visual culture is embedded in the larger institutional structures based on asymmetrical power relations, makes the camera a deadly weapon.

I shall discuss this in the light of another crucial digression that Joffè's movie makes from the novel. In the novel Hasari Pal's death is not caused by a knife wound inflicted by the goons, as it is in the movie. The movie needs

greater sensation generated by sex and stunts for the box office. And this need perfectly fits in with the greater motive of 'othering' the Other. Consequently the underworld with its venality and greed gets fore-grounded. But what has been hidden from view in this panoptic operation is important.

In Lapierre's novel *Hasari* Pal dies of consumption, a death well-imaginable for a man who works as a 'human horse.' But there was something that precipitated Pal's death. Unable to put together enough dowry for his daughter's wedding Hasari decides to contact an agency that specialized in the sale of human skeletons. The agency is one among many that buys skeletons for export to the medical colleges of North America and Europe. Hasari concludes a deal with the agency to sell his own skeleton (after death) for a thousand Indian Rupees. He is paid half the sum in advance and promised that the balance would be paid before the wedding of his daughter. When Hasari goes to collect the money on the eve of the wedding he is turned down by the agent who says Hasari does not seem likely to die any time soon (Lapierre, 1985: 456-98). Hasari however dies on the day of his daughter's wedding and the agent's men come to claim the body. In the movie this section has been replaced by the fight with hoodlums and the eventual death due to bleeding during the wedding ceremony, days later. It is the panoptic politics of visual culture at work here. The fact that Hasari Pal and other poor Calcuttans like him sell their bodies to the covert agents who trade with Western institutions of higher learning is a skeleton in the Whiteman's closet that needs to be hidden from view; the film does it ingeniously well. This is an instance of what Mirzoeff described as the 'willful refusal' to see certain people and objects (Mirzoeff 11).

In a *Slumdog* scene, Jamal and Malik, travelling on the roof of a train, try to steal food, from an Indian family enjoying a sumptuous meal. The boy of the Sikh family notices this and raises an alarm. A tussle follows in which the brothers are thrown off the train. The Sikh boy is a study in contrast to the brothers. His plump cheeks and fat body suggests overfeeding. The message is: great many Indians suffer poverty because some are being overfed and overindulged. The 'real India' is not sympathetic to its 'real' people.

This is another instance of a refusal to see certain things. Poverty in the Third World countries has more to do with global consumption patterns than with inherent inequalities prevailing in these countries. But the camera eyes camouflage this fact by projecting the overfed comic-looking Indian boy. Unlike his counterparts in America, the Indian child who eats too much is not athletic. His dad and mom are incapable of compassionate behavior the way American couple could. A lot separates 'real America' from 'real India.'

President Bush's statement in the wake of rising food prices across the globe has to be seen in the light of this colonial semiotics. According to the President, the exponential rise in food prices had to do with the increasing

consumption of Chinese and Indian middle class (Yechuri, 2008). The facts, however tell a different story. According to the American Department of Agriculture, the per capita consumption of grains in America is 2300 pounds compared with a mere 392 pounds in India which is five times higher. The consumption of meat and poultry also exhibit a similar pattern (Yechuri, 2008).

Yechuri explains how Bush's statements were echoed by the European Union in its response to the statement. The implication is: the Other has no right to eat as much as we eat because WE are the norm and the Other the inferior; WE are - to use Terry Eagleton's expression - Culture with capital C' whereas the others are only cultures that exist in relation to us and can so be appropriated (Eagleton, 2000:40-50); Others' children can be bought, their land appropriated and their poverty marketed.

Sardar explains how the film *Crocodile Dundee* with a single stroke seeks to legitimize the whole process of colonization. The scene is a conversation between Sue, the American news-reporter and Dundee in which the latter explains how aboriginals 'don't own the land' but 'belong to it.' Commenting on this Sardar remarks: '[...] by a single sleight of hand, Dundee dismisses the aborigines' 200 year battle to win recognition by the High Court and the Australian parliament of native title to their traditional land...The aborigines of *Crocodile Dundee* are Uncle Tom figures content in their misery (Sardar, 1998: 154).

The Indians in *City of Joy* too are Uncle Toms. Towards the end of the movie, Hasari tells Max: 'I am glad that you came to my country.' The colonial message cannot be stated with greater frankness: poor Indians need the benevolent American to rescue him/her from their misery. Mirzoeff says how television warfare creates a sense of empowerment and agency in the viewers (Mirzoeff: 2002a: 4-5). For Americans, the films that generate huge profits like *City of Joy* create another sense of empowerment as benevolent agents with a charity mission.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show, how visual culture, embedded as it is in the wider societal structure, presents a lop-sided view of the Other. This does not mean it offers no possibilities of counter voices against the dominant discourse. As Fiske notes camera and video can be used as powerful guerilla weapons (Fiske, 2002: 391). The Rodney King video that exposed the nature of police brutality against blacks is an example of camera's subversive potential. But the dangerous alliance of the dominant visual culture with market forces does not offer great hope. When monopoly capitalism and mainstream media join hands the effect will be one of carpet-bombing. The relevant question will

then be: will individual guerilla fighters be able to hold out themselves against areal bombardment and missile attacks?

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