»Do you want to see the real India?«
An Anthropological Reading of the Film, *Slumdog Millionaire*

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»Do you want to see the real India?«, the protagonist of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* asks two American tourists as their driver beats him up. »You’re in it!«, he says. For me, this scene is crucial to the film, as well as to the heated discussion that it has triggered. Of course you can look at such a film from many perspectives. You can focus on its cinematographic and artistic features. For example, the director Danny Boyle chose to use a small team and filmed in the slums of Mumbai (previously Bombay) rather than in a studio. Or you might discuss ethical questions, because the film describes the life of three slum children in Mumbai and how they struggle to escape from their lives of deprivation, poverty and violence. Some of the young actors actually came from the slums and the way they were paid and what happened to them after their few weeks on the set has been subject to criticism.¹ However, I do not want to discuss such issues here. Instead I will look at the film from the perspective of cultural anthropology. This discipline deals with understanding other cultures in which »we hawk the anomalous, [and] peddle the strange« as the famous American anthropologist Clifford

Geertz once put it.² Anthropologists peddle the strange because they assume that difference is not a hindrance to understanding but, on the contrary, enhances it (otherwise their work would be in vain). Ruptures in behaviour and thought are the epistemological basis of anthropology. Although this is common wisdom in the discipline, it is not always easy to deal with, nor to put into practice, because it is also a painful experience. Anthropologists know that intercultural understanding, if it is to do more than pay lip service or spout political platitudes, demands a real effort, which also entails the questioning of your own values and the things we usually take for granted.

_Slumdog Millionaire_ was part of the programme for the International Student Week at the University of Groningen in March 2009; the present contribution is a modified version of the introduction I gave to the film on that occasion. In their e-mail to me, the organizers of the International Week wrote that their aim was to stimulate »Dutch and international students to experience each others’ cultures«. Obviously they selected _Slumdog Millionaire_ because they thought this film also contributed something to intercultural understanding. This is the reason for the main questions that I pose in this paper: Does the film deal with India? Is it a film about India or a film that is merely staged in India with Indian actors? To whom is it addressed, an Indian audience or a ›Western‹ audience? Does the film express the above-mentioned rupture, on the basis of which we can improve our understanding? As will become evident, we will learn more through an examination of the discussion about the film than through _Slumdog Millionaire_ itself.

**Perception, Context and Representation**

From an anthropological perspective the concepts of perception, context and representation are crucial. Perception is important because what we perceive is culturally determined. We tend to think that perception is a purely natural process, but this is an illusion. For example, when looking at a painting of modern art surely the painting will tell us something. There is a flow of information from the painting to the observer. However, we only generate the knowledge because we also bring information to

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the painting. Without a specific cultural background we would not be able to ›read‹ it. It would mean nothing to us, it would just be paint. In the same way, *Slumdog Millionaire* is perceived in many different ways – various observers watch it through different cultural lenses.

In this sense, the second concept, the notion of context, is significant for perception. Cultural context delineates what we perceive and so also what we know. This is the starting point of the film: Jamal, a kid from the slums, somehow becomes a contestant on the TV quiz show, »Who wants to be a millionaire?«; he is able to give correct answers to questions others think he could not possibly know given his particular context, and having had no formal education. »What can a slumdog possibly know?« the policeman asks in the film. The question: »How did he do it?« is put right at the beginning of the film. Like the quiz show itself, the audience is offered four answers to choose from: A. He cheated, B. He is lucky, C. He is a genius, D. It is destiny. And destiny appears to be the right answer. It appears that his particular life history provides him with the knowledge he needs, as if his whole life had been leading to the questions on this show and his winning 20 million rupees. The notion of destiny is also invoked in Jamal’s love for Latika, a girl who is also from the slums. Yet, his life story is also about breaking free from destiny, from a life predetermined by the cultural context of the slums. I will come back to the notion of destiny below.

The third notion, representation, is crucial in anthropology as well as in understanding the reactions the film provoked, because it poses the question of authorship. Who is representing a culture, and in which way? It was a British director, Danny Boyle, who made the movie, that is, a citizen of the country that ruled over India before its independence. He made this extraordinarily successful film, based on the screenplay written by the British author, Simon Beaufoy, which is in turn loosely based on the novel *Q and A* by the Indian diplomat, Vikas Swarup. Certainly, Indians are still sensitive to attempts at characterizing their culture from a British point of view. Knowing this, Boyle was wise enough to ask the Indian cinematographer, Loveleen Tandan, to join the project as co-director. The producer, Christian Colson, states that
Tandan was one of the »key cultural bridges« in the film, meaning the bridge to the Indian audience. Nevertheless, on the posters and in the closing credits you only read »A Danny Boyle Film«, written in bright letters.

»Do you want to see the real India?« The scene in which this question is posed epitomizes the attempt of perception – do you want to see? – and at the same time it questions the readiness of the observer – do you want to see? Are you prepared for it? The boy asking the question is an Indian child from the slums and the people being asked are American tourists. Is the Western world as a whole being asked whether we are prepared to see the real India? The American tourists want to experience the rich cultural heritage of India, but what they see is a boy being beaten up by their driver. They compensate the experience in their own way by giving the boy a hundred dollar note, and then saying »[...] and this is the real America«.

Perhaps this question is also addressed to the Indian audience. Although poverty is omnipresent in India’s metropolitan cities, with thousands living, begging and sleeping on the streets, at the same time it is also invisible. In India, children sweeping the train carriages are a completely ordinary phenomenon, and as such are also »unseen«. There have been other films about poverty and corruption in Mumbai, such as Salaam Bombay by Mira Nair in 1988, which also had street children as its topic. However, the worldwide recognition that Slumdog Millionaire received certainly alters the situation. It may well be that India will take a new look at the phenomenon.

So is the real India a country of poverty, injustice and violence? Of course, poverty strikes tourists from Europe or North America as soon as they arrive at the airport, and in this way, it is no surprise that the film focuses on this aspect. However, can Boyle possibly be serious in indicating that this is the real India? What about the 3,000-year-old tradition of Sanskrit literature, the software industry, cricket, 700 million people going to the polls, India as a nuclear power and the many vibrant religions of the subcontinent? Boyle is aware of all this, although it is evident from his interviews that he does not know

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much about the country. In one interview he stated that he wanted to see things from the perspective of the slum children, with the camera work in the narrow streets of the slums supporting this aim. From their perspective it may well be that life consists mainly of poverty and violence. However, at the same time this is a misleading simplification of the life of street children and is also in contrast with the statements by Boyle and Beaufoy that there is also dignity, productivity and joy in life within the slums.\(^4\) Certainly the glimpses of the slums that are given in the film also convey these impressions. However, this is not an attempt to understand the slums, but to present it predominantly as a spectacular visual backdrop for the film.

Boyle’s decision to take the perspective of the children also has an important implication regarding the level of reflection.\(^5\) If you take the perspective of children as the horizon of your understanding, then comprehension is certainly limited. For example, there is a scene of communal violence in which a mob of men, shouting »kill the Muslims«, rampage though the neighbourhood. For Western viewers, this scene explains why the boys leave the slum; nevertheless, the background of violence remains completely obscure to the uninformed foreign observer, as it is also to the boys in the film. Certainly, people perceive this scene very differently in India.

**Slum and »Slumdog«**

Because the film itself does not explain much about the slum while nevertheless taking it as a central feature, let me briefly provide some additional information. Boyle filmed in Dharavi, a place usually glossed as the »biggest slum in Asia«. Approximately one million people live there in an area of about two square kilometres. The word »slum« connotes stereotypes of deprivation, marginalization and lack of culture, which certainly does not do justice to this complex place and to the

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lives of its inhabitants. Geographically, Dharavi was previously located on the periphery of the city, but over the decades it has been encompassed by the continually expanding city. Economically, Dharavi is more than an assemblage of marginal huts. The first tannery opened as early as 1887 and now thousands of small industries are located in the slum, many connected to the global economy, producing belts and other items for European and other markets. In India, leather is considered to be ritually very impure by the Hindu majority because it is connected with the slaughter of cattle. Traditionally, only those from very low castes would be leatherworkers, and, in addition to Muslims, Dharavi is mainly inhabited by those from such low castes who today are called Dalits. Along with its economic significance, its complex and rich cultural life should be emphasized. State institutions function only partially in Dharavi, as is well depicted in the film when the police attempt to chase the slum children through the narrow streets. Dharavi is based on informal patterns of organization such as caste groups and various social institutions that regulate the relationships between different communities. Furthermore, Dharavi is a place of tremendous religious diversity: There are Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, mosques and the Christian churches of Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, Angli cans and Methodists all within its confines.6

Having said that, it is understandable that the term ›slumdog‹ provoked protests and disapproval. This might have been expected, and the Indian co-director at least should have known better than to allow its use in the title. The term apparently seemed untranslatable – the Hindi version of the film is entitled Slumdog Crorepati, crorepati being the equivalent of Millionaire. Furthermore, even in the Western context the notion of a ›dog‹ is ambiguous. On the one hand, it suggests the beloved pet that is intimate with, but also subordinate to humans, while on the other hand it signifies a worthless or contemptible person.7 In the South Asian context, the animal is emphatically considered to be very


impure. Accordingly, in India the name was mainly seen as an insult and triggered demonstrations by slum inhabitants, even leading to some lawsuits. Boyle stated that this was a »terrible misunderstanding« and that »Slumdog« is obviously a hybrid of underdog. What it indicates, however, is that he mainly had a Western audience in mind.

Perhaps without noticing it, we are already embroiled in the criticism of the film that was raised in North America and Europe as well as in India. Briefly reviewing some of the arguments one can distinguish between a ›pre-Oscar‹ and a ›post-Oscar‹ phase. The film’s huge success also changed perceptions. In the pre-Oscar period the debate focused on the question of so-called ›poverty-pornography‹. In January 2009, Alice Miles from Timesonline made that point and described the film as »vile«. She wrote: »As the film revels in the violence, degradation and horror, it invites you, the Westerner, to enjoy it, too«. Expectedly, among the 72 comments on this article written by correspondents from across the world, you find praise as well as contempt for this perspective. The post-Oscar reactions are generally enthusiastic: »Slumdog makes India proud with 8 Oscars« and statements such as: »There’s not a single Indian heart that does not seem to be echoing the sentiment, ›Yes, we have done it‹«. After its extraordinary success, the criticism is eclipsed by the general feeling of triumph and joy.

9 Amresh Sinha, who teaches film and media studies at New York University, argues that Slumdog Millionaire has been utilized by Hindu Extremists: »Slumdog Millionaire« happens to be a cause célèbre for the right-wingers to consolidate their political stronghold among the poorest of the poor by claiming that the West looks down upon them«. Cf. http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/the-real-roots-of-the-slumdog-protests/?ref=opinion#amresh (accessed 2nd April 2009).
12 Cf. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/alice_miles/article5511650.ece (accessed 2nd March 2009).
»Religion, interesting!«

Whether one takes it as a sign of courage or naivety, the film also enters the quicksand of religion and religious conflict. One of the questions that Jamal, a Muslim boy, has to answer in the quiz deals with Ram, a Hindu deity. When the appalling showmaster sees the question on his screen he exclaims »Religion, interesting!«. He then asks Jamal what Ram holds in his right hand. Again, it is a memory of a devastating event which provides Jamal with the answer. During the outbreak of communal violence mentioned above, Hindu fundamentalists attack Muslims in a Dharavi neighbourhood and kill Jamal’s mother. Jamal and his brother Salim run away in terror, and while fleeing through the narrow streets of Dharavi they encounter a boy with the appearance of Ram, the famous divine king. The boy, who is only visible for a second, looks frightened or paralysed and holds a bow and arrow in his right hand.

It was this scene in particular that triggered angry reactions from India. It is, however, difficult to estimate whether this resentment is mainly voiced by members of Hindu nationalist circles or whether it is shared by a more general Indian audience. The magazine India Today asked 1,600 people from across eight Indian cities for their opinion, and 18 percent of the viewers felt »angry« afterwards. However, we do not know why. Nevertheless, 39 percent found the film »outstanding« and 49 percent still »good«. Among 30 Mumbai street children who saw the film and were questioned afterwards, the film did not produce resentment but cheers; Boyle became their new hero. In the Netherlands, Hindus seem not to be bothered by the film; for example, the secretary of the Hindoe Studenten Forum Nederland wrote an e-mail to me saying that their organization had no opinion on Slumdog Millionaire.

Three main accusations have been raised. Firstly, Hindus protested against the depiction of violence by Hindus against Muslims. In this context, they particularly felt the connection with Ram was an affront to Hinduism. In addition, they protested against the film’s portrayal of

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15 http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article56880-73.see (accessed 16th April 2009).
the Muslim boy, Jamal, being tortured by Hindu policemen. Secondly, the question of »hands« is debated. The fact that nowhere in the world the left hand is symbolically equal to the right is common wisdom in anthropology, ever since the pioneering essay by Robert Hertz written in 1907.\(^6\) On the website of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a Hindu nationalist organization, an article as well as many comments protested that Ram is depicted as blessing with his left hand.\(^7\) This hand is considered to be ritually impure by Hindus, and so blessing with the left hand is inappropriate. While the question in the quiz focused on the right hand – holding the bow and arrow – the commotion was aroused by the implied use of the left hand. In fact, Ram is usually depicted holding the bow in his left hand and giving his blessing with the right. It is claimed that the inversion was done on purpose and meant as an insult.

Finally, the film and its director Boyle are charged with being divisive. This charge is made because of the differences between the movie and the original novel by Vikas Swarup. The protagonist in the film is Jamal Malik, a Muslim, whereas in the book the main character is named Ram Mohammad Thomas. In the novel, the mother of the protagonist is not killed by Hindus; in fact, nothing is known about her at all, because the protagonist was abandoned as a baby. Therefore, his religious heritage is unknown and the name given to him, Ram Mohammad Thomas, is seen to represent Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. In the book, the quizmaster reacts to the introduction of the boy on the show with the words: »Ram Mohammad Thomas, now that’s a very interesting name. It expresses the richness and diversity of India«.\(^8\) As a whole the film is thus characterized as anti-Hindu, with it also being pointed out that most of the actors were Muslims.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Cf. [http://www.hindujagruti.org/news/6162.htm](http://www.hindujagruti.org/news/6162.htm) (accessed 2nd March 2009). On the website, people also protested against the appearance of the model Heidi Klum as the Hindu Goddess Kali at a New York Halloween party as defamation, amongst other things. Thus, a certain interpretative overdrive can be attested to this organization.


\(^9\) See the above-mentioned website and also the article (and the more than 70 comments) by the French journalist F. Gautier, »Religion, Marxism and Slumdog«. In a manner that is reminiscent of Hindu nationalist jargon and opinions, this article condemns Slumdog Millionaire as anti-Hindu; it portrays Hinduism as an endangered species, threatened by Christian missionaries, and argues that »Slumdog literally defecates on India«, [http://www.expressbuzz.com/edition/story.aspx?Title=Religion,+Marxism+and+Slumdog&artid=10ACvtR0cZA=&Title=Religion,+Mar](http://www.expressbuzz.com/edition/story.aspx?Title=Religion,+Marxism+and+Slumdog&artid=10ACvtR0cZA=&Title=Religion,+Mar).
Although one might wonder about the reasons for the reversal of hands – probably just a blunder – the accusations seem to me unfounded since the direct statements concerning religion in the film suggest a rather negative attitude towards religion in general. Jamal does not care for Islam and in one instance tells the policeman: »Without Ram and Allah I would still have a mother«. In addition, Islam only becomes an issue for his older brother Salim, when he fully engages in his criminal career. In one scene Jamal observes his brother in prayer, saying »Forgive me! I know that I have sinned.« As a result, religion is seen in relation to the remission of crimes, not in a very favourable light. Only at the end, when Salim commits a kind of suicide, does he return to the »good«; he finally helped Latika to flee her imprisonment and join Jamal, and when he dies, his last words are »God is great«.

The accusation that the names and religious identities of the protagonist have changed from being multi-religious to simply Muslim ignores the fact that Boyle was in the first place attracted not by Swarup’s book but by the screenplay, which mainly took up the novel’s idea of structuring the story around the quiz. What this means is, Boyle did not actively change the identities of the protagonists, but accepted the screenplay as it was. Furthermore, the critics ignore the fact that the name Ram Mohammed Thomas was not chosen as a token of religious tolerance (as the quizmaster indicated); in the book his name is created in response to the fear that simply naming a boy of unclear religious origin Thomas might provoke a Hindu nationalist mob to burn the church where the boy was then living (Vikas Swarup, Q & A, p. 52). At two other places in the novel Hindu nationalist violence is also mentioned (ibid., pp. 95, 228). Significantly, the film as well as the book takes a critical stance against Hindu nationalism and religious dogmatism in general. Swarup makes this point by letting his protagonist use one or the other of his religious identities as is appropriate in different situations. Obviously, many of the protestors (some admit this explicitly in their blog comments) have neither seen the film nor read the novel.
In addition to these few explicit comments on religion, which will nevertheless have escaped the average Western viewer of the film, a certain religious undertone may be identified in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Paul B. Courtright, professor of religious studies at Emory University, argues that *Slumdog Millionaire* has a theological aspect, and the theme of someone’s life being pre-written by destiny is commonplace in India.\(^{20}\) Indeed, the film begins with the notion that »it is written«, as pointed out at the beginning of this paper, and ends with the same message when Jamal and Latika are successfully reunited. Courtright also mentions devotion as an overt theme in the film, an aspect that I would like to stress. Devotion (*bhakti*) is the unconditional love for and dedication to a deity, whereby the believer shares in divine grace; devotion as a direct way to liberation without having to leave the world, as the renouncer does, is certainly a theme that can be identified in the film. Jamal shows an unwavering commitment to Latika, the girl from the slums who is forcefully removed from him several times. Despite this, his unconditional love is unconquerable, and it even convinces his brother Salim, who finally paves the way for the happy ending. Latika is Jamal’s *ishtadevi*, his chosen deity. For those who practise absolute devotion, everything is possible. As Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita (9/32, 34):

> For if people resort to Me, even those of low birth – women, *vaisyas*,\(^{21}\) and *shudras* also – all of them attain the highest goal.

> Keep your mind on Me, be devoted to Me, worship and pay reverence to Me! Having disciplined yourself in this manner, with Me as your supreme goal, to Me alone shall you come.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) *Vaishas* refers to the third lowest ranking category of »peasants« in the varna classification theme. *Shudras* are below them, they are excluded from the sacred knowledge of the Veda and thus not regarded as »twice-born«, as are the three other categories.

A ›global‹ film?

It is therefore possible to unearth a few specifically Indian themes in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Nevertheless, the film has also been described as a global film and the protagonist as a »postmodern Everyman«.23 Boyle himself says, »*Slumdog Millionaire* is a universal story. The reason it works is because the film signifies the relevance of one coming from nowhere with a dream and how he eventually gets there somehow.«24 The film stresses universal themes, not cultural particularity. When asked »What’s the biggest thing you took away from filming there that has affected you and your outlook on life?« Boyle answers similarly, »Working in the slums, you realize the people are the same all the world over.«25 As the director mentioned in many of his interviews, he was immediately fascinated by the screenplay by Simon Beaufoy, in which the love story is »the real agenda«.26 It was the narrative and the city that fascinated Boyle in the first place, not India.27 He also had no intention of portraying poverty from a political activist point of view. According to his own statements, what shocked Boyle most was not the poverty, but the sexism in India. However, he explained, »It’s not in the film because it’s not relevant to our story.«28 The story came first, and I would argue that, from a Western point of view, the film could also have been set in Rio de Janeiro, Jakarta or Mexico City. It is a universal rags to riches story.

*Slumdog Millionaire* does not challenge our worldview in the anthropological sense I have outlined above. It provides no rupture

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which could serve as basis for understanding. Many differences depicted in the film remain implicit and are beyond the scope of understanding of a non-Indian audience. As a result, an international audience does not learn very much about India from the film, apart from gaining some sense of its flavour from scenes of Indian trains and streets. Most of us are neither able to understand the nature of the communal riots, nor notice the specifically Indian notion of destiny and devotion. When Boyle was asked what he learned about Mumbai or India while making the film, his answers were rather vague, implying that in the first instance he learned more about himself.\textsuperscript{29}

\textit{Slumdog Millionaire} is a mainstream production made for a Western audience, despite the cast and the location being Indian. This is evident from a variety of details. I have already mentioned the title, another example is that of language. The young children in the film speak Hindi, which was suggested by the Indian co-director. However, as they grow up they speak English, more specifically, after falling from a train they all of a sudden speak English. The film makes a point of explaining this – their contacts with Western tourists around the Taj Mahal – however, this neither explains the English accent of the older Jamal, nor the fact that the kids from the slum even speak English among themselves. Obviously, it would be unacceptable for many Western audiences to watch the film completely in Hindi with English subtitles. Another aspect is that of dance. As is well known, dancing is a crucial masala ingredient in Bollywood movies, and for some inexperienced Western eyes may be difficult to watch for long periods. In \textit{Slumdog Millionaire}, except for a brief interlude when Jamal is a child, there is dancing only after the finish of the film proper, during the closing credits. This hardly mirrors Indian priorities.

The film ends with a kiss, and this will be my concluding comment. In Bollywood movies there are many wet saris and plenty of scenes with erotic dancing, but as far as I know, never a kiss on the lips. \textit{Slumdog Millionaire} not only ends with such a kiss, a spotlight shining through between the lips of the lovers, but is even initiated verbally by the female, who says »Kiss me«. When questioned, Boyle described how

he had convinced the actress Freida Pinto: »It’s quite a big thing there [in India], but she understood it was necessary for the story.«

One may think that this last scene is directed towards an Indian audience by way of provocation, especially considering its introduction by the girl. On the contrary, one might take this final scene as another indication of the non-Indianess of the film and its focus on a Western audience. This would entail disregard and lack of reflection about the possibility of raising obscenity charges in India against the film, as in the thoughtless application of the term »slumdog«. One can only speculate. Two years ago, Richard Gere publicly kissed the Indian actress, Shilpa Shetty, on the cheek in Delhi, an act which when broadcast on television triggered strong reactions in India. Shetty downplayed the situation by saying, »I understand this is his culture, not ours.« However, she publicly proclaimed that she did not want to apologize, asking: »Did he kiss me on the lips?« Such an event would obviously require an apology. Meanwhile, effigies of Gere were burned in the streets and the spokesman of the Hindu nationalist party (BJP) stated: »Such a public display is not a part of Indian tradition.« In any case, the astonishing thing in relation to the kiss in Slumdog Millionaire is that in all the comments I have read, there was no disapproval voiced about the kiss.

Globalization is itself an idea that developed in a specific cultural context, mirroring particular assumptions and values. Boyle may well think of his film as a universal story and Western audiences may perceive Slumdog Millionaire in this way. Still, viewers elsewhere, embedded in different structures of meaning (and conflict), understand the film in different ways, »seeing« different things. A kiss, left and right hands, love and devotion, all turn out to be different things viewed from different perspectives.

»Do you want to see the real India?« The »real India« here functions as a floating signifier, the meaning or signified changing according to different interpreters: India is poverty, India is colourful, India is cruel, misrepresented by »the West«, Hinduism denigrated. The Western

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audience that does not already bring knowledge about India to the film leaves the cinema knowing no more about that culture than before; *Slumdog Millionaire* is not a documentary. In this sense, including the film in an international student programme to facilitate intercultural understanding provides probably little added value.