

Topographies of Poverty: Imagining Calcutta in *City of Joy*

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Roland Joffé's film *City of Joy* (1992) is presented as an elevating, "feel-good" story set in a Calcuttan¹ slum; it was promoted as "a film about the strength of the human spirit". It is based on Dominique Lapierre's best-selling non-fiction book *City of Joy* (1985) though major changes have been made in the adaptation process. The young soon-to-be-doctor Max Loeb who appears in the last third of the book has been turned into a central character, an American surgeon Max Lowe (Patrick Swayze), who after losing a young patient on an operating table in Houston travels to India to, as he says, "find enlightenment". The other main character in the film – as well as in the book – is a Bihari slum-dweller Hasari Pal (Om Puri), who moves with his family to Calcutta from his rural village after losing his farm to a money-lender. Hasari goes to the city to find work and raise money for his young daughter's dowry. Both men end up in a slum called the City of Joy, Max as an initially-reluctant-to-practice doctor and Hasari as a resident who finds work as rickshaw-puller.

The first experience of Calcutta for both arrivals is robbery: Max loses his wallet to local gangsters, Hasari's family all their money as a Mr Ganguly rents them an apartment that is not his to let out and the family is kicked out into the streets by the real owners. Furthermore, all sorts of wheeler-dealers seem to be operating around the newcomers: Max is offered female company by a hotel worker. The young woman is to get him drunk in a nearby bar, after which he is beaten and robbed. This beating is masterminded by a local thug, Ashok (Art Malik). Both newcomers, Indian and foreigner, are immersed from the beginning in a harsh urban environment, a jungle of swindlers and criminals, begging children and lepers, where only very few people (a receptionist at Max's hotel and a man on the street telling Hasari where they can spend the night without a roof over their head) are genuinely willing to help until they end up in the slum, where everyone is friendly. The film is about the two men, a white Western foreigner and a poor citizen of India, coming to terms with their new environment, building a relationship to the place, a Calcuttan slum, they both now find themselves in, and finding a way forward. With and through these two newcomers to the city the spectators of the film get to encounter and experience life in an Indian big-city slum. The message of *City of Joy* is one of charity and finding joy in life even in adversity.

City of Joy is one of the Western films set in India which Ananda Mitra categorises in his study *India through the Western Lens* as films "where the place 'motivates' the progression of the plot" and "is the reason behind the narrative" (50–51). The geographic place in these films is

¹ In this chapter I use the anglicized name, Calcutta, which was the official name of the city until 2001, when it was changed to Kolkata, since the film I analyse was made in 1991.

vital to the story and the reason to make the film, which means that these movies cannot be set in any other place – as opposed to other Western films about India which could have been set elsewhere but for some reason were set in India. Mitra argues that *City of Joy* “could only be set in Calcutta” since it is a story about a “rickshaw puller and the specific subculture of a shantytown” (55-56). The film in fact “utilize[s] the place as a key motivator in the narrative.” Taking my cue from Mitra, I focus in this chapter on the portrayal of Calcutta in *City of Joy*. I explore the ways in which *City of Joy* portrays the metropolis of Calcutta and its topography of poverty, how the film imagines the city space. I argue that poverty in this film becomes a landscape for the global audience to look at, a background whose constituent parts and reasons for existing are never examined. The slum, though the home of thousands, becomes mainly a place where Westerners can save Indians and perhaps themselves along the way. I suggest that by portraying Calcutta, and by extension, India, as a slum-city, home of the poor, the film presents *City of Joy*/Calcutta/India as a prime location in which a Westerner can practice charity and where s/he can find “enlightenment” through that work.

Looking for Authenticity

Filming *City of Joy* in Calcutta was not an easy endeavour but the filmmakers wanted to shoot on authentic locations. The Marxist West Bengal state government was against the filming of *City of Joy* and when the production finally began in Calcutta in February 1991, the filmmakers were “faced with riots, firebombs, government protests, lawsuits, and crowds marching in the streets” (Eberts 20). Mnriral Sen, a leading Calcutta filmmaker, explained (qtd. in Kaufman n. pag.) at the time that the concern was that the film would underscore the Western image of Calcutta mainly as the city of Mother Teresa and the very poor. This concern was well justified: the finished film foregrounds Calcutta’s slums and poverty, showing very little else of the city. Sen further pointed out that “[p]overty is a certain reality here, but we Bengalis also think of Calcutta as the home of (Rabindranath) Tagore and many more creative and important Indians. The government is perhaps expressing this frustration that other sides of Calcutta are seldom shown.”

The filmmakers eventually managed to film scenes in the Calcuttan streets but had to build their own slum. Even though Calcutta abounds with bustees² and slums, it would have caused “too much inconvenience to the inhabitants to film everything in the slums,” Iain Smith, co-producer of *City of Joy*, has said (qtd. in Hedges n. pag.). As Joffé has explained, they “could hardly move people out

² “[I]n the official terms of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, [bustee] is an area of the city not less than 700 square meters with huts and other structures for human habitation. A slum is any plot of land with a collection of huts covering an unspecified area. There are said to be some 2,000 bustees and 1,500 slums registered in Calcutta.” (City of Joy Production Notes)

of their homes, so [they] created [their] own environment” (Joffé, Medoff, and Eberts 62). This naturally causes questions about the authenticity of the film’s images. Authenticity is important for slum tourism, both physical and virtual. As Dean MacCannell has argued, “touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences” (597). Salman Rushdie (n. pag.) has commented on the demand of authenticity in (virtual) tourism as follows:

It used to be the case that western movies about India were about blonde women arriving there to find, almost at once, a maharajah to fall in love with, the supply of such maharajahs being apparently endless and specially provided for English or American blondes; or they were about European women accusing non-maharajah Indians of rape, perhaps because they were so indignant at having being approached by a non-maharajah; or they were about dashing white men galloping about the colonies firing pistols and unsheathing sabres, to varying effect. Now that sort of exoticism has lost its appeal; people want, instead, enough grit and violence to convince themselves that what they are seeing is authentic; but it’s still tourism. If the earlier films were raj tourism, maharajah-tourism, then we, today, have slum tourism instead.

Rushdie wrote this piece in 2009 when Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* had been released but he could have written that already in the early 1990s for the era of raj and maharajah tourism had ended by the late 1980s and new images of India were gaining ground in the West. In the mid-1990s, Hutnyk (176) noted that “[t]he cultural role of the old literature of Empire has been usurped by film”, Rudyard Kipling had been replaced by Roland Joffé and other famous filmmakers. I would argue that that is only part of the representational change taking place. The (neo)colonial cinematic and televisual images of the 1980s’ Raj Revival (*The Jewel in the Crown*, *Heat and Dust*, *A Passage to India*, *The Far Pavillions*, even *Gandhi*, largely based on British novels on India) started to give way to more “realistic” images of India, such as *Salaam Bombay*, in the late 1980s and early 1990s but film was not the only medium that contributed to the loss of appeal of British literature on India. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the huge popularity and critical acclaim of Indian English fiction. The Indian English novel became a highly marketable product which framed international public perception of India in a new way replacing British fiction and its stereotypes on India.

In the 1980s, mass tourism started to globalize and spread to new areas, also in Asia and Africa, and changed the perceptions and expectations Western masses had of India (and other countries of the Global South). Whereas China and India have drawn affluent European tourists for decades and the hippie-trail had led young people to India since the late 1960s, they, along with many other Asian countries, started to pull Western tourists in masses in the 1980s and 1990s. Asian countries, including India, became more familiar to larger audiences not only through fiction but also through travel which further quickened the loss of sustainability and appeal of old romantic fantasies of India as the realm of maharajahs. Westerners wanted to experience the “real” India, not

the fabled one of fakirs, snake-charmers, and maharajahs. Calcutta and its poor had started to draw volunteers from abroad to do charity work with Mother Teresa's and other organizations, starting a practice nowadays known as voluntourism, a practice which has grown in the 21st century to become a popular form of tourism. David Clemmons, founder of voluntourism.org, says that "Mother Teresa's program was a precursor to VolunTourism." The program allowed back-packers and other volunteers to come and go freely, without long-term commitments, and spend any number of days at Mother Teresa's charity in Calcutta, after which they could move on to sightseeing in the city. "In this way, Mother Teresa was ahead of her time" (in Arnoldy 2010).

In the 1990s India seemed to be everywhere and was marketed globally in various forms. Increasingly, this meant also selling images and experiences of poverty as Western/global audiences have started to crave "grit and violence", as Rushdie puts it, authentic images and experiences of the 'real'. For many Western tourists, visiting Asian cities and experiencing the life of the buzzing metropolises of say, Jakarta, Bangkok and Mumbai, has been authentic and thrilling enough. India especially has offered exotic experiences for Western travelers. Tim Edensor has suggested that "the disorganised tourist space of the Indian street", very different from city streets in the West, is "sought by backpackers in search of 'authenticity' and the thrill of encountering the 'other'" (217). With globalization and increasing homogenization of big cities around the world, Western backpackers and other tourists have been looking for new "authentic" spaces and have found them, for example, in the slums of the Global South.

In the 1990s, poverty in the Global South became a product Western tourists can consume. Since then, slum tourism, controversial as it is, has become an increasingly popular travel activity practiced mainly by Western visitors in the Global South.³ Slum tourism, also known as poverty tourism or even "poorism", apparently began in 1992 with tours in Rio de Janeiro's biggest *favela*, Rocinha (Freire-Medeiros 584; Diekman and Hannam 1320).⁴ Rocinha is now the third most popular tourist attraction in Rio and slum tours are organised across the Global South from Manila

³ Williams (486) writes that a majority (65%) of the participants of Marcello Armstrong's – the pioneer of modern slum tourism – "Favela Tours" around Rocinha and Vila Canoas, are European and only a handful (1.5%) Brazilian. In Mumbai, Reality Tours and Travel dominates the slum tourism market. Dyson (259) notes that the tourists taking part in these tours are "predominantly European and American, white, middle class, 20-50 years old. Roughly 5-10% of the participants are Indians/Mumbaikars."

⁴ As Steinbrink (16) notes, as a phenomenon, "slum tourism" is a century and a half old, though it has grown dynamically in the Global South since the 1990s. "Slumming", i.e. visits by the British upper classes in their leisure time to the poor urban areas of the city began in London in the Victorian era and spread to New York in the 1880s. Steinbrink suggests that even though "slumming" in London had some touristic elements, it was in New York that "slumming" became a tourist attraction. The first commercial tour companies specialising in slum tourism were established in Manhattan, Chicago and San Francisco at the end of the nineteenth century. Slumming tours then emerged in big all over the United States after the turn of the century, when they "predominantly went to the urban enclaves of the new immigrant groups from Eastern and Southern Europe, and from Asia. This led to the development of a phenomenon that Cocks (2001) calls 'ethnic slumming'. The destination slum was now constructed as a 'place of the ethno-cultural Other'" (Steinbrink 7, 11-13). Since the 1990s "slum tourism" has globalised. Steinbrink (4) notes that in South Africa, "Township tourism had forerunners during the apartheid era, but in its recent form it started in the early 1990s." Nowadays it is a form of mass tourism in Cape Town.

and Mumbai to Cape Town, Cairo and Mexico City. Sometimes these tours take a virtual or fictional form, which makes them available to a wider audience. Slum fictions – films and novels that capitalise on the slum theme – are, as Rushdie and Chakravorty maintain, “a form of tourism” (Rushdie n. pag.; Chakravorty 88; see also Mendes). Slum films and slum tours are interlinked: slum tourists have preconceptions of the slums they are visiting based on slum fiction, and slum films such as *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*, 2002) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) have greatly increased interest in Rio’s *favelas* and Mumbai’s Dharavi slum respectively (e.g. Williams 485; Forster 30–32). Slum fiction is not a new phenomenon – it was not “born” in the 1990s – but its significance increased at the time together with the growing slum tourism industry. The experience of the embodied slum tour practice has been studied by Dyson, and by Diekman and Hannam, among others. Diekman and Hannam (1315) have argued that “significant connections exist” between cinematic representations and actual physical slum tourism.

Interestingly, (some) Western tourists seem to have the notion that “poverty and hardship is more ‘real’ and ‘true’ than contemporary urban middle class culture” (Engqvist and Lantz, qtd. in Dyson 265). Therefore, Indian slums, for example, are seen to offer even more authentic experiences and encounters with the “other” than Indian streets in general, which partly explains the increase in the popularity of slum tours – and, I would argue, slum fiction. To tour the slum, either physically or virtually, is, as Dyson (265) puts it, “to see a romanticized landscape ‘more real’ than the artifice of the tour-goer’s Western life.” Travel agencies round the world offer tours in the slums among the urban poor for those tourists for whom foreign middle-class homes in the Global South are not exotic or different enough – private homes are no longer out of bounds as couch-surfing and Airbnb accommodation allow tourists to see and live in actual (middle-class) homes of the inhabitants of the tourist destination – or who want to experience how the poor “Others” live but in a controlled, shielded and limited way. Furthermore, poverty seems to be the image foreigners have long had of India, and Westerners in particular seem to expect images of poverty in depictions of India. Nargis Dutt, star of the Indian block buster *Mother India* (1957) and later MP, accused the most famous Indian film director, Satyajit Ray, who himself was from Calcutta, “of distorting India’s image” in a parliamentary debate and also in an interview in 1980. She asked the interviewer (qtd. in Robinson 327): “Why do you think films like [Ray’s] *Pather Panchali* become so popular abroad? [...] Because people there want to see India in an abject condition. That is the image they have of our country and a film that confirms that image seems to them authentic.” She goes on to argue that Ray directs films about Indian poverty “to win awards.”

MacCannell has argued that tourists are “motivated by the desire to see life as it is really lived”, by the “quest for authentic experiences” (592, 593). Drawing on MacCannell, Dyson (264) writes: “Because tours, by their nature, open up the spaces that are otherwise inaccessible to

tourists, they are invariably constructed as an excursion into the ‘backstage’.” He goes on to argue that “the Dharavi tours consciously construct the entire slum as a ‘backstage’ landscape in relation to the ‘frontstage’ of Mumbai’s official tourist sites”. Similarly, films such as *City of Joy* and *Slumdog Millionaire* ostensibly give tourists virtual access to the backstage without having to endure the smells, noise, heat or crowds of the slum. *City of Joy* purports to depict a reality its middle-class (Western) viewers were not likely to get to experience or even see first-hand. Veijo Hietala (53) argues that narration in cinema and television differs from oral and literary story-telling and notes that though there are differences between cinema and TV, both are based on the central idea that the spectator sees things with her own eyes. According to Hietala, this has a profound significance on the emotional impact of the audiovisual presentation. Moving image and sound create a powerful illusion of first-hand experience, of witnessing events personally. Unlike in verbal transmission of narratives, in audiovisual transmission there is no mediation of the message: the spectator experiences things directly, in the present. Seeing with your own eyes means, Hietala suggests, first and foremost personally experiencing, sensing and feeling. *City of Joy* aims to show to its Western viewers what Indian slums are as lived locations. Viewers experience the slums through a youngish Western doctor who comes to Calcutta to seek enlightenment and enters the slum by accident. We encounter what slums are like, what it is to live in a slum, together with and through another Westerner. We do not have to sweat, get dirty, be beaten and desperate – he does all this for us but at the same time lets us see by our own eyes how hard life in the slums can be. Yet, the doctor does not sleep in the slum but in a hotel with a shower and room service.

City of Joys’s huge \$7 million slum, or bustee, set was built on rented land in Calcutta’s docklands and consisted of some 80 buildings. The filmmakers recall that in the strive for authenticity,

“[n]ew doors, roofs, and eroded corrugated iron were swapped for old with astonished bustee dwellers. Tattered curtains fluttered from windows; TV aerials sprouted from roofs littered with rubbish and old tires. Water, dyed black to give it a stagnant look, ran in open drains along the length of the streets and lay in huge puddles in the squares. [...] ‘The only thing lacking,’ says Shabana Azmi (who plays [Hasari’s wife] Kamla), ‘was the smell.’” (Joffé, Medoff, and Eberts 62).

Dyson discusses MacCannell’s (1973) influential work on “staged authenticity” which argues that “tourist spaces can be made to look like the ‘backstage’ when, in fact, they are just as ‘dressed up’ and ‘artificial’ as the frontstage.” Dyson continues: “It is implied that ‘contrived tourist spaces’ [...] undergo a substantive transformation and are physically manipulated to appear more authentic than they really are” (264). Staging is an integral part of fiction filmmaking and *City of Joy* is no exception. What is interesting is the kind of staging done on the slum set. The set was built inside a

large concrete tank so that it could be flooded for the monsoon sequence. Water for the flooded set and the street scenes in which the fake monsoon sprays torrential rains on actual city streets had to be transported by trucks from a distant 850-foot well sunk for the purpose (*City of Joy* production notes). The water used on the set was purified and chemically treated and then dyed to make it look stagnant and polluted (Hedges n. pag.). “Careful attention” was reportedly “paid to maintaining hygienic conditions in an area where diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera and typhoid have yet to be eradicated” (Hedges n. pag.). Mindful of the potential dangers of a slum, filmmakers stage images of extreme poverty and offer virtual tours of slum for visitors who cannot or do not want to experience them physically. One can assume that there were also many Westerners who wanted to know what these slums and their inhabitants made famous by Mother Teresa’s program were actually like but who could or would not go to Calcutta themselves. Since there were no slum tours available at the time, *City of Joy* offered a virtual slum tour of Calcutta for global consumer-spectators. As Mitu Sengupta remarks, “[f]ilms offer potential visitors a set of images about a country even before they arrive and, at times, compensate for visits altogether” (70).

Despite the “authentic” look of the slum, *City of Joy* is fairly restrained in its portrayal of poor people. There are some people washing themselves by the street in the background in some sequences of the film, but the camera never focuses on them or shows them in detail. The open sewers are highly visible but the camera never shows children, not to mention the foreigners, suffering from diarrhea and defecating in open sight. John Hutnyk (193) has pointed out that “[t]he viscous limit of *City of Joy* is reached by blood, childbirth and a fairly sanitized focus upon the stumps of leprosy.” The spectators encounter blood, sweat and tears but no other bodily products. The film does not try to shock its viewers with excessive realism and squalor. 16 years later Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*, set partly in a Mumbai slum, was markedly different in its portrayal of life in the slums and its focus on waste, dirt and excreta. In *City of Joy*, Joan and Max work at a clinic but the camera never zooms in on open sores, maggoty wounds or sick people in general other than those suffering from leprosy. One reason for the restraint in the Joffé film may be the protests against the shooting of the film: perhaps it was important to show that the film is not poverty porn.

One interesting point about the depiction of the slum community in *City of Joy* is that it appears really to be a community of people with no caste and gender and religious divisions. The reality in *City of Joy* might be different. Jan Nijman (10) writes of the famous Mumbai slum that “The overwhelming majority of Dharavi residents are Dalits [...] who [...] reside in tight community clusters within the slum generally based on regional origin and professional status – living anywhere else is virtually unthinkable.” In contrast, in *City of Joy*, poverty seems to make everyone equal. This may be because, as Nijman writes,

[t]o outsiders, slums tend to appear more or less contiguous areas of decrepit housing, without much consideration for possible internal differences. But to those inside the slums, territoriality is often hugely important in terms of belonging, identity, safety, community, status and political organization. (11)

City of Joy clearly depicts an outsider's view of the slum. The slum space in the film is made understandable to the Western viewer as the slum is presented as a homogenised one (with the exception of the lepers) and the differences are between the Westerners and slum-dwellers and slum-dwellers and gangsters rather than internal differences between different factions. Hasari's wife Kamla (Shabana Azmi) exclaims at one point that they have "never known such friends" as they now have in the slum community. There is no competition for space or work, everyone works together and helps each other. Hasari, for example, is offered a place to live in, even though he can only pay rent once he gets a job and starts earning: there is strong solidarity among the slum-dwellers.

Reading Roland Joffé's text in *City of Joy: The Illustrated Story of the Film*, one gets the impression that he believed that his team of filmmakers had captured a realistic portrayal of Calcutta and that the portrayal was objected to by the Marxist West Bengal government only because they wanted to deny that reality. According to Joffé, Indians have had "a simple, potent human response to powerlessness, to the unendurable: denial. India has refined this instinctual response into something close to an art form" (12). Joffé is therefore basically saying that the government of West Bengal has denied the existence of the slums and their poor living conditions and that Calcuttans protested against the film because it portrayed a reality they do not want to see and acknowledge and definitely do not want advertised abroad. Joffé (11–12) writes that the problem with his film seemed to be that it depicts poor people and the current situation rather than (colonial) history. Calcutta was established by the British in 1690 and served as the capital of the colony until 1911. The British taxed Bengal heavily and much of the area's – and India's – wealth was exported through the city. The British may have left the country in 1947, but the colonial legacy to Calcutta and India cannot be denied. Yet this is exactly what Joffé, an Englishman himself, does. He mentions in *City of Joy: The Illustrated Story of the Film* that "[t]he historic capital of the British Raj, Calcutta was once extremely rich. Now it is a fecund, intricate maze of streets dotted with the dumpy and decaying presences of myriad colonial palaces" (7). The implication of this is that the city was rich and beautiful when the British still ruled India, but Indians have allowed it to decay. In the film itself, old colonial buildings, monuments and places such the Raj Bhawan, St. Paul's Cathedral and the Queen Victoria Memorial are conspicuous by their absence: it is clear that the filmmakers have chosen to focus on postcolonial, present-day India and present her problems as contemporary and local, not related to history or the global economy.

The colonial era or the fact that Calcutta once was the capital of British India, a grand and wealthy city, through which much of India's wealth drained to Britain, are left unmentioned in the film. As the old colonial connection and its legacy in the city as well as any and all effects of neo-colonialism are not examined, the British are absolved from any responsibility of the condition of the poor.

East is East

The first images of India in *City of Joy* are seen after we hear the words "run and see where that will take you" uttered by Max's father, who is also the chief at the hospital where Max works. The next shot tells the audience where that is, as the shot is of Indian countryside, similar to many earlier images in (Western) popular culture. The exact location of that countryside is not divulged. All the audience needs to know is that it is a very general "India" where Max is going. As Mitra (85) has noted, Lowe's home town "Houston, Texas" is marked with a caption but India, or later Calcutta, is not named similarly. The audience's identification of the city space later in the film happens through the line "We're going to Calcutta" voiced by Hasari's son when the family still prepares for their journey in the countryside or by recognising of the first image of Calcutta, the Howrah bridge. Mitra sees that this naming strategy is "an attempt to point out that the city of joy is certainly not Houston, with a silent assumption that when the narrative moves to the city of joy the images will be self-explanatory, and the viewer would never confuse Houston with the city of joy" (85): I argue that while this seems to be the case, there is also more to this distinction of naming cities diegetically or non-diegetically depending on whether they are located in the "First" or "Third" World. The implication of this representational strategy seems to be that Max is from a specific location, from Houston, Texas, United States, whereas at least rural India locations are less specific and mutually interchangeable.

The interchangeability appears to extend to Indian cities as well: even though the cities are clearly different from the Indian countryside, and represented as such, the cities themselves are not shown to be specific enough to need naming. The implication seems to be that one Indian city is much like another. This specificity of the place names in the West and unspecificity of the places in South Asia points to a situation similar to what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2) has called "the inequality of ignorance" in, for example, academic scholarship in the humanities. Western scholars who are very specific when discussing Western referents can afford to be more ignorant and unspecific when discussing Indian/South Asian/Asian referents, whereas Indian/South Asian scholars cannot afford to be unspecific or ignorant of Western ideas, names, places, people and so on. Chakrabarty (2) discusses an analysis of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* by a "Westerner" as an example: the novel's intertextual references to Western cultural products, novels,

films and writers are individually named (“*The Tin Drum*, *Tristram Shandy*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*”) in a sentence which only very generally mentions the references to Indian cultural products (“Indian legends, films, and literature”). As Chakrabarty notes, the Western “author is under no obligation here to be able to name with any authority and specificity the ‘Indian’ allusions” (2). Similar generalisations and unspecific references are notable in *City of Joy* as well. Houston, Texas is contrasted to a very general and vague “India”, and the hi-tech operation room of the Houston hospital to the street clinic in the City of Joy. As the audience never sees images of proper Indian hospitals and is first introduced to an India which is traditional and underdeveloped, the audience not familiar with India may well take the street clinic to be the typical kind of facility where patients are treated in India. In the 1980 interview mentioned above, Nargis Dutt (qtd. in Robinson 327) told the interviewer that when she goes abroad, foreigners ask her “embarrassing questions like ‘Do you have schools in India?’ ‘Do you have cars in India?’ I feel so ashamed, my eyes are lowered before them. If a foreigner asks me ‘What kind of houses do you live in?’ I feel like answering, ‘We live on treetops.’” *City of Joy* does nothing to change this “inequality of ignorance” between India and the “West”. Chakrabarty (2) writes that the “inequality of ignorance” can be unselfconscious. However, in *City of Joy*, contrasting Houston, nicknamed the “Space City”, with the slum “City of Joy” seems to have been done consciously – Max Loeb of Lapierre’s book was from Miami, not Houston, and the story itself does not require that change of location (though Swayze who plays Max was born in Houston and probably spoke naturally with a Texan accent).

The conventional, even stereotypical images of the “general” Indian countryside in *City of Joy* are followed by a shot of the Howrah bridge, a famous symbol of the city, which may tell the audience that this is Calcutta. The bridge is used in *City of Joy* to authenticate the city whose name is seldom mentioned, but interestingly many of the other “iconic” sites and sights of Calcutta are absent. Neither the famous Kalighat Kali temple nor any Hindu, or for that matter, Muslim, religious rites or practices, are shown or heard, except in few scenes in the background. The camera catches glimpses of some temples, but the city in fact appears fairly secular except for the religious icons, such as the crucifixes of Joan, the Irish nurse running the dispensary in the slum. The character of Joan is based on the character of Stephan Kovalski, Polish priest, who in turn is a composite character in Lapierre’s book, representing “several dedicated clerics” (Joffé, Medoff, and Eberts 67), hence the Catholic icons. They also connect Joan with the work of Mother Teresa and her nuns and volunteers in the city, and charity with Christianity.

Hutnyk (185) notes that “most viewers ‘back home’” recognise Calcutta by “familiar stereotype scenes of poverty, crowds, perhaps the Howrah bridge, and so on.” In *City of Joy*, Calcutta is introduced using these familiar images. The camera moves from the first Calcutta shot of the Howrah bridge to the crowded and somewhat chaotic Howrah railway station, where the Pal

family arrives by train from Bihar. The same train carries a Communist Party notable who is greeted by a uniformed band, flags and banners, so there is a lot of noise and commotion going on. The Pals, when they exit the train and set their foot on Calcuttan terrain, are immediately swooped over by the crowd on the platform. The crowd pushes the young Shambu Pal towards a group of lepers begging, in an aggressive manner, at the platform, scaring the little boy. When the family exits the station, they are seen navigating the chaotic traffic of the Calcuttan street. Within a few minutes, the city is introduced as one of crowds, poverty and begging as well as chaotic traffic – all familiar stereotypes of India.

Furthermore, the slum in the film seems to exist in a synecdochic relation to the city, as the poor part of the city comes to represent the whole. When Max has been mugged and brought unconscious to the City of Joy for the first time, he wakes up to hear Joan, the white European nurse, say to him: “Welcome to India – you are in the city of joy”. Joan clearly implies that this is typical India. Whether she is talking about the slum or the mugging is left unclear. As Mitra (86) notes, “[t]he name Calcutta is unsaid and, to the untrained eye of the Western viewer, the name India, the images of the metropolis, and the city of joy are all connected together by the utterances of the white woman.” This strategy “locat[es]”, according to Mitra, “the story in a particular geographic space and connect[s] the name of the location with a particular set of images about the place.” I suggest that it not only conflates Calcutta with City of Joy as Mitra argues but also India with Calcutta, and eventually City of Joy with India so that the slum space comes to represent India. This is confirmed later on when Max, after helping to deliver a baby in the leper colony, says to Joan that he does not “even feel good about what we did back there. Another little mouth to feed in this cesspool of a country.” Even though he is chastised by Joan (“Feel good! Who the hell cares if you feel good! What makes you so special! You’re just a person like the rest of us”), the implication here is clear: the Calcuttan slum comes to stand for the whole country in Max’s and therefore quite likely also in the viewer’s eyes.

City of Joy focuses on the poverty and slums of Calcutta and offers a very limited view of Calcutta’s other, more affluent and modern, sides. Calcuttan universities and colleges, hospitals, sports grounds and stadiums, medium- and high-rise buildings are excluded from the camera’s view. Indian writer and politician Shashi Tharoor has elaborated on the concerns the locals had before the making of the film:

Calcuttans dreaded yet another depiction of poverty, prostitution, and urban squalor unleavened by any acknowledgement that their city has for more than two centuries been India’s cultural capital, a metropolis of art galleries, avant-garde theaters, and overflowing bookshops, whose coffeehouse waiters speak knowledgeably of Godard and Truffaut. (314)

The filmmakers can of course defend themselves by saying that their film is about the slums and the poverty, not about Calcutta the cultural capital, but the problem with the film is, as the state government and the protesters feared prior to the shooting of the film, that it barely acknowledges the existence of the “other” Calcutta/s. Affluent and/or middle-class Calcutta is only glimpsed in the beginning when Hasari is trying to find a place for his family and when he pulls his rickshaw later in the film, regularly taking a teenage girl his daughter’s age to school and later to buy a wedding dress. This hints at the vast differences between classes in terms of income, standard of living, education and so on, but the reasons behind these differences are never examined. Rather, Calcutta/India is shown to be like this, like it has been forever. The presence of the Marxist government of Bengal is hinted at with the party’s flags and banners adorning various places of the city, but the implication is that it has failed to make a difference to the lives of the poor.

The city’s chaotic traffic is shown in several shots, and cars, lorries, and motorcycles play their part in the plot, but the Kolkata metro (running since 1984) does not appear; the most significant mode of transport featured in the film is the old, hand-pulled rickshaw. Hutnyk (188) notes that hand-pulled rickshaws, though still used in the inner city, had been replaced by bicycle-rickshaws in the real slum, Pilkhana, portrayed in *City of Joy*, long before the shooting of the film; also the fact that the Calcutta Municipal Corporation campaigned to end the use of hand-pulled rickshaws altogether is left unmentioned. As Hutnyk argues, “Such omissions of urban planning efforts in Calcutta are significant devices in presenting the city as the exemplar of massively abstracted ‘grinding poverty’” (188). Furthermore, putting hand-pulled rickshaws, described in Indian press as “symbols of inhumanity” (Ray n. pag.) and “symbolic of the city striving to come to terms with the pressing concerns of a modern society” (Ghosh n. pag.), at the forefront of the film gives an impression in the Orientalist tradition of Calcutta/India as a city/country stuck in the past, unchanging, inhumane and in need of Western intervention, which in this film takes place through an American doctor.

Whereas the hand-pulled rickshaw takes the centre-stage, more modern forms of transportation are curiously omitted. The Hasaris travel to the city first by bullock and cart, then bus and finally an overcrowded train, all fitting the (stereotypical) image of India not at the forefront of modernisation. In contrast, the arrival of Max in India, presumably by airplane, is not shown as Max is first seen amid chaotic traffic in Calcutta, mobbed by children begging for money and cows blocking his way to his hotel in a part of the city where you would not expect a supposedly wealthy American neurosurgeon to stay. The crowd, chaos, noise and beggars of the Howrah railway station are not balanced by images of, for example, an airport or modern technology, denoting speed and efficiency. The hotel Max stays at looks rather shabby for an affluent traveler, and he seems to be used to “better” hotels as he asks the porter in an ironic tone when he sees the room: “No fruit

basket? No minibar?” The Western viewer is thereby easily led to the conclusion that this is the standard of Calcuttan/Indian/local hotels, for why would Max complain about the standard of his lodgings, if he had chosen this modest hotel instead of a four- or five-star one? The film eschews not only Calcutta’s cultural sites and colonial monuments but it also avoids showing images of a modern and more affluent Calcutta.

Calcutta/India in *City of Joy* is decidedly non-modern, especially in contrast to Max’s native Houston: the operating room of the ‘Space City’s’ hospital in the opening sequence, and the film’s specifying of the city where that operation room is located as Houston, associate the city with all things modern, progressive and hi-tech. This is in stark contrast to the following images of rural India, with its eternal heat and dust, bullock-carts and poor people, and Calcutta, with its pavement-dwellers, lepers, street clinics and open sewers. In an earlier screenplay (Brach and Joffé), Max is first encountered in an ashram with his American girlfriend but he gets fed up and leaves, without money (his girlfriend seems to have footed his bills), and heads for a country airport willing to go anywhere but where he is at the time. He meets a wealthy Indian family who offer him a seat in their private plane headed for Calcutta. Max ends up spending some time with the family before checking in the shabby hotel and finding his way into the slum. This section which has been cut would have shown another side of Calcutta, the well-to-do people and their private planes as well as a meeting between Max and her girlfriend at Calcutta’s (modern) airport. It also explains the shabbiness of the hotel Max checks into in the finished film and underscores the fact that Max is not as wealthy as one might expect. By focusing solely on poverty, the filmmakers have not only made India look eternal and unchanging, they have also closed the door to examining the vast differences between classes and the inequality in wealth distribution. Poverty becomes the condition of India; its history, reason and structures are not explored but a simple solution is offered by the American: stop being so passive.

White Saviours

In *City of Joy: The Illustrated Story of the Film*, Joffé offers reasons for what he clearly sees as the decayed state of Calcutta. He explains: “A much-conquered people throughout their history, the Indians have coped with invasions partly through passivity, partly through accommodation, or manipulation, or patient absorption.” Passivity is a major theme here as well as in the film. Joffé does not quite claim that passivity is the natural condition of Indians – he argues that there are historical reasons for it – but it is seen as a general trait of the people of the subcontinent. The same conception is repeated in the film, as the white European woman Joan Bethel (Pauline Collins), who has worked at the slum dispensary for some time, tells Max that “[i]n the beginning [when she came to stay] it was really frustrating, trying to convince [the slum-dwellers] not to be so bloody passive–

then I realised I was fighting a thousand years of acceptance.” Reading this line in the light of Joffé’s commentary of Indians as a much-conquered people, two interesting points arise. First, the Indian people Joffé is talking about seem to be the Hindus, with the thousand years mentioned by Joan referring to the Muslim conquest of parts of North India in the eleventh century. So it is basically Hindu passivity Joffé is talking about, thus falling back on old Orientalist stereotypes. As Indian Subaltern Studies historian Gyan Prakash (386) has written, “India appeared to be unchanging and passive” in Orientalist scholarship. Prakash continues: “The India of the Orientalist’s knowledge emerged as Europe’s other, an essential and distanced entity knowable by the detached and distanced observer of the European Orientalist.” Joffé, who worked on the screenplay together with Mark Medoff and the one-time co-writer Gérard Brach, seems to be taking this Orientalist position, observing the Indians from a Euro-American (English director, Hollywood funding) perspective and identifying passivity as the cause behind India’s poverty.

The second interesting point is that, according to Joffé, what was once a historical survival strategy of the Hindus has become a problem in postcolonial India when there are no more conquerors to organise the society. As the white European and American characters tell the audience, the reason for the poverty of the slum-dwellers in the film is their passivity, passivity that is a thousand years old. This seems to offer proof to Edward Said’s point about latent Orientalism which in his view is “almost unconscious” and changes only a little with time. Said has argued that all nineteenth-century Orientalist writers Said “kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient [...] saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption” (207). Joffé’s analysis of the situation in Calcutta in the early 1990s folds within this view: the silent indifference and the passivity of Indians including the government of West Bengal has resulted in a situation in which the poor live in horrific conditions. Thus the old Orientalist myth of the passivity of “Orientals” is evoked and used as an explanation instead of examining the structures of poverty, the impact of colonial legacy or global capitalism. Joffé’s analysis of the situation also opens up the necessity in the circumstances of Western intervention. His *City of Joy* is represented as “a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption” (Said 207) and this attention and redemption is offered by Joan and Max in the film.

In addition to Joan, there is a young Indian “intern who comes in three days a week at seven thirty” working at the clinic. The intern, Sunil (Anjan Dutt), is introduced by Joan: “Wealthy medical family. Donates his time. Generous young man.” Yet he becomes a side character whose story is not followed. It is quite telling that on the list of the cast of *City of Joy* on IMDb Dr. Sunil is number 34 with the main characters standing on top. The spotlight of the film is on white saviours,

so much so that the film can be seen to belong to the “white savior film genre” in which “a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate” (Hughey 1). In *City of Joy*, the self-help clinic is run by Joan, who calls herself jokingly a “corporate executive”. She receives money from Europe – “from a Swiss organisation” and from her ex-husband – but not from any local sources. The government and its workers are nowhere to be seen, the local police is in the local Godfather’s pocket and the slum-dwellers have to pay protection money to the Godfather. Unlike in *Reality Tours and Travel in Dharavi*, where the tour guides emphasise the workers in Dharavi “as symbols of entrepreneurship and the unrecognized value of slums as productive urban spaces” (Dyson 263), the slums in *City of Joy* are in no way productive and the entrepreneurship is the product of Western encouragement. There is only one possible exception to this: the workshop where Hasari’s daughter works but it is not entirely clear whether the workshop is located in the actual slum and in any case, the workshop is introduced only as a place where Hasari’s daughter meets her future husband, not a thriving business *per se*. The situation is thus set for a “white (male) savior” to step in.

When Max, who in his own words is a “non-practicing doctor” who does not “like sick people”, finally agrees to work at the clinic midway through the narrative, he complains to Joan that “you’ve got some nerve calling that place a clinic” since there is no morphine or “organisation”. He then takes the reins and organises the clinic, expanding it to allow the treating of the lepers in the clinic, because walking to the leper colony wastes hours of time every day. The rationality of Max is further emphasized as he and Joan have to fight against local prejudices, as most of the slum-dwellers do not want the lepers visiting their clinic.

Max also teaches the slum-dwellers to stand up for themselves when the Godfather demands more rent and protection money if they expand. When the matter is discussed by some residents of the City of Joy, Sunil suggests that they “must break the Godfather’s hold on [them]” but proceed with caution, whereby Max again assumes leadership and says that they have to risk it: “I don’t understand you people. You act like sheep!” Prompted to action by Max, the slum-dwellers work together to build the new clinic and to defend it when an angry mob sent by the Godfather tries to destroy it. While Joan has to budge and agree to pay protection money to end the riot, Max finds another chance to lead slum-dwellers out of passivity when the Godfather’s son Ashok takes away Hasari’s rickshaw. Max encourages him to fix an old, broken rickshaw and work in an area that is not controlled by Ashok, thus teaching Hasari that he should let go of passivity and work hard, that is the way forward. Max’s advice is like the American dream moved to Calcutta. As Hasari follows Max’s advice, he eventually earns enough money to pay her daughter’s dowry and arrange a lavish wedding for her at the end of the film. Max’s role as a “white saviour” is emphasized when he says he is there “to get you guys organised” – and the slum-dwellers become

so organized that they go on strike against Ashok's attempt to raise the rickshaw rent. The rickshaw-pullers right to strike is confirmed by a judge in court, thus returning law and order to the slum. Following Max's advice has paid off.

As the text on the back cover reads, "Max teaches the impoverished Indians the strength of their own unity". Hutnyk has noted that the film's concentration on charity "serves to render redundant any more analytical examination of exploitation, poverty and opportunism beyond simplistic good-versus-evil narratives" (180). Individuals are prompted to fight against the oppression of organized crime and to make their lives better but the attention of the film is on treating the symptoms of poverty, not problematising, examining or solving the issue.

City of Joy is a Western film ostensibly about India and the Indian poor but really about the mental journey of the white main character. In 1991, a Western story about Indian slum-dwellers was still not really about the slum-dwellers but about Westerners coming to India and being charitable. Max, the white American, is the focus of the story: a youngish Western man trying to find himself and his purpose in life. He finds it by helping the poor in Calcutta, and the poor become a means for Max's self-discovery; they are not that important themselves. The slum is the place which teaches Max to stop running and where he finds inner peace. Ultimately the film is more about learning about yourself (as a Westerner) than about learning about the people of Calcutta. If the point was to show the lives of the poor and the work done among them, one could have focused on Sunil. In 2008, the world had changed so much that *Slumdog Millionaire* could have an Indian main character and white faces were largely absent from screen. The depiction of slums was not much more complex, but at least the portrayal of India was more diverse.

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