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SALAAM BOMBAY!

(Mis)representing child labor

by Jyotika Viridi

SALAAM BOMBAY! marks a departure from the powerful and one-sided flow of media texts from the "First" to the "Third World." As a film from "Other Worlds," to borrow a term from Gayatri Spivak, **SALAAM BOMBAY** is made by Mira Nair, an Indian filmmaker, a woman of color. Its warm reception by western audiences is an encouraging sign, since despite India's large film industry, few Indian films reach a western audience. Films about India that do reach the west have been made by westerners presenting their view of the Orient. These films are representations of the Other rather than self-representations from "Other Worlds." However, I wish to question how much indigenous authorship—as in the case of **SALAAM BOMBAY!**—amounts to a more "authentic" representation of the "Other World."

I think that to receive the film **SALAAM BOMBAY!** as a film from "Other Worlds" raises complex issues about representational politics, which arise out of India's complicated colonial history. Who makes the film? For whom? And how does it shape what is said? In other words, the film's textual politics can only be analyzed by posing these kind of rhetor-

ical questions. In this paper I will analyze **SALAAM BOMBAY!** in terms of its politics of production and politics of reception, which I see as tied to its textual politics. By politics of production I mean to locate the subject-position of the filmmaker, which is constituted by a specific colonial history. I will examine this film's reception at two levels: first, how the content of the film text shapes its reception; and second, the position the text occupies in western film and tele-visual space. In particular, I will look at the film's reception in the grounds of the "First World" and the representation of "Other Worlds" within it.

The reason for tying the textual politics of the film to the politics of reception has to do with the nature of my own engagement with the film. I wish to present my own subject-position viz-a-viz the text and the audience. Having seen the film advertised as a "docudrama" about the street children of Bombay, played by those actually engaged in child labor, and having grown up in India and thus familiar with this scenario, I was disappointed by the film. Its overwhelming success with western audiences motivated me to try to understand their response. I showed the film to U. S. university students, and I will report their responses along with my analysis. As I do this, I am fully cognizant of the problems

involved in my privileged position as a media critic representing the audiences' reaction through the movement I make between audience response and the film text. My intention here is to highlight some features of the overwhelmingly positive response to the film and to point out how the film text shapes this.

The film *SALAAM BOMBAY!* traces the story of Krishna, a boy, about twelve years old. Abandoned by a circus company that he works for, Krishna buys a ticket to Bombay. We are told in a conversation he has with another child that he left home because of a family feud and needs to raise Rs 500 (approximately the monthly wage of an unskilled worker) before he can go home. Working at a local tea shop that services a neighborhood brothel and befriended by a street-adolescent, Chillum, who sells drugs, Krishna encounters the underworld of a "Third World" metropolis. Several parallel stories are woven into the plot: one revolves around "Sweet Sixteen," a young girl from Nepal kept hostage at the brothel, a victim of the traffic in women; a second story deals with another prostitute in the brothel, a single mother, in love with a local drug pusher and struggling to raise her five year old daughter, Manju; a third story is about Krishna's friend Chillum and his addiction to "brown sugar."

I will report what appealed to the university students to whom I showed the film and interviewed after the screening. The film was received with unanimous and unambiguous praise by members of the audience. Identification with Krishna was ubiquitous: "He was so good....so responsible." The fact that Krishna was not rough or hardened by his circumstances made him all the more appealing: "He did not do drugs....He worked hard to earn his money....He 'looked' his role." This latter point seemed sufficient to establish his credibility. The film evoked maximum involvement in the narrative line — the characters, the plot, what happened to whom, the personal relations between the children, the nameless prostitute and her relationship with her daughter. University students seemed enormously satisfied with the narratives about the various characters, the characters' actions and whether or not they were justified. This is how the "magic of realism" seems to work. The film can be accepted and appreciated as a powerful rendition of the manifest reality of the "Other World" it portrays.

For this reason I argue that it could be a story of pathos situated anywhere in the world. Aside from the trappings of language, idiom and locale, I do not see the nexus of drugs, poverty, and prostitution in the Bombay underworld as being in any way a particularized representation of a metropolis in India. I am unable to see how this story would be different if set in Dickens' nineteenth century England or a contemporary New York City or Chicago.

When I probed the students about what the film told them about a world they knew nothing about, they did have questions: "Do all parents abandon their children? Does the state take away children from their parents?" they asked. Interestingly *SALAAM BOMBAY!* resembles the clichéd genre of commercials that people are familiar with on U.S. television which solicit good-hearted North Americans to

donate their dollars to adopt/support children in a "Third World" country. It is not the film's appeal to emotions that I consider problematic. It is the glaring omission of the specificity of the situation which Nair attempts to delineate. In particular, the film omits issues concerning child labor and rural displacement.

I asked about the student's reactions to child labor. One student was shocked to see young children working. Another student felt the children were lucky to have jobs to support themselves. At any rate the scarcity of jobs at a living wage did not seem to be an issue. Yet another student commented that children's having jobs was offered as background information about the characters, but of itself it did not seem important. Nair's own motivation for making the film, the starting point of it all, was her experience of seeing children selling newspapers while stopping at a red light when she rode in a taxi in Bombay. The children were weaving dangerously between the cars imploring people like herself to buy newspapers. Since child labor is rampant in India, its presence inescapable even to the casual tourist, it is surprising how much Nair elides the issue. However, "You cannot show everything," a member of the audience argued with me.

The displacement of the children from their rural homes to the back alleys of Bombay does surface in *SALAAM BOMBAY*. Within the narrative economy of the film, family feuds are invoked as the cause of this displacement. Here was a moment in the film where a narrative cause-effect connection, used repeatedly, could have been mobilized to explore deeper connections between social institutions and their effects on peoples' lives. The actual cause of displacement is set in motion by dispossession of land — that oldest modern tragedy of capitalism, the rise of rural unemployment, and the subsequent migration to the city in search of jobs. The film completely represses these casual connections in the same way it does the issues surrounding child labor.

Had Nair chosen a more analytic direction, she would have avoided the rather specious representation of children abandoned by their parents living like orphans. A picture closer to reality would depict parents who do not abandon children but rather view children as an asset to the family and their labor an essential contribution to family income. Specifically this rural migrant family custom gets transposed onto urban capitalist relations, making children a source of cheap and easily exploited labor in the city. Impoverished rural migrant families do not see educating their children as an avenue for achieving upward mobility. Energy is directed towards mere survival.

What is worse is that the narrative gives rise to a complete misperception of the problem. The film presents the problem of families abandoning children, on the one hand, and of the state, on the other hand, making authoritarian interventions in family life by taking away children from "dysfunctional" families. This is a familiar scenario to the western audience and is read into the Indian context. It is perhaps farthest from the heart of the problems confronting street children in India. Nair's plot line, while it succeeds in

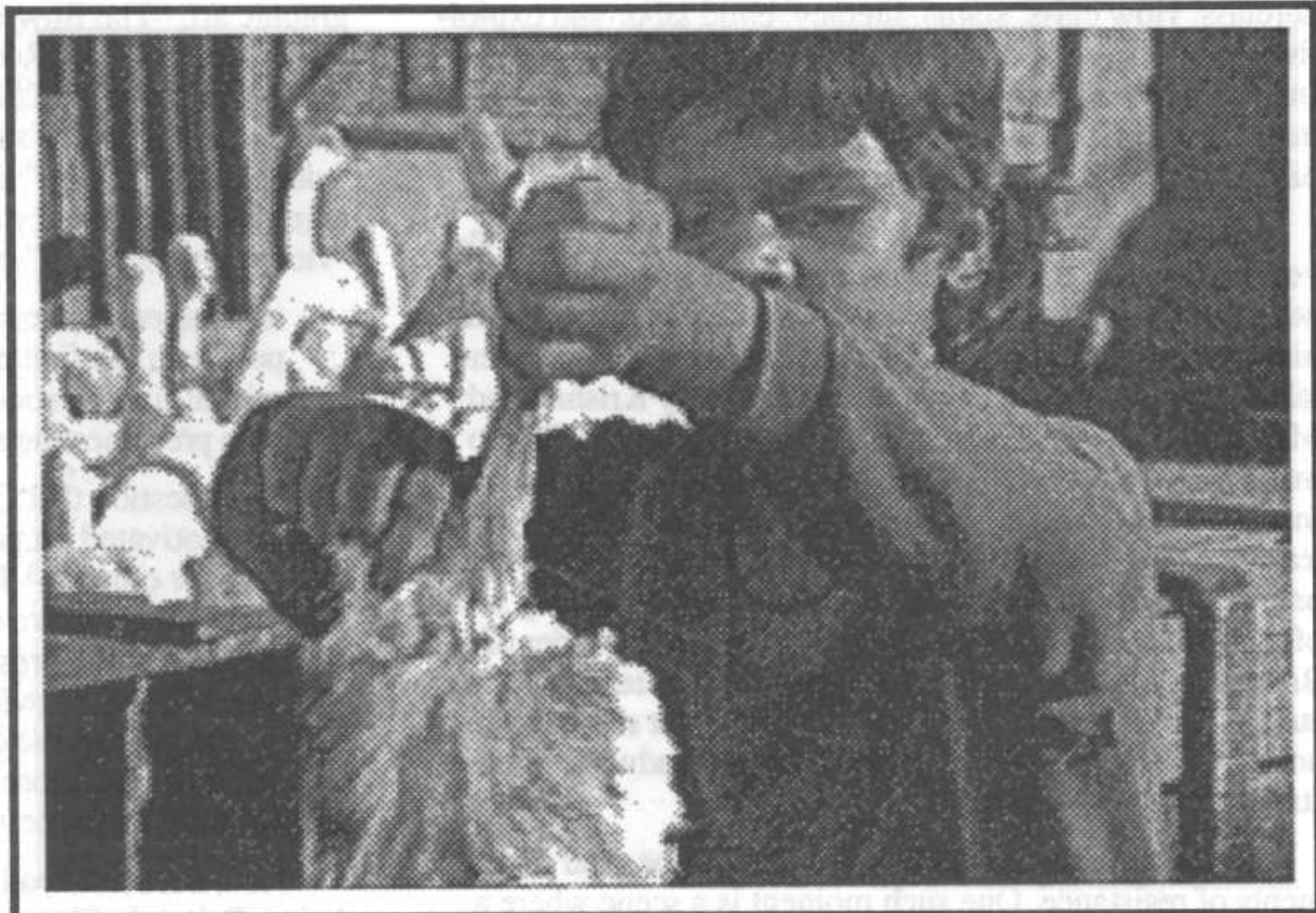
maintaining narrative momentum, fails because it ends up with a merely symptomatic reading of poverty and despair.

Thus in a sequence towards the end of the film, Manju (the prostitute's daughter) and Krishna get picked up by the police and thrown into a state detention center. Manju gets taken away from the prostitute (against her mother's wishes) and loses her family just like Krishna already has, although for different reasons. This loss of family that the film repeatedly points to is incredible, especially when matched against social reality. State institutions are strained and overcrowded not because they actively round up children on the streets but because these repressive, reformist institutions, whether philanthropic or penal, are always underbudgeted, underpaid and understaffed. The sequence that follows Krishna's escapades in the state-run detention center appears to be added to reveal the dismal conditions of state institutions which are supposed to function as an alternative to life on the streets for these children.

But here again, Nair merely skims the surface of another weighty issue ridden with complexities — the issue of minors, criminality, law, and repressive reform structures like "juvenile" detention centers. If the Indian state is to be faulted for its relation to children, it is not for its solicitous and paternalistic interventions in family matters but rather for its utter lack of concern about regulating large and small scale employers for their egregious violations of labor laws, exploitation of child-labor, and the failure to bring them to book for their widely known malfeasance in this area. *SALAAM BOMBAY!* indicts both family and state for a callous attitude towards children, but the question remains, is that the crux of the problem of child labor?

The film depends on a traditional, overused, and generalized account of decadence, dislocation, the depravity of street life, the pathos of drug abuse, poverty and prostitution. In structuring the film around a brothel, and the lives of prostitutes and drug pushers, Nair exercises a choice, including plot lines about adults trapped by the manipulations of love/sex relations. The story of Baba, the drug pusher, and his relationship with Sweet Sixteen and the prostitute/single mother are narratives of victimization that guarantee audience interest and attention, since audiences always have an appetite for such stories. But such major inclusions are choices the filmmaker makes at the cost of excluding other aspects of the children's lives on the street which the film purports to address.

By locating the film in the setting of a brothel and by dealing with pushers and prostitutes, the film engages us with institutions that are largely tangential to the lives of



"children on the street of Bombay," to whom the film is dedicated. As one student pointed out, child labor and the struggle for survival become background issues in the film. The struggle to find work, job conditions, extortion, underpayment and long hours of work that working children face are only faintly suggested in the film and for the most part remain peripheral. The film seems more about the life of children on the streets who make a quick buck by pushing drugs, enjoying long hours of leisure, gambling, drinking and taking buggy rides after they break into an old Parsee man's house.

There is too much that we do not know about the children shown sleeping in the streets. How do they organize to get food? Or water? Where do they bathe or take a shit? Many would argue that these are unnecessary and unpalatable details to add to a film. Who would want to see these children searching for food from garbage cans, bathing in ponds saturated with industrial effluents or using the railway tracks to take a shit? But such images are unpalatable precisely because the truth about the everyday lives in the street is grimmer and offers less titillation than do the travails of love among victims of prostitution.

The film offers a fable about poverty, a tale about the misery and suffering of the underclass with an overpowering sense of hopelessness. In this sense it is reminiscent of the Italian tradition of neorealism of the fifties, along with its use of location shooting and non-professional actors. De Sica's film *BICYCLE THIEF* (1948) is emblematic of this tradition. Like Ricci, the protagonist of De Sica's film, the boy Krishna tries hard, but circumstances constantly go against him. Krishna suffers one reversal after another, losing his family, his "girl," his job, and the money he almost makes in order to go back to his village. The film leaves us with a merely sentimental account of the conditions of poverty and with pessimism about the victimization of the un-

derclass. How class, status, literacy, child labor and exploitive labor practices impinge on each other is not presented. Instead what is deployed is a narrative structure that relies on a cause-effect formula sometimes used with little credibility.

For instance, the process of how Krishna becomes involved with a network of connections once in Bombay is not at all clear. When he arrives in the city, we are shown him meeting Chillum and other street-children by accidentally bumping into a garbage heap. Similarly Krishna and Manju's arrest appears to be staged merely for the film to make a hasty "expose" of life inside a state-run "juvenile" institution. Krishna's "great escape" from the juvenile detention center happens in the most clichéd style: he jumps onto a pick-up truck that stands outside the forbidding walls of the juvenile home. This and the subsequent murder of Baba go against the grain of Krishna's character as it was etched out in the rest of the film: he had been shown as innocent and compassionate despite the most adverse circumstances in his environment.

There are moments in the film that can be read as moments of resistance. One such moment is a scene where a U.S. tourist bargains with Krishna and Chillum over the sale of cocaine. Interestingly, every one of my students responded positively to the tourist being "ripped off," though many who had traveled or had friends who had traveled had heard warnings against "scams" in "Third World" countries, which they were also aware were "cheap" places to visit. "He deserved it." "It was perfectly legitimate for the children to rip him off in order to survive." But the question is, is this really a "rip off"? If the U.S. tourist gone to another drug dealer, he may have got a better price and thus avoided being "ripped off." But compared to what he might pay in the U.S. is he being "ripped off?"

In the ontology of the international fiscal system and badly skewed currency exchange rates in favor of the U.S. (currently at Rs 23 for a dollar), no matter what Krishna, Chillum or the audience believe, a North American tourist is *never* "ripped off." Yet here the audience experiences a comforting identification with the protagonists and a spurious sense of participating in a subversive act. They see the tourist's being "ripped off" as a symbolic victory for the "Third World," without recognizing the lopsided exchange rates that permit tourists to get fantastic bargains for whatever they buy, no matter what the cost. The audience's complicity in the children's condition is never brought to bear on the film. Poverty becomes just another commodity circulated for consumption within the cultural circuit.

Nair's own complicity and her inability to confront the relation between her aesthetic choices and her subject matter is also a serious issue. Film critic Rustom Bharucha accuses Nair of voyeurism, in which director and viewers are implicated.¹ A case in point is a scene where the camera tracks past the red light area of Bombay from the "safe distance" of an invisible car — revealing the director's touristic engagement with the "material" for which she purports to have strong empathy. In an essay entitled "Postmodernism and Feminism," Craig Owens discusses Martha Rosler's photo-

graphic art, "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, 1972-74." Rosler intentionally avoids photographing the inhabitants of Skid Row or speaking on their behalf, while maintaining a "safe distance." Rosler has called this "victim photography" that is supported by the myth of "photographic transparency and objectivity." Craig argues that "victim photography" only acts

as an agent of the system of power that silenced these people in the first place. Thus, they are twice victimized: first by society, and then by the photographer who presumes the right to speak on their behalf.²

The question that Craig raises involves much other politically motivated art practiced today: "the indignity of speaking for others."³ The scene from SALAAM BOMBAY! described above engages in voyeurism from a safe distance so that the prostitutes of Bombay's famous Falkland street become "twice victims" — first by society and then by the gaze of the camera that absorbs their images for free and then puts those images into a circuit of exchange, the profits of which never reach them.

How does one read a film funded by Rockefeller Foundation, Britain's Channel Four, France's Cadrage and India's own state-owned television, Doordarshan? It is a film made about the grimy poverty of Third World children and received warmly by the sensibilities of the First World. While examining the politics of production we cannot ignore the extensive extra-textual material — full-page interviews with the filmmaker in newspapers and magazines that give news about her "involvement" with the children she represented. The children she engaged in the film, we are told, did not return to their lives on the streets. They have been put on the right track, so to speak. They go to schools now (some we are told set up by Nair herself), or they are working at "decent" jobs. *The Sunday Boston Globe* reports:

Five of the 17 have returned home to their villages. Others are in school. Others are pursuing work of *their choice*. Four work as messengers for film companies. One runs a gambling den. One of them now teaches sculpture to blind children in Bombay [*italics mine*] (16 October 1988).

There are two ways of reading this. One is to dismiss this work as promoting at best reformist welfare or at worst old-fashioned charity. From this point of view such individual solutions fail to deal with the depth of the problem and are mere bandages that fail to make a dent on what is an immense problem of child labor in India. This critique is often made by left-wing radicals, who call instead for fundamental changes in social and economic organization and the distribution of resources, achievable only by the insurgency of the subaltern. The other approach made by proponents of those engaged in welfare is to dismiss this radical critique and its agenda by declaring its strategy to be an alibi for inaction. The waiting-for-the-revolution stance denies the value of compassion and the tangible service done is dismissed as humanism. While torn between these two arguments, I feel helped in making my own judgment by reading the extra-textual evidence mentioned earlier. The repeated interviews in newspapers and news magazines reporting on Nair

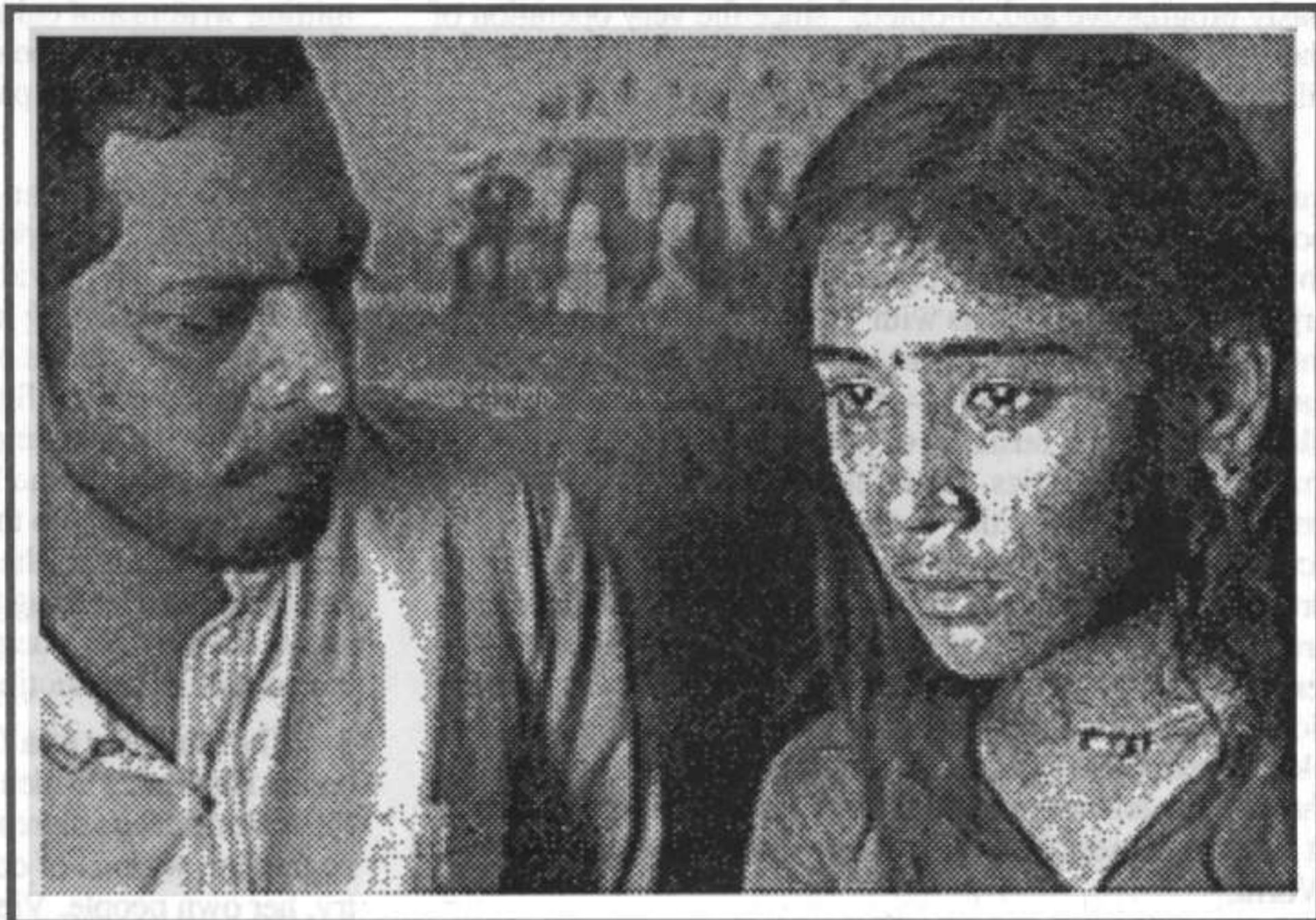
and her film have done much to publicize her humanism. What disconcerts me is the tenor of all these interviews in which the filmmaker calls attention to *her* engagement and involvement with the children's lives, which one would have hoped the film would have dealt with in the first place. It is this self-absorbed, self-congratulatory tone that permits me to slot Nair's work in the liberal reformist camp.

Nair claims that part of her objective was to instill in the children "a sense of self-worth and dignity." The imprint of U.S. popular psychology is inescapable in this statement. The entire post-Enlightenment era with its manifesto of the "rights of man" has propagated the notion of the individual, "his" worth, success and entrepreneurship. The idea of the individual in charge of his/her destiny denies the role of wider social and political forces. It speaks with the same ideology embedded in the voice of *The Sunday Boston Globe* reporter who writes about the children pursuing jobs of "their own choice." How does Nair hope to graft these notions onto children who labor for long hours of the day as rag-pickers,⁴ restaurant assistants or as the docile work force for the piecework industrial system? It is not their choice to work at these jobs, nor is it simply a matter of dignity and self-worth that will help these children alter their lives or pull themselves up by their boot-straps, as the mythology⁵ of Nair's speech indicates.

The aftermath of the lives of the children that Nair hand-picked from the streets for her film has been reported in *India Today*:

Naidu, 17, went back to Nagpur and brought his longestranged mother and sister to show them the sights of Bombay. Rashid, 15, has gone to Delhi to study and work with Barry John's theater workshop. Saifuddin, 12, used his earnings to get his family's legal possession of their house in a Bihar village. For Manoj, 15, the transformation in his life has been even more poignant. He had run away from his home in a Madhya Pradesh village two years ago as his father beat him for his obsession for sculpting ganesh *murtis*.⁶ Today Manoj has a job teaching blind students to sculpt religious idols (15 August 1988).

This is the reality of the children's lives. Yet *The Guardian* in an adulatory note on the film welcomed the film as a "breakthrough" in the west, "suddenly intriguing those who knew little or nothing about it."⁷ Perhaps the film's success with the western audience lies precisely in the fact that they know nothing about India. The report goes on to tell us that for young Shafiq, who played Krishna, the main protagonist in the film, the pleasures of commercial cinema are lost for-



ever: "All these films appear *naqli* ⁸ now. Real life is different." Ironically Shafiq's words could not be more appropriate for the film *SALAAM BOMBAY!* in which he is supposed to have represented the lives of the likes of himself.

How then may we address the terminal problem of representation, especially when it comes to representing the Other? Speaking of the nature of intervention possible for the intellectual in the "texts of oppression," Spivak suggests the possibility of "[r]epresenting them and analyz[ing] them, disclosing one's own positionality for the communities in power."⁹ A self-reflexive mandate is suggested. Dana Polan has attempted to address the problem of representation within the tradition of "realism" by invoking Bertold Brecht. Brecht defines realism as revealing a series of cause-effect relations, contrasting with the hegemonic view. He urges that realism in art be compared to the life depicted. Further, Brecht argues, the attitude of the viewing subject stems from the "attitudinal position in the work." What Brecht calls for in political art, says Polan, is to evoke pleasure in viewing which at the same time creates anger, sympathy, wisdom and respect. What is required is both identification and a critical perspective — from which "the old way is scrutinized" and challenged.¹⁰ Pleasure can be wrought from identification and self-reflexivity. Had Nair situated herself, her own relation to the children, the factors that made her relation and intervention possible and the areas where her access to their lives and situation was impossible due to her specific subject position, the film would have been built on a much more honest and open account.

What then is the role of the post-colonial intellectual as a "specific intellectual"?¹¹ Cornel West takes a sympathetic view of political artists representing those at the margins — "the demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people" hoping to enlist "collective insurgency." The "double-bind" these artists find themselves in is "simultane-

ously progressive and co-opted," since the very operation of their art reveals the power structure they are imbricated in: film funding sources, film festival networks, etc.¹²

Edward Saïd asks the pertinent and uncomfortable question about the role of the intellectual in contemporary politics: "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?" Answers to these questions, he argues, should provide us with "ingredients for a politics of interpretation." His argument can well be extended to the gamut of cultural workers — filmmakers and artists, particularly those in the business of political, social or ethnographic documentaries. A useful method which Saïd suggests is to understand the "audience," "constituency," "community," and "opponents" for whom this work is being produced. Writing, and I would add other cultural products, are produced for an Other, and this has consequences for interpretation.¹³ The film text and its entire nexus of production and reception foregrounds a global network, and a complex, hierarchical structure that needs to be viewed not through the telescope of the First World, but through a look at its arrangement from the reverse direction of the Third World.

The "First World" has always had images from the "Other Worlds." The long-standing relation with the colonies gave rise to the discipline of anthropology, more recently termed ethnography, Oriental studies, and cultural studies. Those disciplines brought news to the master nations about distant lands, while simultaneously deploying the knowledge/power paradigm that has further strengthened colonial rule. Currently popular culture — travel, tourism, literature, film and now even music videos — uses these "Other Worlds" as exotic locales for telling tales of romance and adventure of the western subject. The logic of capitalism as an economic system is that it needs constant energizing through the production of new commodities, a constant search for novelty. This perhaps can partially explain the recent outburst of images from "Other Worlds" within the western world.

Films like *GANDHI*, *PASSAGE TO INDIA*, and *THE COLOR PURPLE* are distributed widely among a western audience, partially leading to what Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer call a "de-marginalizing" and "de-centering" of the traditional 'center-margin' boundaries.¹⁴ However, none of these films have been made by members of the groups they represent. Films made by members of the Third World are only just being granted the rites of passage, so to speak.

The fact that there are emerging forms of self-representation originating in those "Other Worlds" seems to suggest an improvement over the forms of representation produced only by the 'First World.' And given the incipient nature of the flow of media texts from the "Third World," the few products that are received in the west become the only images of self-representation from the "Other World". The creators of these become the ambassadors of the ideology embedded in these images. We must also bear in mind what Aijaz Ahmad points out about literary texts, for it can be extended to the entire cultural field: there is a mechanism of selective acceptance that operates when it comes to ad-

mitting writers and cultural artists from "Other Worlds."¹⁵ Thus texts winning the consent of their audience/constituency become part of "common sense" and are diffused into hegemony.

Sneja Gunew in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of the problem in reception by the First World where an individual artist/speaker may quickly be accepted as representing his/her entire community. This has implications "in terms of funding and dissemination of their work...the few token figures function as a very secure alibi."¹⁶ Thus in the case of cultural representations of the so-called minorities in the First World, given the limitations of resources available to these groups, one idea/ideology succeeds at the cost of others. This is a continual problem among minorities struggling to make themselves heard above the din of the hegemonic voice, and it deeply impacts the politics of production.

The authority of a film like *SALAAM BOMBAY!* rests on the filmmaker's identity as an Indian. Viewed from the First World, Nair represents the indigenous filmmaker, ethnographer, woman of color — representing her own country, her own people. Viewed from the other side of the boundaries of the international division between "First" and "Third World," Nair is a Non-Resident-Indian (NRI), that class of Indians with all the accouterments of privileges granted by the Indian government. The government of India offers NRIs special incentives to invest in India, with a promise of favorable returns.

Nair's status as an NRI and the privilege it affords is exemplified by her relation with the Indian State. Bharucha points to the manner in which the Indian government despite its apparent "animosity" actually went along with the film, allowing Nair to officially represent India at the Academy Awards in Hollywood. She at the same time needs the Indian affiliation to "enhance" her "authenticity" and ties "back home." It is a project in which they both need each other. Referring to *SALAAM BOMBAY!* Bharucha expresses his fears about the dangers of the NRI, with special economic privileges in banking, finance and industry being offered the authority to represent Indian culture and "reality."¹⁷

As a member of the Indian diaspora, the filmmaker Mira Nair has left her home country like many of us who come to the U.S. with the hope of joining the ranks of the international cultural elite. She thus falls into the interstices of the Third and First World, and she is part of the class of post-colonial intellectuals and artists of the Third World practicing in the First World. What then is the specific construction of this post-colonial intellectual, and is her intervention in her/our country necessarily a departure from the now recognized problem of Orientalism? For my purposes I am conflating the category of the post-colonial intellectual and cultural artist, since there is little difference in their institutional and historical construction. How does the situatedness of such a post-colonial intellectual leave his/her invisible signature on the cultural representation produced?

A film like *SALAAM BOMBAY!* interpellates precisely the issues of self-representation from the "Other World," but in the context of a complex colonial history and its pro-

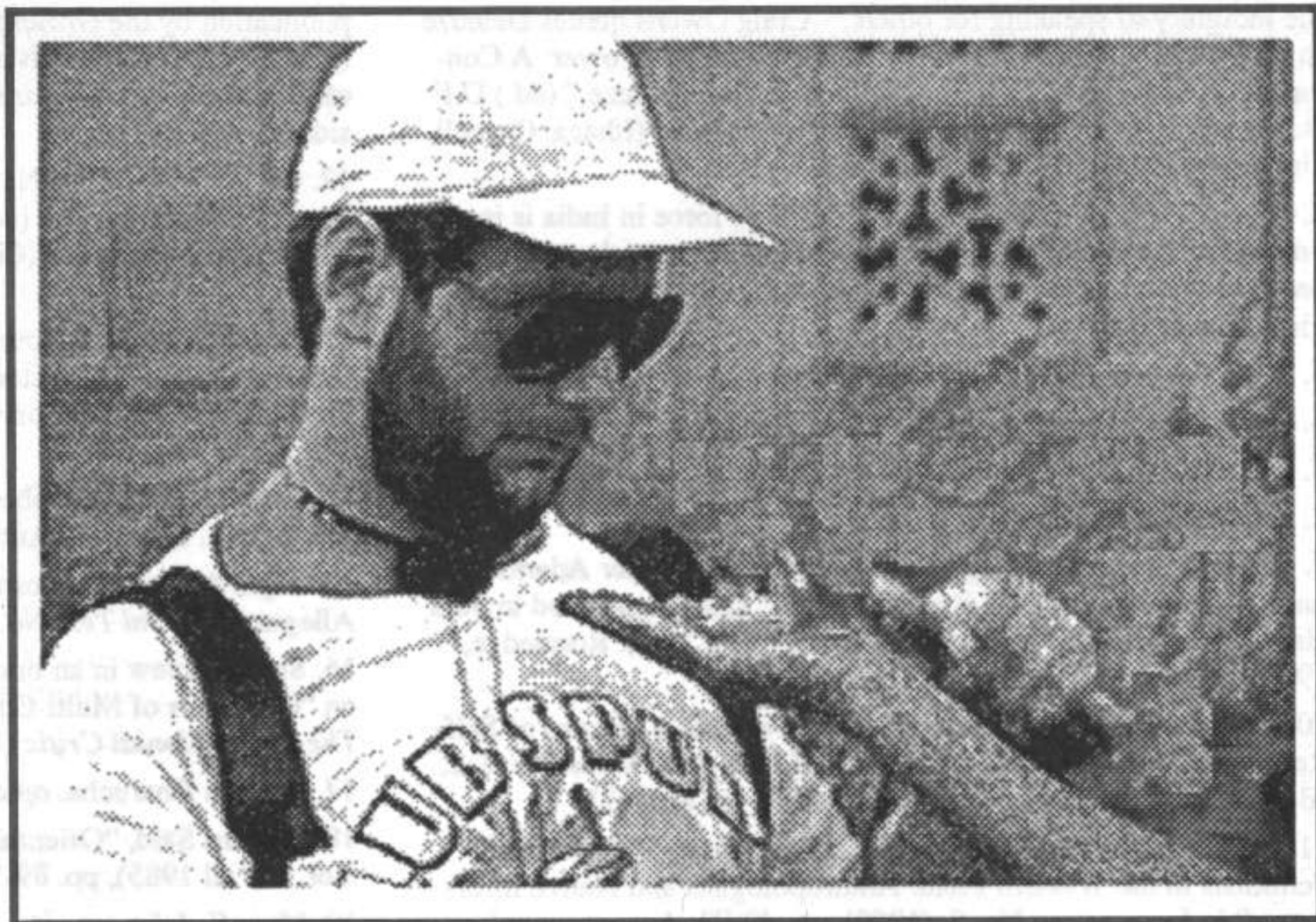
duction of stratified subjectivities. Nair and my position as post-colonial intellectuals must be understood within the master narrative of two hundred years of colonial history and recent decolonization. Tracing the genealogy of the post-colonial intellectual takes us back to Lord Macaulay's famous and often quoted Minute on Education in 1835. Macaulay, known for having laid the foundation of an educational system in India, stated its objective succinctly: to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and color but British in taste."

The category of the post-colonial intellectual has been constituted historically by the transformation of the indigenous elite through its encounter with British Rule. The counter colonial challenge posed by nationalism from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century succeeded in creating autonomous nation states along with a well entrenched national bourgeoisie. It is from this strata that post-colonial intellectuals emerged, and it is they who have been made the heroes of the traditional narrative of anti-imperialism even as they repositioned themselves within the structures set up under colonial rule.

The post-colonial discourse carried out among post-colonial intellectuals has failed to openly accept our own advantageous class position. It is for this reason that I find the categories of the "colonized subjects," the "post-colonial subjects" and the "post-colonial woman" undifferentiated and problematic. Spivak is right when she points out that the elite native speaks on behalf of the subaltern, and his or her speech silences the voice of the subaltern. The binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, then, is too simplistic. It is this complexity in the transformation of the decolonized nations that renders Said's category of "insider" vs. "outsider" unsatisfactory.¹⁸

I want to suggest that the class of insider intellectuals (the post-colonial intellectuals) became veritable outsiders. They/we participate in the reproduction of the west by making it the site of enunciation.¹⁹ This is only an extension of the phenomenon of the western ethnographer/anthropologist attempting to understand the Other in order to see a better reflection of the Self. The difference now is that the non-western elite subject has been incorporated into the image of the western Self and sees its own non-elite subjects of investigation as the Other.

In dealing with the politics of representation, I would like to point out the complexity of issues surrounding representation and the unresolved tangle of problems that have a bearing on Nair's film. It is obviously not sufficient to see Nair as the Other and therefore the producer of an "authen-



tic" representation of the "Other World." The complex historical subjectivity of a post-colonial intellectual must be borne in mind. Nair is representing her Other. Viewed from the subject position of the First World, her film then becomes the representation of the Other by the Other.

In conclusion I would like to address an obvious question that might be addressed to me. How do I as a critic privilege my own reading of the situation over Nair's? As a post-colonial intellectual, I share with the filmmaker a common history and heritage. As a fellow Indian, I share with her a similar trajectory. We have a common class background and cultural apparatus that enable us to arrive on the shores of this country to pursue academic and artistic interests.

How then, it may be asked, do I see her as overdetermined by her class position yet open up a space that assumes a lack of complete closure in my own case? I do not wish to argue that personal politics is overdetermined by class. Our political affiliations are a matter of choice and interest. Nair does not choose to raise issues of class and colonization. What I can say for myself, however, is that my approach is a materialist one, a position that Nair scrupulously avoids. She prefers instead the path of cinematic realism and of heart-renting pathos in representing the lives of the poor.

NOTES

1. Rustom Bharucha, "Haraam Bombay" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10, 1989, pp. 1275-1279.
2. Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 69-70.
3. "In my opinion you were the first — in your books and in the practical sphere — to teach us something absolutely fundamental:

the indignity of speaking for others." Craig Owens quotes Deleuze in conversation with Foucault in "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," (ed.) D.F. Bouchard, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 209.

4. A large section of the massive child-labor force in India is involved in "rag-picking," a virtual recycling industry that depends on child-labor to sift through garbage dumps to collect plastic, glass, metals etc.

5. I use this term in the Barthesian sense.

6. *murti*, Hindi word for sculptures.

7. Quoted in *India Today*, August 15, 1988, p.132.

8. *naqli*, Hindi word for fake, false.

9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interviewed by Walter Adamson on "The Problems of Self-Representation" (1986) reprinted in Sara Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 56.

10. Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film" in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods* Vol. 2, (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), pp. 661-671.

11. This term is taken from Mary E. John's essay "Postcolonial Feminists in the Western Field: Anthropologists and Native Informants" in *Inscriptions* No. 5, (1989), pp. 49-72. An occasional

publication by the *Group for Critical Study Discourse*, U.C.S.C (Santa Cruz). She uses it in the context of her discussion of Foucault's suggested role for intellectuals in struggles within and outside universities

12. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" in Russell Ferguson, et al. (eds.), *Out-There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1990).

13. Edward Saïd, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community" in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 135.

14. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, "De-Margin and De-Center", *Screen* Vol. 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988), pp. 2-10.

15. Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* No. 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 65-88.

16. Sneha Gunew in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on "Questions of Multi-Culturalism," reprinted in Sara Harasym, , *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 60.

17. Rustom Bharucha, *op cit*.

18. Edward Saïd, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique* Vol. 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 89-107.

19. Mary E. John, *op cit*.