**Poverty, (Neo)orientalism and the Cinematic Re-presentation of ‘Dark India’**

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This article focuses on the representation of poverty in films, and in particular the cinematic representations of poverty in India. In recent years, several scholars have commented on the growing popularity of narratives of ‘Dark India’, both in Indian literary production in English and in international and Indian films. ‘Dark India’ is the counterpart to ‘India Shining’, the media campaign launched by the BJP in the run up to the political elections of 2004, which “promoted India as the future global superpower of the twenty-first century, a country of unrestricted opportunities and achievements” (Brosius 2010: 1). In stark contrast with the economic optimism of this campaign, there has, from the beginning of the 21st century, “been a rise of fiction depicting poverty” as “more IWE, Indian films and representations of India of all kinds have focused their attention on the underbelly of India, the slums, the destitution, the crime and the inequalities” (Lau and Mendes, 2012/2013: 138). The popularity of these narratives has prompted Mendes and Lau to argue that “at present, the exotica that seems to be thriving in the cultural scene is the exotica of poverty” (2015: 710). Their observation is the point of departure of the present analysis. While representing poverty in India could be a way to give visibility to a worthwhile social issue, in analysing filmic representations of poverty in India, this study will investigate the relationship between poverty and orientalist and, following Lau, re-orientalist fantasies (2009) and also their relationship with the commodification of poverty as the ultimate marker of exotic difference in the cultural marketplace. The purpose of this article is thus to discuss a set of common themes across different films set in India, in order to detect the general trends in this manifestation of the representation of poverty.

**Orientalism, exoticism and India**

In her analysis of Aravind Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger* (2008) Ana Cristina Mendes talks about ‘Dark India’ as “a new-fangled object of exoticist discourses” (Mendes 2010a: 276). If ‘Dark India’ is the new exotic, exoticist discourses around India are certainly not new and can be traced back to colonial accounts of the subcontinent. As something that “occurs outside everyday experience, beyond the ordinary, maybe even the fantastic” (Nayar 2012: 59), the exotic (the prefix *exo-*, from Greek,literally meaning ‘from outside one’s country’) was the most suitable framework to define India in colonial writings, for, Nayar argues: “India-as-exotic was the *distant* colony, unique, different” (59). Used to encode the difference that India represented in comparison with Europe, exoticism was thus a literary device that reinforced Orientalist discourses on the subcontinent, as in fact this difference was not neutral but served the specific purpose of affirming Europe’s superiority over its colonies. In fact, in Edward Said’s terms this affirmation served ultimately to define Europe itself, for the Orient provided Europe’s contrasting image (Said 1978). As a place of difference, the Orient was the place of “disorder”, “irrationality”, “primitivism”, whereas Europe was the place of “order”, “rationality” and “symmetry” (Said 1978: 38). Along the same lines, in the case of India, the colonial discourse produced a dichotomy according to which India was “barbaric, primitive, irrational”, whereas Europe was “advanced, modern, rational” (Nayar, 2012: 61). The notion of the exotic was thus “aligned with not simply difference, but also a scale of civilization” (Nayar, 60).

The legacy of the discourse of difference “as an apparatus of power” (Bhabha, 1994: 100) is traceable in popular culture and in cinematic portrayals of the subcontinent in the west, as seen for example in films such as, among others, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg 1984), or in Roland Joffé’s *The City of Joy* (1992), where India is portrayed as a space of difference and as a counterpoint to the West. The representation of India as the exotic Other remains common in popular culture, as demonstrated by the debate sparked by Coldplay’s and Beyoncé’s video clip for the song *Hymn for the Weekend* (2016) – where the band strolls around Mumbai during *holi*, alternatively encountering saffron-clad priests, street children who dance along with their music, and even a child dressed as Lord Shiva (a figure already seen, although in context, in Danny Boyle’s film *Slumdog Millionaire*). While not the subject of this article, this music video points to the persistence of Orientalist representations of India as the exotic Other, and it has in fact been criticised for reproducing “reductive tropes originally intended to preserve western hegemony”, while also “perpetuating hackneyed fantasies of India as an exotic playground for rich white people to explore and to exploit for cultural capital and economic gain” (Kumar 2016)[[1]](#footnote-1).

“Hackneyed fantasies of India as an exotic playground for rich white people” are also found in more recent films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (John Madden, 2011), which show western characters who travel to India precisely for spiritual or material gain, discovering India first and foremost as a place of exotic difference*.* In *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert goes to India in a quest for spirituality – it is the “pray” segment of the film – as she is trying to “find herself”. Her decision to “find herself” in India, of all places, is based on what King calls “romantic Orientalism”, the idea of a “mystic East” that contrasts with the rational west (King 1999: 92). This is perfectly expressed in Gilbert’s frustration at her inability to meditate. Her travel seems to respond to “the lure of the exotic and ‘mystical’ nature of the East and the belief that it can provide Westerners with some much-needed spirituality”[[2]](#footnote-2) (King, 1999: 142) and it attests the continued popularity of “a romantic and exotic fantasy of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective and otherworldly in nature” (142). *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (whose title directly points to the exotic allure of India) instead of having characters looking for spiritual fulfilment, sees British pensioners moving to India for “material gain”: unable to afford a dignified life in Britain, they decide to retire to a luxurious mansion in Jaipur, which, due to the economic power of the sterling, they most certainly can afford. Except that the place is not the luxury residence they expected it to be and they find themselves facing the challenge of living without the comforts of the west – in yet another reiteration of the modern-primitive dichotomy between Europe and the Orient.

In both films, the characters’ introduction to India is rendered through a risky trip through the crowded streets of the country, which, with the chaos of vehicles, people, animals (alternatively cows and elephants) signals their arrival in a different world. India is characterised as a place of poverty, of chaos (“a riot of noise and colours”, says Evelyn in *Marigold*) and clearly distant from the modern west. References to teeming crowds, poverty, heat, beggars, in contrast to the order, symmetry and modernity of the west, abound in both films. These juxtapositions, together with the privileged position that characters in both films occupy within the Indian context, inevitably recall colonial fantasies of western superiority. In *Eat, Pray, Love*, this dichotomy is rendered first by the context of Elizabeth’s stay: not only is the ashram run by white westerners in the absence of the Guru, who is on a trip to New York, but also, notwithstanding the fact that the ashram attracts a mixture of Indian and western devotees, Elizabeth’s interactions are restricted to white western people, so that Indians remain in the background. The only local she interacts with is Tulsi, a 17-year-old girl who, as soon as she meets Elizabeth, wastes no time in informing her that her parents are “marrying her off” to a boy from Delhi (as is the “custom”, she explains) whereas she would like to go to university and study psychology. The second time we see them talking, Tulsi expresses her admiration at Elizabeth’s decision to end her marriage (“it is most commendable the fact that you ended your marriage”, she says), commenting on how lucky she is to be “free” and not have to have children. The implication here again seems to be western superiority over an east that is still stuck in a pre-modern era. The characterisation of Tulsi echoes Mohanty’s reflections on orientalist discourses on the ‘Third World’ woman, according to which, she observes, she

leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (1984: 337)

The juxtaposition of Tulsi and Elizabeth follows precisely this pattern and it is most visible during the wedding scene, where a sad-looking Tulsi, celebrated by her family and friends, keeps her eyes firmly on Elizabeth, the free and educated woman that she cannot be.

If *Eat, Pray, Love* offers a view of an “immanent India” characterised by mysticism and spirituality, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* offers a look at a more modern India, and yet, it is still markedly distant from the west. The binaries east/west, modern/primitive, superior/inferior are first evident in the material condition of the hotel: far from being a luxurious residence (it contains broken chairs, broken sinks, no electricity, and so on) it will need one of the residents to invest in it to finally make it work (in the sequel). But it is not only their economic possibilities (compared to the locals) that make them special in India, it is also the cultural capital of the residents, as authentic Britons. Evelyn, who has never worked in her life, obtains a job as a cultural consultant in a call centre precisely because of her nationality. Initially rebuffed by the call centre’s manager, who informs her that the call centre only employs graduates from top universities, “ambitious people”, she gets the job after explaining to him the pleasures of “dunking a biscuit” in a cup of tea. If the idea that Indian top graduates’ greatest ambition is to work in a call centre is not enough to suggest that India is still in the “waiting room” of history, the period of transition that it would supposedly need to catch up with western modernity (Chakrabarty, 2000, 8-10), then the fact that a woman who has never worked in her life is offered a job at this highly sought-after place only because she is British cannot but remind the viewer of the colonial power relation between Britain and the subcontinent – as if the hotel owner quoting Kipling was not a strong enough reminder. References to an ‘Indian essence’ also abound in this film: while one of the pensioners refuses to stay in this “uncivilised” place and immediately regrets her decision to go to India, all the others immerse themselves in “the spirit” of the land and are fascinated by it – although, yet again, not at the cost of actually mixing in any significant way with the locals.

In both films the exoticisation of India, which is already a legacy of orientalist discourses, goes hand in hand with the characterisation of the country as a space of poverty, a poverty which furthermore is in fact a key element of its exotic appeal. This is because poverty is not portrayed as especially ugly, but is rather encoded as a form of ‘simplicity’ that goes along with the idea of a ‘mystic east’: poor Indians, who remain firmly in the background in both films, calmly accept their fate instead of trying to change it. The background position of these characters is also not coincidental: it is their distance that maintains them as exotic, and in turn maintains poverty as something alien. The exotic character of poverty is clearly expressed in Jean’s exchange with Graham (*Marigold*): when she says she cannot understand what he finds in the country (which, to her, is all “squalor and poverty”), he praises its “light”, its “colours”, the “smiles” of the people and tells her how much he appreciates the fact that people “see life as a privilege and not as a right”, again a reminder of orientalist discourses of eastern passivity. It is perhaps the references to (often children’s) smiles (made more than once in the film) or to people’s “grace” (in *Eat, Pray, Love*) that are most significant to how poverty is portrayed in these films, because, as Frenzel and Koens argue, representing “impoverished communities as poor but happy” is a way to neutralise poverty. This representational strategy effectively “limits the potential of poverty to shock, move and change people’s perspective” (Frenzel and Koens, 2012: 207) while allowing western characters to pursue undisturbedly their quest for spiritual and/or material fulfilment without the need to question their own privilege nor the roots of inequality in the society they are visiting/have moved to. The normalisation of poverty as an integral part of daily life in India reduces its perception as a social and political issue, and maintains the dividing line between the mystic east and the pragmatic west. Both *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The* *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* thus contribute to the exoticisation of India as a space of poverty, as they portray poverty as part of what makes the country so exotic, indeed, so distant, from the west.

‘Dark India’ narratives

And yet, Morley and Robins remind us that as much as “difference can be seductive it is always disturbing, dangerous, and ultimately intolerable” (1995: 162). The imperialist construction of the exotic India that I previously referred to also included elements of, as Nayar observes, “barbarism”, “obscurity, darkness, shadows” (2012: 73, 74) and it is especially these elements that can be found in narratives of ‘Dark India’. If ‘Dark India’ narratives focus on “the underbelly of India”, crime, poverty and destitution, as Lau and Mendes argue (2012/2013: 138), then two western films that fit the description are Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog* *Millionaire* (2008) and Garth Davis’s *Lion* (2016), whose portrayals of India and of Indians do not dwell on mysticism, colours and smiles, but highlight the shadowy, dark and obscure aspects of Indian poverty – albeit within two distinctly feel-good narratives that plot a route to escape from poverty. *Slumdog Millionaire* tells the story of Jamal, a poor boy from a Bombay/Mumbai’s slum who, despite a life of hardships, ends up one question away from winning the famous TV show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, and focuses on the path that led him there. *Lion* tells the true story of Saroo, a five-year-old boy who lives in a village with his mother and family but gets lost after accidentally boarding a train to Kolkata. Unable to identify himself to the police, the child, after some time in the streets, is eventually adopted by an Australian couple and more than twenty years later he sets on a mission to find his lost family. In both films, Indian characters take centre stage – rather than staying in the background, as in the two aforementioned films – and in both cases their experience of poverty could not be farther from ‘grace’ or ‘spirituality’: poverty in these two films leads to violence, crime, exploitation – the abduction of children being the common motif here.

Far from resembling the romanticised depiction of ‘poor but happy’ Indians, these two films offer images of India that are closer to the primitivism which the orientalist discourse attributed to India (see Nayar 2012) as the crude harness of a life in the streets is portrayed in all its violence. In this respect, neither of the two films has escaped accusations of reproducing a foreign orientalist outlook in their depiction of “barbaric India”[[3]](#footnote-3) (Desai 2011: 73, 76; Mattes 2017[[4]](#footnote-4)) and of omitting to address the roots of inequality and poverty in the country (Roy 2009). Mattes’s comment that *Lion*, which concludes by showing figures of children going missing each year in India only then to publicise international adoption, is “one of the most Orientalist visions seen onscreen” (2017) of late is certainly sound, as this vision inevitably resonates with the rhetoric of the civilised west saving the barbarous east. While the film is a biopic, the visual grammar of the Kolkata scenes in *Lion* strongly recalls *Slumdog Millionaire* – Dev Patel also plays the lead character in both films, and, interestingly, he is also the hotel owner in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – a film which has triggered a very intense debate over questions of Orientalism, exoticism and authenticity[[5]](#footnote-5) (or lack thereof). While it is beyond the scope of this article to enter this debate, it is relevant to reference the key issues raised by commentaries on the film, summarised by Narain as:

poverty porn, slum tourism, imperialist guilt flick, post-colonial inequalities continued, Bombay’s underbelly revealed-revelled, brilliant, feel good movie, accurate portrayal, gross misrepresentation, a visual Lonely Planet guide to Mumbai, an (anti-)Indian movie, Bollywood mania (2009).

This list suggests that reactions to the film could be divided into three broad and at times overlapping categories: those accusing the filmmaker of exploiting poverty to perpetuate fantasies of western superiority and to demean the growth of the country (as symbolised by the ‘India Shining’ campaign); others praising him for his courage in showing the hardships of those living at the margins of society; finally a third group of enthusiasts for Boyle’s take on “Bollywood” and its feel good effect[[6]](#footnote-6) (for in-depth analyses of media and audience responses to the film see Banaji 2010, Desai 2011, Korte 2010-2011, Narain 2009).

The first two categories are especially of interest here, as they revolve around the construction of Indian poverty in film. While representations of urban poverty in India inevitably raise questions of orientalism and exoticism, it is worth clarifying that it is not the portrayal of poverty *per se* which makes a film orientalist, but rather the framework within which this poverty is inscribed that points to its orientalist character – which, Lau and Mendes suggest (2012/2013) could come from the outside as well as from the inside. This is a “difficult tightrope for artists and authors to walk” (Lau and Mendes 2012/2013: 142) as in putting the spotlight on the darker aspects of India, instead of promoting a sanitised version of the country, the trap of exoticism is always around the corner.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the case of *Slumdog Millionaire* however, Arundhati Roy argues that ‘Dark India’ and Shining India are not really in competition, for she believes that “*Slumdog Millionaire* does not puncture the myth of ‘India shining’ – far from it. It just turns India not-shining into another glitzy item in the supermarket” (2009). Roy’s observation interestingly converges with the opinion of Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan, who “took issue with the exploitative poverty porn that exoticised and packaged Indian slum life for the consumption of voyeuristic Western audiences” (Mendes 2010b: 473). Both Bachchan and Roy, in their criticism of the film, refer to the currency of ‘un-shining India’ as the ultimate marker of exotic difference in the cultural marketplace, something that *Slumdog Millionaire* has contributed to, whatever one thinks of the film.

Indeed, *Slumdog Millionaire* has given great visibility to the slum of Dharavi and placed it in international awareness. Images of the Indian slum offered by the film have impacted western imaginings of the subcontinent to the point that, Ananya Roy maintains, the slum now “stands as a metonym for India” itself (2011). It is not a coincidence that Dharavi has now become one of the favorite tourist destinations in Mumbai, the tour company which organises guided tours of the slum (*Reality Tours and Travel*) having significantly increased its business since the release of the film (by more than 25% in 2010, see Banaji 2010: 5).

**The slum and the exotica of poverty**

If exotic narratives of India as a space of poverty have dominated the cultural discourse since colonial times, what makes images of the slum so successful in the global cultural marketplace? This is a matter of debate: Deepika Bahri, drawing a connection between poverty and the orientalist binary construction Europe/Orient previously mentioned, suggests that representations of poverty and of “the smelly, chaotic mass of others” can be used to promote and reinforce ideas of western superiority (quoted in Mendes and Lau, 2015: 711). And yet, this may not fully explain the currency of ‘Dark India’ tales – the emphasis on crime, violence, corruption. According to Ellen Dengel-Janic, the contemporary focus on, and popularity of, ‘Dark India’ is not only a matter of Orientalism, but a phenomenon directly connected to the current social, economic and political crisis of the west, for, she suggests (referring in particular to *Slumdog Millionaire*) that this kind of narrative:

reflects not only the West’s exoticism of India, but also its repressed fear and paranoia of becoming abject and poor. In times of financial crisis, the very stability of cosmopolitan capitalism is shaken, and therefore, films like *Slumdog Millionaire* offer immediate relief from the Western citizen’s anxiety of losing status, money and security, since, it is *there* and not *here*, that poverty can be securely located (2009).

This is a point subscribed to also by Korte, who proposes that narratives of poverty are attractive to readers (and viewers) of the Global North because they “deflect a problem which is also the North’s by setting it in the developing world” (2010/2011: 295). The popularity of ‘Dark India’ narratives emerges thus from the combination of the cultural legacy of colonial discourse and the reassuring perception that “abject poverty” is a matter of alterity, and it is again this combination that feeds into what Rushdie calls “poverty tourism” (2009), or to borrow Bachchan’s words, the “consumption” of the slum (Mendes 2010b: 473).

Despite the boost that Boyle’s film has given to slum tourism in India, this practice is not a new phenomenon: it began in Victorian times, when “*slumming* originally stood for the leisure activities pursued by the upper and upper-middle classes touring the poorest quarters of London” (Meschkank 2011: 47). It is in the 1990s that organised tours of slums of the metropoles of the Global South began to emerge (in particular in South Africa, Brasil and India) and it is in 2006 that Chris Way and Krishna Poojari opened in Mumbai *Reality Tours and Travels*, a charity which offers guided tours of Dharavi. It is worth noting that, while the global popularity of this Mumbai slum might have reached its peak with Boyle’s film, it has to be dated back to at least the publication of David Gregory Roberts’s *Shantaram* (2003), a very important part of which is set there. Notwithstanding the charity’s aim to bring awareness of the conditions of life in Dharavi, research conducted with participants reveals the persistence of exoticist discourses in the perception of the slum.[[8]](#footnote-8) More importantly, what is exoticised here is Indian poverty for, Rushdie again suggests, “people want […] enough grit and violence to convince themselves that what they are seeing is authentic; but it’s still tourism” (2009).

Rushdie’s reflection leads us to a key element of the popularity of ‘Dark India’: the idea that authentic India is poor India. This is a point which is made clear by research conducted among tourists who visit ‘authentic’ places like Dharavi. The name of the charity providing tours in the slum, *Reality Tours and Travel*, already suggests that what they have on offer is a taste of the ‘real’ India, and on their website this suggestion is reinforced by their self-description as “a responsible tour company dedicate to providing fun and authentic experiences around India”. Studies conducted on these tours and their clients confirm that the promise of authenticity is the main reason why tourists sign up: as Meschkank notes, “to many tourists, Dharavi represented not only a place of reality, but also a place of authenticity, in the sense of the true Indian life” (2011: 53). As she explains, “for the tourist […] the *real* India in the sense of *authentic* India is the poor India” (53). The popularity of slum tours thus responds to the tourists’ search for authenticity, an authenticity that should be gritty enough to satisfy their expectations, but one that, at the same time, can be kept at arm’s length because, as Bauman maintains:

In the tourist’s world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist’s wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist’s desire, made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. […] Unlike in the life of the vagabond, tough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do not interfere here(1996: 29-30.

Bauman’s point is particularly relevant in this context because research on Dharavi tours shows that tourists, initially frightened at the idea of meeting poverty and, with it, possibly crime and violence, complete their tours having re-imagined the meaning of poverty, as they define the place as a space of harmony, community, with hardworking people (Meschkank 2011: 56-59; Nisbett 2017). This way, poverty is not only “domesticated”, it is also depoliticised, as the structural inequalities persisting within Indian society are not addressed (Nisbett 2017: 43), and in fact the very geopolitical inequalities and racial hierarchies that bear historic responsibility for India’s underdevelopment themselves receive further contemporary reinforcement.

The exoticisation of India, metonymically associated with poverty, not only depoliticises poverty, but also, as a symbol of authenticity, transforms it into another commodity in the culture of leisure. This is indeed an exceptional condition for, as Freire-Medeiros observed:

In his much-cited piece on the theory of commodity fetishism, Marx (1884) states that, although under capitalism every single thing may be turned into a commodity, there is one thing which can never be bought or sold: poverty, for it has no use or exchange value. The fact is that, at the turn of the millennium, poverty has been framed as a product for consumption through tourism at a global scale. (Freire-Medeiros 2009: 586)

As India is essentialised as a symbol of poverty, and poverty has become just another commodity in the leisure and cultural marketplace, narratives of Indian poverty retain a strong popularity in the west. And yet, even if maybe not as popular, they are not watched in the west alone. In an article published in 2009 on *darkmatter*, Atticus Narain, while discussing the hype around and the reactions to *Slumdog Millionaire*, wondered if “this Slum’s Eye view may cause Bollywood to readdress its fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West”. This is a question that will be briefly addressed in the following section.

**Hindi cinema[[9]](#footnote-9) and the aesthetic of poverty**

Poverty is certainly not a new subject for Hindi films. In the aftermath of independence (1950s – 1960s) films of the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of Hindi cinema (made by Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy) tackled issues of poverty and inequality by focusing on the economic changes within the country and the effect of urbanisation on the lives of ordinary people. In the 1970s, with the emergence of Amitabh Bachchan and the ‘Angry Young Man’ character, the focus was on the struggle of the working class, the criminality and the corruption that plagued Indian society. However, since the mid-1990s, a new trend of films emerged, which, instead of openly tackling socio-political issues, focused more and more on the affluent lives of the upper classes, offering a sanitised version of Indian society in which differences of class are effectively erased and poverty does not exist, or it is not acknowledged (see Punathambekar, 2005, on *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham*). While these films dominated the box office up until at least the mid-2000s, since the 21st century a new set of films have emerged which, contrary to the aforementioned upper-class centred blockbusters, turned their attention to “the crime-ridden, rotting underbelly of urban India”, the “dark shadow” of the glittery fantasy of urban modernity (Shah 2014) – an early example being Ram Gopal Varma’s *Company* (2002), which focused on the Mumbai underworld, but also most of Anurag Kashyap’s films fit in with this description. In addition to a renewed interest in the underbelly of India, filmmakers also re-introduced social and political issues in their films, often tackling questions of inequality and disparities within society (Devasundaram 2016: 4-5).

Two films that certainly readdress Bollywood’s “fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West”, to borrow Narain’s words, are *Peepli Live* (Anusha Rizvi, 2010) and *Dhobi Ghat* (Kiran Rao, 2011), both produced by Aamir Khan, one of the most famous actors in the Bollywood scene. As films which deal with poverty, corruption, inequality and crime, these films get very close to western imaginings of India as a space of poverty, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that they both premiered at international film festivals (respectively the Sundance Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival). *Peepli Live* focuses on the issue of urban-rural divide, poverty and farmers’ suicide, as it tells the story of Natha, an indebted farmer who grabs the attention of the media when he threatens suicide – the only way he could provide money for his family as the government has a support scheme for the families of those farmers who commit suicide. *Dhobi Ghat* instead is set in Mumbai and focuses on the intertwined lives of four very different people in terms of class, caste and religion: a banker who, on sabbatical, goes back to Mumbai from New York to pursue her career as a photographer, a painter who is looking for inspiration, a washer-man who aspires to become an actor and an immigrant who chronicles her life in Mumbai on videotape.

Considering their approach to sensitive social, political and economic issues such as class divide, inequality, corruption, destitution, these films clearly mark a decisive shift from the Bollywood films of the mid 1990s – mid 2000s. And yet, going back to Narain’s question regarding the possibility that *Slumdog Millionaire* could prompt “Bollywood to readdress its fascination with elite power, consumerism and diasporic life in the West” (2009), I want to consider the possibility that Boyle’s film, rather than influencing the emergence of this indie genre, which is rather a response to a changing social, cultural and economic context,[[10]](#footnote-10) might have had an impact on the visibility of these films on the international stage, as well as on the filmmakers’ ability to navigate it. In contrast to most Bollywood films of the previous decade – except for *Laagan* (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) starring and produced by Aamir Khan, which won the audience award at the Locarno Film Festival – *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* had much more international visibility, as they both circulated in the international film festival circuit before their release in India (unlike most Indian films). Both films have been mostly praised in the west and by the English-speaking press in India for broadening the horizons of Indian popular cinema – “Star expands reach of Indian films” was the title of a *Variety* article on *Peepli Live* – as well as for challenging the “India Shining” myth (Mukhopadhyay 2013:130). Many reviews, in praising these films, stressed on the one hand their distance from Bollywood films[[11]](#footnote-11) and on the other their portrayal of “real life in India”: Pallav Mukhopadhyay, for example, commented on how *Peepli Live* is “an attempt to showcase the ‘real’ people of India” (2013:131) as did the *The Times of India*, which suggested that the film is about “real India” (2010)[[12]](#footnote-12). These are of course interesting remarks, because they seem to conflate the realist style of these films with their concern with “real” people. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that upper-class Indians living affluent and consumerist lives (like the characters of most Bollywood films of the previous decade) are not “real people” – we could argue perhaps that they are not represented in realist tones. The emphasis on these films representing “real India” and “real people” reintroduces the question of authenticity and the western stereotype of India as a space of poverty.

This is an issue directly addressed in Rao’s film through Shai’s tours around the Dhobi Ghat (the outdoor laundry of Mumbai). Shai, the upper-class banker on sabbatical from New York, asks Munna the Dhobi Wallah (washerman) to guide her around the place because she “wants to see, wants to understand [real life]”. Her guided tours of the Dhobi Ghat, which she documents with her camera, retain an uncanny similarity with the aforementioned slum tours, for she, like tourists in Dharavi,

want to immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves) – on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish (Bauman, 1996: 29).

Shai’s visits to the ‘real India’ of the Dhobi Ghat thus reiterate the same dynamics of exoticisation seen in western films about India (she does not mingle with the locals, only with Munna, who acts as the ‘native informant’) and yet, the clear disparities of social, cultural and economic capital between Shai and Munna do not disappear under the pretence that Munna is happy where he is; neither does he find a way out as he was hoping for. Rather than simply reproducing poor India as an exotic spectacle, Shai’s visits to the Dhobi Ghat hint at the phenomenon of poverty tourism, thus demonstrating the filmmaker’s awareness of the currency of poverty in the international marketplace and her ability to appropriate the dominant discourse that produces poverty as a spectacle only to re-write it and subvert its meaning.

Talking about the position of postcolonial writers in the global literary marketplace, Graham Huggan suggests that “they recognise that the value of their writing as an international commodity depends, to a large extent, on the exotic appeal it holds to an unfamiliar metropolitan audience” (1994: 24) as exoticism remains a key element for their success. The same can be applied to Indian filmmakers, as Ganti observed in fact that “filmmakers’ prestige and status is critically connected to the ability to circulate within elite social spheres, such as international film festivals, and to garner praise from the English-language press in India and abroad” (2016: 130). As previously mentioned, both *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* have circulated at international festivals, and their ability to ‘sell’ Indian poverty has certainly contributed to their popularity in the international circuit. But rather than merely reproducing traditional exoticist approaches to poverty in India, the ability of both films to gain visibility on the international scene could be read as the result of, following Spivak (2008), a politics of “strategic essentialism”, which gives them access to the global stage only to allow them to then subvert the dominant discourse (of India as the exotic, poor, Other) and bring forward their own agenda.

The representation of poverty in *Peepli Live* as well as in *Dhobi Ghat* is significantly different from the approach of films focused on spiritual India or ‘Dark India’. Indeed, even though both films play with the trope of ‘the east as spectacle’ their strategic exploitation of poverty resembles what Lau and Mendes call “a re-Orientalist technique of claiming cultural truth and authority in representation” (Lau and Mendes 2011: 5). The very idea of poor India as a spectacle, which is mimicked in both films, rather than being a way to confirm stereotypes, serves the purpose of unsettling people’s perceptions of reality: in *Peepli Live* this is seen through the mediation of the camera and of journalists preying on the misery of farmers, and in *Dhobi Ghat* through Shai’s photographs and the recordings of immigrant Yasmin. Moreover, in both films poverty is not depoliticised, and class differences and inequalities rather than being overcome at the end of these films are actually reaffirmed: both Munna and Natha are in fact “essentially pawns, malleable to the vested interests and whims of privileged individuals and groups and therefore dispatched to the periphery at the culmination of both films” (Devasundaram 2016: 196).

**Conclusion**

Representations of India as a space of poverty in contemporary films are still heavily influenced by the legacy of the orientalist discourse of difference as an apparatus of power (Bhabha 1994: 100), as they keep reproducing the binaries east/west, modern/primitive, rational/irrational, ordered/disordered that characterised the colonial discourse. In particular, in cinematic representations of India, such as those offered by films such as *Eat, Pray, Love* or *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, poverty itself is exoticised and conflated with the myth of mystic India, de facto producing a neutralisation of poverty which, normalised as a key characteristic of the exotic Other, is no longer treated as a social and political issue. The more recent narratives of ‘Dark India’ reiterate the orientalist binaries between the east and the west and, once again, reproduce the idea of India as a space of poverty. Despite their continuity with orientalist discourses, these narratives mark a shift in the representation of poverty because, rather than representing Indians as ‘poor but happy’, they put the spotlight on the violence, crime, fear that comes with poverty. And yet, films such as *Lion* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, even though they give visibility to pressing social issues, end up providing a spectacle of poor India which, once again, is not contextualised, and, by allowing their characters to escape poverty respectively through adoption and the participation in a TV show (symbol of the neoliberal shift of the country, see Desai 2011), poverty is once again neutralised and, emptied of any significance, turned into a spectacle. Narratives of ‘Dark India’ thus feed into an exceptional trend of the 21st century: the commodification of poverty in the global marketplace, exemplified by slum tours taking place in Dharavi.

The popularity of ‘Dark India’ tales as well as the growth in what Rushdie calls “poverty tourism” respond to western anxieties at a time of deep economic, social and political crisis. With disparities on the rise in the west, in fact, taking refuge in the fantasy that “abject poverty” is a matter of alterity, as it is always “there” and never “here”, is a way to “deflect a problem which is also the North’s by setting it in the developing world” (Korte 2010/2011: 295). It also feeds into a nostalgia for a lost past which, in the UK at least, has been accompanied by a renewed popularity of films and TV series tackling the imperial past. The hype around poverty has had in turn an effect on Indian popular cinema which, operating in a global arena, Is keenly aware of international trends. While films like *Dhobi Ghat* and *Peepli Live* offer an interesting perspective on the social and political conditions of contemporary life in both the urban and rural space, these films have been also marketed in such a way as to appeal to the same viewers who, as Rushdie said, “crave enough grit and violence to believe that they are portraying a real India”, thus playing along with contemporary exotic representations of ‘Dark India’. It was Khan himself who, in an interview, declared that these films were meant for an international audience (Daniels 2012). What remains to be seen is the extent to which these films will manage to re-write dominant discourses of India and poverty and subvert the long-lasting legacy of orientalism.

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1. It is not even the first western music video playing with Orientalist imaginings of India: Major Lazer’s *Lean On* (2015) and Iggy Azalea’s *Bounce* (2013) again see western singers/musicians taking centre stage with Indian people (again mostly dancers, children and priests) in the background. See Butler 2016, Cupchik 2017, Kumar 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The fact that western people look to the east searching for spirituality does not make their assumptions on the existence of a “spiritual east” less stereotypical. The very idea that the east was more spiritual than the west was a key point of the colonial discourse, which, since the early 19th century, insisted on the “identification of a world-denying and ascetic spirituality as the central teachings of Hinduism” (King 1999: 131) to prevent social activism and revolutionary tendencies. Ironically though, this discourse was later on appropriated by Gandhi to articulate anticolonial resistance. For a more detailed analysis of the idea of “mystic India” see King 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the case of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Desai observes how, notwithstanding the fact that the film is the cinematographic rendition of Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* and that it was co-directed by an Indian director, Loveleen Tandan, while also featuring popular Indian actors and the soundtrack of popular Indian musicians, is rarely thought of as a kind of re-orientalism perpetrated by Indians (2011: 87). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://theconversation.com/lion-is-a-well-made-melodrama-with-a-rather-disturbing-message-70279> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Desai (2011: 77) notes how accusations of a lack of authenticity have sprung in particular from those who, within India, would rather promote the modern image of “India shining” (see also Roy 2009) in the world, and therefore label any hints at poverty in western films as a sign of Orientalism, overlooking the fact that Hindi popular cinema itself has tackled this issue numerous times in the past, and notwithstanding the fact that Boyle’s film pays homage precisely to one of these films focused on the urban underworld, *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1995, starring Amitabh Bachchan). Narain also asks if this discussion would have taken place at all had Danny Boyle’s ethnicity been different (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The relationship between *Slumdog Millionaire* and Hindi cinema would deserve an entire chapter on its own and will not be addressed here as it goes beyond the scope of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this respect, Miriam Nandi’s suggestion that we are left with, following Chakrabarty (2000: 45-46), a “politics of despair” which “requires a reading strategy that shows why the predicament which we have to criticize is necessarily inescapable” (2013/2014: 168) seems to be the most suitable way to approach literary or cinematic representations of poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Anne-Marie d’Hauteserre maintains that “exoticism itself is deeply rooted in colonialism and tourist experiences of exotic landscapes are a thin parody of the colonial experience” (2004: 237). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hindi cinema and Bollywood are two overlapping but not identical terms. They both refer to the Indian popular film industry, in Hindi, based in Mumbai (former Bombay), but while Hindi (or often ‘Bombay’) cinema refers to Indian popular films made since the early days, ‘Bollywood’ is mostly used to indicate the films produced since the mid-1990s, when the Hindi film industry acquired a more transnational character (in terms of operations and narratives). The term also refers to the transnational culture industry that has emerged, in that very same period, around films (see Prasad 2008: 43-44; Rajadhyaksha 2003: 30; Punathambekar 2013: 1-2. For a more in-depth discussion of the term ‘Bollywood’ see Mishra 2006, Dudrah 2012, Thomas 2013, Vasudevan 2008.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a detailed analysis of indie films see Devasundaram 2016 and Dwyer 2011. Devasundaram also offers a detailed analysis of *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Although different from traditional Bollywood films, most of these films are connected to it, having Bollywood actors and or producers investing in them, and often having Bollywood actors in the main lead, or playing cameos. Both *Peepli Live* and *Dhobi Ghat* were produced by Aamir Khan, who also stars in *Dhobi Ghat* (and is married to Kiran Rao), while Naseerudin Shah stars in *Peepli Live*. On the relationship between Bollywood and indie films, see Devasundaram 2016 and Dwyer 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/movie-reviews/peepli-live/moviereview/6298078.cms> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)