

# Observation

## Street Children in Film

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### ABSTRACT

In examining the depiction of street children in three classic films: *Kids*, *Pixote*, and *Salaam Bombay*, I argue that the respective directors play upon our protean concepts of "the street" and "the child" in order to offer social criticism of three types of states: the consumerist state, the authoritarian state, and the neocolonialist state. In each film, street life is used as a metaphor for the way in which the state expresses its authority. In spite of their differences, the directors' share gendered views of children and childhood innocence, and see the street as offering its inhabitants the opportunities for pleasure and liberation, along with suffering and dependency. Through viewing the films together in comparative terms, the audience is able to understand the political subtexts that define our interactions with children of all types, in as well as outside of conventional classroom settings.

In this paper, I examine the depiction of street children in three feature length films: *Kids* (U.S.A., 1995), *Pixote* (Brazil, 1981) and *Salaam Bombay* (India, 1988). The use of popular film as a unit of comparison is relevant to educational study insofar as filmmakers are able to use the medium to create and disseminate cultural capital to vast audiences, reifying specific values and attitudes in the process. Because cultural capital continually is contested amongst various groups vying for the opportunity to control its reproduction, and because film has become such a powerful means of influencing the mass audience, its importance no longer can be ignored by scholars used to exploring conventional educational practice in traditional settings. And, whereas North American educators have begun to appreciate the importance of analyzing the media so as to better understand popular perceptions of educational actors, institutions and issues (Giroux, 1992, 1996a, 1996b), few have used a comparative approach to sharpen their analyses. I believe that this is a serious omission, and will plead my case through analyzing images of street life, arguing that in this instance, the act of comparison provides insight and context to our understanding of the relationship between children and the state, an understanding that would be lacking if the films were critiqued separately. It is arguable whether analyses of cultural studies generically influence policy directions. But they do help us to understand how the power of the visual image shapes and legitimizes those popular perceptions and attitudes that form the subtext through which policy is developed and implemented.

I believe that we, as teachers, play a critical role in this process insofar as the consequences of our contact with children form the basis upon which other state institutions will later address their needs in other contexts. In most cases, the school is the initial state institution to which children are exposed for a lengthy period of time. And as employees of the state, we are aware of the contradictory attitudes that we convey to students within classroom settings, attitudes that include promises that express a concern for promoting social inclusivity and respect for difference in cooperative terms, coupled with individualistic admonitions that speak to the importance of independent self-reliance, self-discovery, and critical thinking. We promote the intrinsic value of learning but rely upon practices that utilize surveillance, cooption, and coercion as a means of minimizing resistance to pedagogical authority. Thus, we treat our students as the state treats its citizens: with a mixture of benevolence and coercion, as we find ourselves communicating to students the importance of their acquiescence to externally imposed rule governed behavior, whereas we neglect the legitimate needs of those who are in difficult and even tragic circumstances. A comparative analysis of these films speaks to the broader implications of the state's treatment of children. But in examining how childhood and street life become redefined so as to represent prevailing political discourse, we are able to better appreciate the process through which childhood roles are constructed to fulfill instrumental purposes, a process with which educators are complicit.

There are approximately one hundred million children throughout the world who identify the street as their home, while there are almost 90 million children between the ages of eleven and fifteen who are forced into regularly contributing to the international workforce. Ten million children under the age of seventeen systematically exchange sex for money; millions of others, having been orphaned by the AIDS epidemic and displaced as victims of war, have turned to the streets for their survival (Dalglish 1996). The existence of street children is not limited to the developing world, as the North American experience with homelessness attests, and the reasons for its occurrence are as complex as they are varied. Within the past decade, international organizations such as UNICEF and numerous nongovernmental organizations have established educational and social service programs that attempt to more directly

address the needs of street children than those conventional services offered by official government bodies. When we read of street children being summarily assassinated by police in numerous Latin American countries, and when we hear of street girls being raped by official authorities on a regular basis, it is clear that institutional responses that rely solely upon organs of the state to address the issue have a limited value. And, because of the enormity, growth, and seeming intractability of the problem over the past two decades, it is understandable that filmmakers would view the subject of street children as a topic worthy of exploration for the most realistic of art forms. To be sure, the existence of street children as an international social phenomenon is symbolic of our postmodernist age. The street itself threatens our modernist notions of place (home and space [Harvey 1985]) as being necessarily private, personal, permanent, and subject to independent ownership and control. Life on the street simultaneously encourages freedom of movement and expression, offering the possibility of obtaining immediate pleasure, while also inflicting incredible suffering and pain, through encouraging random and accidental environmental and social interaction that is violent and uncompromising. Characteristics of street life are both positive and negative, reaffirming and repressive, liberating and alienating. In the three films subject to review, images of street life are given quite different persona, reflecting their writers' and directors' differing critiques of the respective societies at large.

If the concept of "street" is protean and full of inherent ambiguity, the notion of "childhood" also can be thought of as a social construction subject to contextual influence and historical change. Our recognition that human beings experience a distinctive, identifiable time period, clearly bounded by birth and adulthood, is rooted in early modern European social thought, and is representative of a social reaction to declining infant mortality rates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Aries 1962). But our views of childhood also became associated with modernist notions of the role of the state and its affirmative stance toward mass education and restricted child labor. The globalization of the nation-state ideal resulted in a subsequent international acceptance of childhood as a legitimate concept (Stephens 1995).

The fact that this concept has always been subject to politicization is not surprising. Initially associated with the privatized family and the home (Bellingham 1983), the child was depicted in either overly romantic terms, as the essence of goodness, the dependent innocent, whose lack of development gave evidence for social potential rather than individual agency when parented correctly, or as the subhuman pollutant, whose very existence threatened social stability and cohesiveness. The difference, of course, depended upon the child's class standing and parentage. In nineteenth-century North America, the existence of street children among the urban poor threatened middle-class notions of childhood, family, privacy, and autonomy. As a result, biological determinism and environmental melioration were alternatively used as rationalizations for state policies that sought to either ignore child destitution, or intervene so as to take children away from their impoverished parents, perpetuating their social segregation (Bellingham 1983).

The existence of street children in the late twentieth century further serves to contradict globalizing tendencies based upon modernist notions of class, family, and nation-state. We understand that the conditions street children confront are derivative of (1) the ethnic conflicts that have questioned the inherent legitimacy of modern state institutions, (2) the urban violence that demonstrates the limitations of state institutional effectiveness and social control, and (3) the socioeconomic structural inequalities that challenge the viability of the traditional family as a productive capitalist unit, and, as a result, it becomes clear that our contemporary views of childhood are reflective of a much larger frame of reference. And, it is not surprising that the images of street life captured in the three films subject to our review are as informative about their authors' critiques of capitalist consumerism, institutional authoritarianism, and postcolonialism, as they are about street children and street life per se.

*Kids* was directed by Larry Clark and written by nineteen-year-old Harmony Korine, whom the director befriended after a year of talking to and interacting with New York City skateboarders. Clark made his reputation as an avant-garde photographer, who documented the lives of youth using speed in his first book, *Tulsa* (1971), and teenage runaways in *Teenage Lust* (1983). A third book, *The Perfect Childhood*, a random collection of his photography, was published in Britain in 1993. His photography is noteworthy for its graphic as well as autobiographical nature. Clark spent nineteen months in jail in 1976 for a parole violation and in interviews he has hinted at his own struggles in coming to terms with issues of sexual expression and violence. *Kids* was his first film and when shown at the Sundance Festival in 1995, it caused intense audience reaction because of the graphic nature of its sexual explicitness, and its hedonistic portrayal of North American youth. It was purchased by the Miramax Corporation and distributed without a parental rating code. The film also was controversial because of the director's use of untrained youth as actors, who were required to perform numerous scenes involving sexually explicit situations.

The minimalist plot of the film revolves around Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick), a fifteen-year-old whose primary preoccupation involves deflowering as many virgins as possible, moving from conquest to potential conquest. When one of his victims, Jenny (Cloe Sevigny), discovers that she has been infected with HIV after having had her first and only sexual experience with Telly, she seeks him out to inform him that he is a carrier. The remainder of the film involves her efforts to find him while he seeks a new conquest. At the end of the film, Jenny is raped by Telly's best friend Casper (Justin Pierce), in the aftermath of extended drug use that occurs during a night-long party.

Henry Giroux (1996c, 1996d) has offered an extensive critique of *Kids*, arguing that the film symbolizes a social conservatism that in depicting contemporary youth as unfeeling sociopaths rationalizes policy neglect and indifference to the needs of the urban class. For Giroux, the images presented in the film go beyond a "blaming the victim" mentality that was evidenced in the biological determinism promoted during the nineteenth century. In this case, under the guise of a pseudodocumentary style, the lives of urban youth are totally objectified to the point whereby the film's characters are depicted as being void of feeling, agency, or resistance to repression. Clark shows us the results of a society that has reneged upon its social responsibilities to its children, but in failing to chronicle in explicit terms how that occurs, in ignoring the structural conditions that create his 11 urban monsters," he lets us off the hook, expressing an incomplete and therefore inaccurate view of urban life. The pseudodocumentary style of the film conveys more subtle messages that are no less dangerous as well. First, the audience is encouraged to voyeuristically enjoy the main characters' hedonism as long as it can comfortably view them at an emotional distance, without having to bond with the characters at all. The cardboard nature of their roles makes this possible. Second, Giroux notes that although the major characters are Anglo, they adopt African American "hiphop" culture with respect to swagger, musical preference, and speech, while on the street. He concludes that the film subtly promotes a form of racist stereotyping, through encouraging the association of social pathology with African American culture.

One of Giroux's critics notes that his critique of *Kids* lacks perspective, in the sense that North American youth often have been portrayed in negative, stereotypical fashion, throughout contemporary film, where the complexity of their characters is left undeveloped. I believe that there are a number of other issues that need to be addressed as well, in spite of the provocative nature of Giroux's critique.

From an empirical standpoint, his assumption that the film promotes racist stereotyping is problematic, in the sense that he fails to acknowledge the power of "wannabeism," where urban Anglo youth often willfully and intentionally assimilate the mannerisms and speech of the African American community with which they are in contact. It can therefore be counterargued that Clark is indeed simply recording the realistic rhythms of urban speech and movement, rather than subtly attempting to convey racist images per se, in chronicling his main characters' acceptance of hip-hop.

Giroux's analysis also is lacking in the sense that he fails to consider the gendered nature of the relationships that are depicted in the film. Although they are generally sexually experienced, pleasure seeking, and hardened to the macho imperatives that govern their male friends' behavior, the girls in *Kids* are more mutually supportive of one another and express a genuine care for one another that is lacking among the boys. If hedonism crosses gender in the film, social pathology does not. Furthermore, the willingness of females to play by male rules, even after consciously understanding their ramifications, leads to a depiction of youth culture that is certainly sexist. The image of Jenny, the naive waiflike innocent, the ultimate victim who still possesses enough ethical sensitivity to attempt to warn Telly of his condition, further gives evidence for the film's gender stereotyping. Is such stereotyping a realistic depiction of urban youth culture? The answer to this empirical question is not easily ascertained, but in acknowledging Clark's differing treatment of males and females throughout the film, it is clear that his overall treatment of urban youth is somewhat more complex than Giroux would have had us believe, conforming to the traditional dichotomy that viewed youth as either predator/pollutant or innocent victim.

If *Kids* is decidedly sexist, it also is somewhat classist in its depiction of working-class parents who are largely absent from their children's lives. Only one parent is seen in the entire film at all, and parental absence, particularly when their children are partying, engaging in drug and alcohol abuse, and participating in sexually exploitative behavior within homes, apartments, and sheltered spaces, is quite shocking. The one scene involving a parental figure occurs when Telly's mother, breastfeeding an infant while simultaneously smoking a cigarette, refuses to give him money, which he then steals from her bedroom anyway. Upon leaving his home, she tells him to return by 4:30 a.m. The image that is transmitted is one of workingclass parental incompetence and ineptitude. Insofar as the film is a story of youthful hedonism, it is a hedonism that transcends class boundaries, though, as the filmmakers are attempting to make a more general statement concerning the larger ramifications of parental neglect. It should be stressed that the home environments portrayed in the film include the material comforts one would associate with upper-working-class/lower-middle-class affluence.

It is legitimate to question the degree to which this is a film about street life, as so much of the action occurs within closed and sheltered boundaries. But it is precisely because the distinction between home and street is portrayed in such a transparent light that Clark's imagery becomes extremely powerful. If there is a message to the movie, it can be found in the triumph of the street over the security and rationality of the home. Street life as it is presented in all of its randomness, its excitement, and its violence, becomes a metaphor for the directionless nature of a postmodernist life in which children end up killing each other and themselves, in their empty pursuit for pleasure. The director views the triumph of the street as a triumph of a self-absorbed, consumptive society, which, in the form of its children, implodes.

If the street is made to represent a consumer society at its hedonistic extreme in *Kids*, in *Pixote* the lives of street children are presented in ways that reflect the horror and violence of Latin American authoritarianism. Director Hector Babenco sets his film in Sao Paulo and Rio, where he tells the story of a street child (Pixote) and his peers. Sent to a reform school because of involvement in petty crime, Pixote immediately witnesses a homosexual rape upon his arrival at the school. Along with others, he is rounded up and held under horrific conditions by local police looking to pin a previous murder upon one of the boys. The police themselves regularly murder street youth and round up reform school offenders, beating confessions out of them and locking them in solitary in order to close unsolved crimes. They brutally beat Fumaca, an inmate who dies upon returning to the reform school. The authorities attempt to blame one of his peers unfairly for his murder and when the accused offender is beaten to death, the boys rebel, burn down their dormitory, and escape.

Pixote and three of his friends attempt to survive on the streets on their own, but their efforts at forming mutual trust and consummating an emotional attachment to one another are unrealized. After traveling to Rio to close a drug deal, Pixote accidentally stabs Debora, a contact who has tried to swindle them out of their money, to death. During the interaction, one of the four boys, Chico, also is killed. They then "buy" Such, a prostitute, from a pimp with their recovered drug money, and together they create a scam, stealing money from wealthy clients whom she entices into the bedroom. Another of the boys, Lilica, soon leaves the group after feeling sexually spurned by the group leader Dito. Ultimately, Dito, Sueli, and Pixote are unable to react quickly to unforeseen circumstances as Pixote mistakenly kills both Dito and an American tourist during a failed shakedown attempt. Pixote is left alone with Sueli but she abandons him, not wanting the responsibility of caring for a young boy. As was true of *Kids*, this film also was made with actual Brazilian street children rather than with professional actors, and in a tragic example of life imitating art, Fernando Ramos Da Silva, the child who played the role of Pixote, was himself gunned down on the streets a few years after the film was released.

For director Babenco, street life simply becomes an extension of the brutality of the state, as symbolized by the youth's treatment in the reform school and in the adult prison. There are absolutely no redeeming characteristics to these state institutions, and, in fact, all pretense with regard to their legitimacy of purpose or function is lacking from the very start. Correction officials are naturally concerned about press investigation and popular reaction if their policies and activities are discovered, but they demonstrate no loyalty to any set of ethical principles except for maximizing their self-interest.

If one of the important themes of *Kids* concerns the ascendancy of street values to a point whereby their acceptance influences all aspects of the youth's everyday activities inside and outside of the home, in *Pixote*, it is the brutality of the state that is later reproduced on the street. When incarcerated, the Brazilian children depicted in the film mimic the repressive behavior, to which they have been subjected, in defining relations with their peers. Their exploitation of one another parallels the degradation and violence they have seen in their lives. Nonetheless, they do attempt to construct authentic relationships with one another, seeking each other's friendship and companionship, ultimately initiating their insurrection out of loyalty to the murdered colleague who has been unjustly beaten to death.

Once on the street, we see the failed efforts of the youth to solidify their friendship in the face of random violence. The inability of these youths to completely trust one another, and their inability to adjust to unforeseen events, results in their downfall. A number of the scenes in *Pixote* are arguably more brutal and more disturbing than those in *Kids*. Homosexual and heterosexual sexual activity is prominently displayed, as are graphic scenes depicting violence and drug use. But unlike the youth in *Kids*, these Brazilian street children are more sympathetic, because of their desire to connect with one another in personal terms. They tackle street life together, in groups of two, three, or four, although it is their own neediness that both characterizes their humanity and causes their downfall.

If the violence of the street complements the institutional violence to which Pixote and his friends are subjected, Babenco's portrayal of the disparities of city life further evokes images of the repressive authoritarian state. In truth, the street children in this film are no more able to survive in the slums of Sao Paulo, where they are initially incarcerated, than they are able to adjust to the fast life of Rio, where they attempt to sell their drugs and make their money. They live in a society that, in permitting abject poverty and conspicuous affluence to coexist, has no place for its neglected children, a theme that leaves a lasting impression when Pixote is left abandoned, walking the streets of Rio as the film ends. Street life becomes ultimately symbolic of the violence, neglect, and loneliness, to which most of the Brazilian people are subjected on a regular basis. It is reflective of their loss of human agency rather than a possibility of escape or a safe venue for free expression. It is important to note that *Pixote* was filmed before Brazilian democratic reforms were enacted in the mid-1980s. Yet the fact that the conditions of street children have actually deteriorated since the film was made underlines the close relationship between the neoliberal state and its authoritarian predecessor in spite of the latter's sporadic attempts to mask its coercive nature.

*Salaam Bombay* was directed by acclaimed Indian director Mira Nair, and received Cannes and Academy Award recognition in 1988. The film tells the story of Krishna, a young boy who is directed by his mother to work for a circus in order to pay back a debt to his brother. When he is abandoned by the circus, he travels to Bombay, hoping to make his money there and return home. Once in Bombay, though, he barely survives on the streets as a tea boy, and his situation becomes increasingly more destitute. His new acquaintances include Chillum, a drug addict; Sweet Sixteen, a young virgin being groomed for sale as a prostitute; Baba, a small time racketeer; Baba's wife, who is a prostitute; and their young daughter, Manju. Krishna conscientiously tries to maintain contact with his mother through attempting to send a letter describing his new environment, and through saving money so he can pay off his debt to his brother. But, being unschooled in the ways of the street, he is taken advantage of and is unsuccessful. After Krishna and Manju are rounded up by police for simply being on the street, they are sent to state institutions. In spite of her mother's pleadings, Manju is assigned as a permanent ward of the state because of the ill-suited nature of her mother's activities; Krishna eventually escapes from his reform school and, in a fit of rage, stabs Baba to death as his wife attempts to leave him. At the end of the film, Krishna and Baba's wife escape together, only to be separated on the streets of Bombay, where Krishna remains alone and in tears.

If street life is the epitome of state authoritarianism in *Pixote*, its representation as postcolonialism is unmistakable in *Salaam Bombay*. Throughout the film, viewers see references to India's inability to escape from its colonial past. Such references include depictions of the ignorant Western tourist, swindled by Chillum into paying more for faulty merchandise than the item is worth under the pretext of bargaining for a good deal; the myopic journalistic "do-gooder," who is unable to come to terms with Baba's crudeness and runs away in tears when forced to observe his behavior closely; and reform school officials, who sit mesmerized listening to a cricket match rather than closely monitoring their residents, thus allowing Krishna the chance to escape from the institution. Insofar as street life represents the essence of Indian culture and society, its fundamental nature is impenetrable and misunderstood by foreign observers who, through their affluence and/or political power, nonetheless are able to maintain their social privilege. At the same time, the street represents the inability of Indian society to break away from foreign domination, and the inevitability of its failure in attempting to do so. Chillum counsels Krishna that his dream of returning home never "I be realized, because once one is drawn to Bombay, one is never allowed to escape. Baba derides his wife as she attempts to leave him, asking her pointedly if she thinks she is Mother India in finally expressing her desire to become independent. He goes on to both question her ability to survive on her own and confesses to his own dependence upon her, in an indication of the reciprocal nature of dependency that characterizes all colonizer/colonized relationships. Of course, his character represents all native elites who "pimp" their own people through serving the desires of foreign colonizers. Ultimately, the street is transformed into a venue for continual social repression that is as unresolvable as it is unyielding.

The children in *Salaam Bombay* are more sympathetically portrayed than those in either *Kids* or *Pixote*, their inherent innocence and their efforts to form nurturing interpersonal relationships being prominently displayed throughout the film. Indeed, the particular portrayal of Sweet Sixteen as the kidnapped virgin who is sold into becoming a prostitute borders on clichéd heterosexism. Still, the children never lose their humanity in the film, although they definitely are social victims in an uncaring, harsh world that includes the extremes of wealth and poverty, Western and native tradition, coinciding with one another uneasily, characterizing the complexity of modern Indian society.

## A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

In comparing the three films, it is clear that our notions of childhood are politically and culturally nuanced, and cannot be separated from wider social and cultural contexts (Elshtain 1996; Therborn 1996). We have seen children depicted as urban monsters and naive victims. At times, they unknowingly participate in their own self-destruction, and, in other situations, they seek self-affirmation through pursuing authentic interpersonal relationships. The street is used to express a number of specific metaphors: the absent state, countenancing hedonism and social nihilism; the overtly coercive and repressive state, where domination and exploitation through the use of violence is an accepted part of regular daily existence; and the postcolonial state, where vestiges of colonialism interact with traditional values to create destitution and suffering that is predestined and inexorable.

It is not surprising that each director uses specific cinematic techniques to convey his/her own interpretation of street life. For Larry Clark, street life is primarily photographed in daylight, with appropriate attention given to the free-ranging physical movement and free expression of the film's teenagers. New York's Washington Square sets the stage for the youth's energetic hedonism and sadism. As Giroux noted, the use of hip-hop music is essential in complementing the visual imagery. Characters who are photographed on the street are always moving, and even when Telly and Casper are speaking with each other or are in a group, wide camera angles are used to juxtapose their interaction with the street as well as with each other. This is in contrast to the depiction of crowded, noisy, closed, indoor rooms, where much of their sexual and drug activity occurs.

The most visually compelling scenes of *Kids* occur when Casper attacks an African American male who invades his Washington Square skateboarding territory. The violence that ensues, as the victim is repeatedly attacked first by Casper and then by all of his

friends, ends with the male lying on the ground, having been beaten unconscious after having been hit on the head with a skateboard. The scene ends with Telly spitting on the unmoving body as the friends leave, unconcerned with the victim's injuries and possible death. Here, street violence is depicted in almost poetic terms as the use of slow motion and lengthy close-ups, along with multiple camera angles, combine to communicate a sense of escapism, emanating from uncontrollable passionate anger,

Hector Babenco does not even photograph the street until his film is half over, as the severe brutality of the state is depicted solely within reformatory and prison walls. The initial images of the street thus evoke liberation and freedom. Pixote and his friends are seen engaging in petty theft and pickpocketing on the streets of the business section of Sao Paulo through use of the wide angle lens. Their anonymity within the crowd provides them with a sense of protection. Whether playing in a water fountain, or later, after traveling to Rio de Janeiro, enjoying the beach, Pixote and his friends are able to blend in with mainstream society, at least on a temporary basis. These scenes are filmed with abundant light and are in stark contrast to the darker scenes indoors, which include prostitution, sexual exploration, and murder.

Two of the more disturbing scenes from the film occur within Sueli's apartment. When the boys first meet her, she is sitting on a toilet, strung out and crying, with an aborted fetus on the floor in a trash can in the background. The close-up of Such intentionally blurs the image of the fetus, so that she can call attention to its existence in the dialogue. Later, after Pixote unintentionally shoots Dito and the American tourist the gang is trying to shake down, Sueli and Pixote sit in the bedroom as the camera records a close-up of Sueli breastfeeding the twelve-year-old as he sits in an almost fetal position. Realizing that she does not want to be his mother, as he refuses to stop sucking on her nipple, she kicks him out and the film ends as he is walking on the streets of Rio alone. Pixote's desire to recapture his childhood cannot be expressed in stronger terms. But it is significant that so many of the failed attempts of the film's characters to connect with one another occur within the intimate confines of sheltered space.

Mira Nair, director of *Salaam Bombay*, films a majority of her scenes on the street. Like her counterparts, indoor lighting is dark, whereas the street is considerably more bright and colorful. The audience witnesses examples of Western affluence juxtaposed with nativist poverty, but also is shown the pageantry of Hindu festivals as part of the hustle and bustle of urban Indian life. Not only are the streets depicted as being safer than conventional sheltered life, they serve as the venues where more ethical and authentic relationships are formed. In this film, too, traditional music plays a crucial role in complementing panoramic views of the street, reinforcing our view of street life as more real than the decadence revealed within enclosed spaces. But when Krishna sits down alone on the street and begins to cry, the close-up that ends the film expresses the director's conclusion that the street, in spite of its possibilities, is no more a place of refuge than is conventional shelter. If the street includes vestiges of social innocence and traditionalism, those elements do not survive the onslaught of Western-inspired materialism and corruption.

In spite of their thematic differences, these films share a number of important characteristics. First, as social critiques, they present pessimistic conclusions regarding the potential amelioration of the suffering experienced by their characters. Telly, who lives for sexual conquest, will continue to infect unknowing victims with the AIDS virus. Pixote and Krishna are left on their own, alienated and lost, without any real hope for rescue. Not only will the material conditions of their characters remain unchanged, but none of the directors allow for the possibility that their characters will ever be able to successfully initiate and then maintain authentic relationships with other human beings.

Second, each director presents a view of street child culture as being distinctive, distant from and impenetrable to the outside observer. The audience is afforded the privilege of watching these children in their milieu, but from afar, in the safe distance of the theater seat. It is interesting to note that each director uses actual street children, nonactors, in their filmmaking, and they rely upon their subjects for plot development and script editing. They do not, however, demand that their subjects engage in the type of revelatory self-expression that would force the viewer to identify with the person as much as with conditions to which the person is subjected. The purpose of these films is one of offering social critique rather than creating cathartic emotional appeal.

Finally, the use of corrupted sexuality as a metaphor for the destruction of childhood (and social) innocence, is a theme that the three films share in spite of their differing social, political, and cultural contexts. Their selective views of the state do not extend to their analyses of their construction of gender, which is traditional and male dominated.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, are the implications that these images hold for educators? A few conclusions come immediately to mind. First, a comparative analysis of these films makes it clear that the perpetuation of classroom cultures that refuse to acknowledge the social and political influences that govern our understanding of childhood can no longer be sustained. The assumption that individual student needs can be generally defined and then addressed in ways that deemphasize the specificity of cultural influence is not tenable.

Perhaps even more importantly, though, these films force us to reevaluate our global understanding of childhood in light of our own relationship to the state. Our perception of the state influences our views of children, their characteristics and capabilities, and our professional responsibilities to them. Such an understanding has repercussions for even the most intimate and unique of student-teacher interactions as the terms with which we define those interactions must be reconceived. Teacher authority in the classroom must be acknowledged as being based upon factors other than specific pedagogical or curricular orientation, and student resistance to or acceptance of that authority must be viewed as encompassing more than the successful or unsuccessful adaptation to conventionally accepted classroom socialization norms. Instead, the classroom should be viewed as one of many arenas where the negotiation of social roles vis-a-vis that of the state is fluid and changing, for both instructor and student.

Finally, a comparative study of this type forces us to both appreciate the power of the visual image as well as critique its absolutism. These films engage us in powerfully emotional ways that are unique to their art form. But a comparative critique also allows us to clarify the political messages that are communicated in each of the films, while recognizing their limitations as totalistic representations of social realities.

I teach at a small, liberal arts undergraduate institution in the midwestern part of the United States, attended by students who are culturally, ethnically, and geographically homogeneous. I show these films in a first year "Children's Rights" seminar and, invariably, my students' reactions to the films are similar. Most of the time, they evaluate the quality of the film they have viewed according to the degree that it feels emotionally satisfying. With that standard in mind, *Salaam Bombay* is the work which is most popular, while *Pixote* is judged the most shocking and therefore the least useful for the purposes of the class. At times, the sheer power of the brutality depicted in *Pixote* leaves my students feeling disturbed, emotionally manipulated, and used. A few students report they are affected to the point whereby they are unable to sleep and recall the more vivid images of the film days after seeing it. *Kids* is not easy to watch either, although most of my students agree that they know of peers who act in ways similar to those of the characters depicted in the film. They conclude that although the film's characters display behaviors that are exaggerated, many of their representations have some realism.

Visual images encourage an immediacy of emotional response that requires little effort on the part of the audience. But as much as we enjoy participating in pleasurable activities that are immediately gratifying, we also hope that our enjoyment is not quickly consumed and has lasting duration. To the extent that they analyze their collective viewing experiences as having been meaningful, my students conclude that together, the films raise their lasting awareness of issues with which they were quite unfamiliar. And, they begin to differentiate between films that are simply emotionally satisfying as opposed to those that induce provocation and critique in different ways. I am therefore pleased with my use of these films as a teaching tool. But should this art form do more? Can directors who attempt to address issues of child suffering in all of its dimensions, do justice to their cause when working in a medium that demands so little from its audience? And, at what point is one able to transcend the role of passive viewer and pursue the type of active intellectual engagement that may lead to expressing subsequent social/political commitment?

There are no easy answers to these questions, for they ultimately require that we assess the broader issue of social responsibility for all participants who involve themselves in the process of artistic expression and communication, be they artists or audiences. In spite of the limitations of the form, viewing these films collectively and comparatively does allow us to familiarize ourselves with the lives of street children in ways that are more substantial than if we were to view the films individually. Their directors not only communicate a multiplicity of perspectives regarding the relationship between childhood and the state, but they each offer trenchant social critiques of state power without oversentimentalizing or romanticizing their characters. Their passion can be found in their broad social critiques rather than in the people they portray. As a result, their work invites educators to reflexively critique other forms of social practice, such as schooling, that also are defined by the political nature of the state. Such a critique is a necessary if insufficient pre-condition to formalizing a more substantial commitment to social change.

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