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BERT CARDULLO

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THE BEST FILMS I KNOW ABOUT STREET CHILDREN are De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946) and Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* (1951), the former set in postwar Rome, the latter in the slums of Mexico City—slums that are worse today than when Buñuel's camera uncovered them nearly forty years ago. When Hollywood tackles this subject, it produces a *Dead End* (1937): a film that wants to make a virtue of poverty (witness the popularity of the Dead End Kids) at the same time that it calls for the amelioration of the lot of New York's slum dwellers. The social problem meets the happy ending, and the result is unhappy contrivance. In *Shoeshine* and *Los Olvidados*, the social problem stands unadorned and the children unbuffered, and the result is tragedy. Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* is a worthy successor to these two works, not least because it points up, yet again, the difference between the documentary and fictional impulses on film.

Prior to *Salaam Bombay!*, this Harvard-educated woman made documentaries; that is, she *documented the reality* of social problems and the human misery caused by them. In her first fiction film, Nair continues to document a social problem—the poverty and exploitation of illiterate children abandoned to the streets by their overburdened families—but she does so through the story of the innocent, ten-year-old Krishna's initiation into a world of violence, thievery, and drugs. Unlike a documentary, Krishna's story is plotted, but the plotting doesn't exist for its own sake; rather, it serves to condense the randomness of his existence into a series of incidents that highlight his corruption by the evils of life on the streets. And this is Nair's object: to make Krishna's story stand out dramatically from (but not obliterate) the document of Bombay's thickness and squalor, its teeming, filthy streets and dingy, cramped interiors; to call attention to his most unsentimental of educations. Her ultimate goal, in this case, is the same as that of the documentarian—to improve the lives of the poor and especially of poor children—but her method is different. I bring all this up because commentators typically criticize social-problem films for their plotting, as if plotting itself (as opposed to contrivance) were an evil intrusion on truth instead of a device for revealing it. An unplotted documentary about street children wouldn't necessarily be "truer" than a fictional work on the same subject; it would just arrive at its truth by an alternate route, and, I might add, it would face as many perils along the way as its fictional counterpart.

One peril Nair and her co-scenarist, Sooni Taraporevala, avoided

was making Krishna a bathetic character, a child so crushed by his experiences that watching his story becomes unbearable: his pain grows so great as to be alien, monstrous, and we must turn our faces from it. Krishna is resourceful, accepting, and patient, and like most of the people who surround him, he keeps his emotions contained—so much so that inner serenity seems to be his defining trait. Accordingly, Nair shoots *Salaam Bombay!* mainly in medium and long shot; she shuns the close-up because she wants our understanding more than our pity, and because she wants as much as possible to connect Krishna to the environment—the people and the city—that molds him even as he resists it. “Connect” is the operative word here, for Krishna is obviously not the only homeless child on the streets of Bombay, and just as obviously he and his cohorts grow up to become the pimps, prostitutes, thieves, and drug addicts who neglect, corrupt, and abuse children. This is his story and Nair wishes us to focus on it, but it is also through his sensitive eyes that she wants us to see the pain and horror in the lives of selected other slum dwellers—adults as well as children. Krishna gets the focus because in his innocence and compassion and, yes, his beauty, he has the most to lose, his waste is the most tragic. (In this he differs from the titular character of the Brazilian film *Pixote* [1981], a boy who begins in soullessness and whose story therefore degenerates into obscenity, sentimentality, and portentousness. *Pixote* was directed by Hector Babenco, that artificer who went on to give us the equally pat and empty *Kiss of the Spider Woman* [1986] and *Ironweed* [1988].)

Nobody calls Krishna by his given name; he's called *chaipu*, or delivery boy, since he works for a while as a tea runner to the local brothels. Throughout the film, at the same time as we are getting an intimate portrait of this ten-year-old, the oft-repeated *chaipu* serves to remind us of his anonymity and essential insignificance in the demimonde of Bombay. Krishna has come here from his home in Bangalore, which he left in order to avoid the wrath of an older brother to whom he owes five hundred rupees (so much for the family as haven in a heartless world). He is desperate to return to his mother, but he can't until he raises the money to pay his debt. Hence his appearance in the big city of Bombay after a stint with a traveling circus (which abandoned him); it is here that he hopes to earn enough money to pay back his brother and pay for his train ticket home. This is his goal all through the film—to reunite with his mother in Bangalore—and it is what lifts him above the other denizens of Bombay's underworld, what gives his life purpose. He works hard and saves his money from an assortment of jobs—tea runner, chicken-coop cleaner, chicken skinner, server at wedding banquets, and even thief. But simultaneously it is his kindness and compassion—traits surely learned at the knee of the mother he so reveres (his father has long been dead)—that lose him his jobs, his money, and finally his innocence and hope: this is his tragedy and what elevates his story

above document, on the one hand, and pathos, on the other. Krishna is no mere victim of the streets, however worthy such a victim might be of our attention. He is a victim whose very goodness contributes to his victimization and whose undoing is thus all the more horrible. The very traits that make this boy stand out from his environment and could eventually release him from it, are the ones that conspire to sink him deeper into it. Such is the complexity of Mira Nair's rendering of the world.

Shortly after arriving in Bombay and taking the job as tea runner to the brothels (which are near the train station from which he so yearns to depart and behind which he sleeps with a gang of boys), Krishna becomes infatuated with a beautiful Nepalese girl who has been sold into prostitution by her parents (virgins fetch a high price on the Bombay flesh market—in this case, 10,000 rupees). Isolated from her family and by her language (she doesn't speak Hindi), and understandably reluctant to accept her fate, this girl is befriended by Krishna, who brings her free glasses of tea, sends her cookies, and plans to take her home with him to Bangalore. In return for this display of feeling, Krishna loses his delivery job (the best one he'll get) with the tea merchant—he, or rather his customers, the Nepalese among them, broke too many glasses, and his failed attempt to spirit her away from the brothel of her confinement ended in his being banned from selling tea there. On top of this, Krishna loses the girl's affections to Baba, the red-light district's chief pimp and drug dealer, who himself can do nothing to prevent her entrance into a life of prostitution, even though he wants to. And it is another girl, Baba and his prostitute-wife's neglected and nearly abused daughter, Manju, who, because of her attachment to the accommodating Krishna, gets them both arrested and placed in "chiller rooms," institutional children's homes that are more like prisons and little better than the streets. The eight-year-old Manju follows Krishna everywhere she can, even on the odd jobs he takes, and in the process she slows him down—slows him down, that is, in his race to keep out of sight of the police, who routinely pick up street children for straying outside the bounds of the ghetto, even when, as in Krishna's instance, they stray in search of work. The children need not have committed any crimes; their crime is their existence, as one boy's three-year sentence for urinating in public makes clear. Krishna remains incarcerated for only a short time before escaping over a barbed-wire barrier, but he is nevertheless shocked and brutalized by what he has experienced, from his fellow prisoners as well as from the guards. Also, he has yet to learn that he will never see Manju again; having been identified as the daughter of a drug dealer and a prostitute, she will be kept in an institution, apart from her parents, for the rest of her youth.

It is Krishna's relationship with Chillum more than any other person, however, that turns on him, robbing him of his chance to return home and contributing heavily to the film's catastrophe.

Chillum is one of Baba's pushers and is himself an addict. He befriends Krishna because the latter is a soft touch who gives him money for drugs and helps—no, holds and hugs—him through bouts of withdrawal. But despite himself, Chillum grows fond of Krishna and, in one of several scenes in *Salaam Bombay!* whose joy seems fragilely to suspend itself above the meanness and misery of the street, he and the boy smoke hash, then talk, tease, tickle, laugh. Nair films this scene on the outskirts of the city in a long take (interrupted by a dissolve to indicate that the scene occurs over an even longer period of time): there are no cuts from man to boy and back, and during the dissolve the camera retreats from its medium shot of the two. The stillness of the shot, its length, its undivided, discrete space, its soft night light: all suggest that this is a privileged moment of respite and union for Chillum and Krishna—so much so that Nair pulls the camera back in order to include as much of their bodies as possible within the momentarily protected world of the frame. Ironically, it is during this scene that Krishna reveals to Chillum his plan to save the money necessary to repay his brother and go home to Bangalore. And it is Chillum who shows Krishna where he can hide his precious rupees upon their return to Bombay proper; who, after he is fired from his job as a pusher by Baba, in desperation steals Krishna's hidden savings in order to support his drug habit; and who dies of an overdose shortly thereafter. Krishna mourns him even as he mourns the loss of his money: the one is not more precious than the other, this child deprived of childhood still seems able to realize as he starts immediately back to work.

If Chillum at his best is the older brother that Krishna so urgently needs, then Baba's prostitute-wife at her best is his substitute mother: drying him off after a day of work in the rain, lending him small amounts of money, leading him and Manju in a liberating dance around her small apartment, earning his sympathy in her struggle for a better life. That struggle goes unsupported by Baba, whose concerns are sex and drugs rather than marriage and family, power and ownership instead of love and reciprocity. When he tries to prevent his wife from leaving him after the loss of their daughter to the state, and challenges her to strike back at him with the knife he offers (violence is the form of communication he knows best), it is Krishna who seizes the knife and stabs Baba to death. On one level, Krishna stabs Baba for his cruel desertion of Chillum, his feckless infatuation with the Nepalese prostitute-to-be, and his harsh treatment of his wife and daughter. On another level, Krishna stabs this man as if he were striking out against all that has oppressed him during his short life. In doing so, paradoxically, he reveals how thoroughly his environment has conspired to make him over in its own image: now he is a murderer. No longer can he imagine himself to be the peaceful, joyous Salaam, King of Bombay; no longer is he the Krishna of Hindu theology, the human incarnation of the second god of the Hindu

trinity, Vishnu the Preserver. Krishna escapes to the street, where we leave him, ironically, in the midst of a religious festival. He and Baba's wife have lost each other in the jostling, surging crowd, and the camera tracks slowly in on him as he stares blankly off to the right, simultaneously crying and playing with a top. We have understood his dilemma, and now we may pity him and all like him in their agony and isolation. There is no final freeze frame for italics: the shot of Krishna continues unabated until the final fateful fade to black.

Unlike De Sica and Buñuel, Mira Nair had the advantage of color for her film. I say "advantage" because, although black and white can capture well the starkness and gloom of slum life, its blunt sameness all over the world, black and white obviously cannot capture the colors endemic to a particular slum, its own brand of variegated squalor. Bombay's dominant colors are tan and brown and sickly yellow (which seems to be the color of the air), and they pervade *Salaam Bombay!*, which was photographed by Sandi Sissil. When we get blues and greens, they tend to be pale and to recede in the frame; when we see red, as we do in the brothel scenes, for example, it is deep and dark where it is not cheap and garish. But color, no matter how tawny or pallid, tawdry or recessive, appears to open up the world, to unleash its multiplicity and infinite capacity in a way that black and white does not do. So the color filmmaker must be more careful than her black-and-white counterpart to make the *mise en scène* suggest the suffocating, closed-off quality of her characters' world. To this end, Nair fills her film with high-angle shots and bars that frame faces, be those bars on windows, cages, or fences. She's helped by her actors—non-professional children, all from the street, and professional adults—who suggest a containment that is as self-protective as it is self-effacing in this society where human life is so expendable. Shafiq Syed is Krishna, and he is affecting: soft, searching, simple, soulful. The professionals who surround him are all good, especially Raghubir Yadav, who plays Chillum. His is a sharply etched portrait, packed with gesture and nuance. He creates, he *acts*, and acts well. Shafiq Syed *is*, and need be nothing more. The social problem that his film embodies won't go away, alas, but neither will *Salaam Bombay!* It is here, it shall remain, and its triumph is to have created tragic beauty out of the suffering and chaos of street children's lives, and to have done so with their happy collaboration. They are thus ennobled, which is more than I can say for many who are far better off materially.

One of the arguments against tragedy is that it supports the status quo, supports the classical view of the world: i.e., in the instance of *Salaam Bombay!*, that the social problem of street children in under-developed countries can't be solved because it is a product of circumstances beyond our control, and that we must accordingly resign ourselves to this fact as we confer, through art, a measure of tragic dignity on the children, like Krishna, who suffer. Those who

prefer the social documentary to the social-problem film endorse this argument against tragedy; those who are less doctrinaire recognize the validity of both forms and point to films like Bille August's *Pelle the Conqueror* as a kind of compromise between the two. This Danish work is an adaptation of the first volume of Martin Andersen Nexø's four-volume proletarian (and largely autobiographical) novel of the same name, which was published over the years 1906 to 1910.

Volume 1 is entitled "Boyhood," and it documents the vestiges of feudalism still to be found late in the nineteenth century ("Boyhood" begins on May 1, 1877, and ends on May 1st three or four years later) on the Danish island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea, where the nine-year-old Swedish boy Pelle Karlsson and his aging, widowed father, Lasse, have migrated in search of work and a better life. The Karlssons are hired to work for the Kongstrups of Stone Farm at extremely low wages and brutally long hours, and the film chronicles their (and others') exploitation by an agrarian system untouched by land reform, as well as Pelle's incipient moral and political awakening. "Boyhood" ends with his departure alone from Bornholm "to conquer the world"; Lasse stays behind, too old and too afraid to go out into the world again. Pelle begins, in Volume 2, as a shoemaker's apprentice in a small, provincial Danish town soon to be invaded by modern industrialism with its concomitant substitution of capitalism for the guild system. Volume 3 finds Pelle, at about age seventeen, in Copenhagen, Denmark's industrial capital, where the tenement in which he must live and the sweatshop in which he must work cause him to become a trade unionist and eventually a labor leader. By Volume 4, Pelle, now a socialist, is introducing the cooperative movement to Danish industry. So Pelle's development in these four volumes parallels the historic evolution of labor and he does become a sort of conqueror, unlike Krishna, who must give up the idea even of imagining that he is Salaam, the King of Bombay. Both Pelle and Krishna go on journeys in their respective films, but Pelle journeys out of the past—away from Sweden and then away from his father and Stone Farm—in order to create a new future, whereas Krishna journeys out of the past—away from his mother and Bangalore—only in order to be able to return to it, and finds himself instead trapped in an eternal, stinking present. The latter journey is dramatic, intensive, *contractive*, the former episodic, cumulative, *expansive*. There is hope for Pelle at the end of Bille August's film as there is not for Krishna at the end of *Salaam Bombay!*, and that is the measure of these films' separate truths if not of their separate nationalities and time periods.

Pelle's awakening is the result of what he witnesses and experiences on the large farm: the utter tyranny of the farm's foreman combined with the tyranny of work without end; his humiliating whipping by the young assistant foreman and his father's powerlessness to do anything about it; his and Lasse's living conditions in a small,

fly-ridden room off to the side of the large barn that houses the cows (which they tend), in contrast with the Kongstrups' servant-attended life in their splendid manor house; the even more difficult life of his friend Rud, the bastard son of Master Kongstrup, who joins the circus rather than be starved and hated by his wild and bitter mother; the taunts and beatings from local boys because he is a Swedish "alien"; and, most important, his relationship with Erik, the one rebellious laborer at Stone Farm, who befriends Pelle and promises to take the boy with him to America. But Erik's rebelliousness is too blind and brazen and, before he can save enough money for the trip, he is accidentally reduced to imbecility in a fight with the foreman, against whom he had attempted to lead the farmworkers. Thereafter he obediently follows the foreman about, like a dog; and when he is not doing so, he stands pathetically near a window in the barn and steadily gazes out. His misguided, solitary revolt has resulted, not in his freedom from oppression, but in his domestication by it. Pelle has been watching the whole time and continues to watch in horror as, one day, the submissive Erik is led away from the farm by the foreman, presumably to be "destroyed" or simply abandoned. This incident is not in Nexø's novel; August (who wrote his own screenplay) invents it in order to make clearer Pelle's reasons for rejecting the position of assistant foreman offered to him by the Kongstrups (this offer is another invention of August's), and to suggest the different, reasoned and communal direction his revolt against economic exploitation will take after he leaves the farm. In other words, August invents here in order, paradoxically, to give "Boyhood" closure as well as open-endedness, to make this first volume stand on its own as well as point the way to the other three volumes. The young Pelle has learned from his experiences on the farm, unlike his father (Lasse urges him to become the very kind of assistant foreman who made Pelle's life miserable), and August crystallizes that learning in a way that Nexø does not. The latter's Pelle leaves Stone Farm because it gives him "no position and no prospects"; his awakening, his digestion of his agrarian experience, is entirely ahead of him.

Though (as is inevitable in any film made from a novel) August cuts certain things from the book, like the sentimental and palliative strand concerning the family of Kalle Karlsson, Lasse's brother on Bornholm, he keeps what's essential and sharpens it. In "Boyhood," Kalle's daughter Anna becomes pregnant by the owner's son on the farm where she works in the north, and she returns home to warm acceptance by her father, who will embrace her baby just as he embraced his wife's son by the lecherous Kongstrup years before. August takes Pelle's response to Anna's pregnancy ("Pelle knew quite well that what had happened to Anna was looked upon as a great disgrace, and could not understand how Uncle Kalle could seem so happy"), plus the boy's memory of an incident that had occurred outside the family two years before, and collapses them into a new

version of her story. Anna now works on Stone Farm and is not a Karlsson; she falls in love with Nils, a local youth, much to the disapproval of his rich family, and when she gets pregnant (we discover her pregnancy precisely at the moment Pelle does) and secretly has Nils's baby, he drowns it. Anna goes to jail for the murder, Nils back to the bosom of his family. Ironically, he himself later drowns in the act of saving lives—those of several fishermen stranded off Bornholm's treacherous coast.

What incidents August retains from "Boyhood," he often improves. Two examples will suffice. When Lasse and Pelle disembark in Bornholm with other Swedes looking for work, they are met by Danish farm foremen seeking cheap labor. In the novel, after the last foreman has passed him up for younger, stronger men without children, Lasse leaves Pelle on the harbor square and goes to buy a bottle of brandy at a nearby tavern. When he returns, boisterous and wobbly from the few drinks already inside him, he and his son go to meet the foreman from Stone Farm, who has arrived late, and they get their job. In the film, Lasse also leaves Pelle on the harbor square, but he doesn't come out of the tavern until the foreman has found Pelle alone (where we've been watching him) and begun questioning him—all of this in long shot, at a slightly high angle. The changes August has made convey to us succinctly, visually, what Nexø must narrate "around" this scene: Lasse's weakness and ineffectuality, Pelle's vulnerability and isolation. The complement to this scene occurs at the end of "Boyhood," and here again August surpasses the original. In the book, Lasse and Pelle part just past the farm's outer buildings. The father stands looking after his son for a short time, then turns and goes back to his work; Pelle moves on through the land into "the great wide world," exuberantly singing a song of adventure. In the film, Lasse and Pelle say their farewells on a snowy field; the father remains in the middle of this bleak landscape, waving goodbye to his son; and Pelle struggles through the snow down to the sea, along whose narrow shore he begins his journey into the world, accompanied by a haunting piano melody. The camera holds on him, in long shot, as he walks away. August's ending is truer, warmer, to the experience Pelle has had and will have, and it underlines the difficulty and desolation of this separation for him from the father he has always loved but has now come to understand as well.

Max von Sydow is Lasse, and if viewers remember von Sydow from his films with Ingmar Bergman (e.g., *The Virgin Spring* [1960], *Winter Light* [1963], *Shame* [1968]) and Jan Troell (*The Emigrants* [1971], *The New Land* [1973]), that is because for these two directors he played complex characters in genuine works of art. For American directors, he has mostly been charged with the task of enlivening constructs—characters superficially drawn and superficially engaged: witness his role in Woody Allen's inane *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). In *Pelle the Conqueror*, von Sydow returns to form, which for him has literal

meaning: note how he makes his own gangling frame seem like that of the “bent little man” Nexø describes; watch him stoop, totter, shuffle, and squint his way inside this emotionally fragile figure who strains to be the sturdy foundation of his son’s life. Pelle Karlsson is played by Pelle Hvenegaard, whose mother named him after the titular character of this Danish epic, and he is fine: extroverted yet reticent, proud yet fearful, sensitive yet sensible. Hvenegaard’s wide eyes set the tone for his character and for the film: at once gentle and piercing. And this is exactly the quality that Jorgen Persson has got into his photographing of the seasons at Stone Farm. He doesn’t gild the Scandinavian summer, as he did in *Elvira Madigan* (1967); he captures, he serves, its essence, its breezy lushness. He doesn’t make finely observed etchings of cheery winter life; he creates pictures in which the fog and snow and ice surround the huddled human figure with their grays and glistening whites. Persson may have been helped in his work by Bille August, who began his career as a cinematographer.

I don’t know any of August’s previous films (e.g., *In My Life* [1978], *Twist and Shout* [1984]), but I do know that in *Pelle the Conqueror* he has made a movie of lasting quality, of closed and then ever more open space, of so much work that play seems like exquisite luxury, of peasants’ subjugated lives and one boy’s mastery of his own. August is said to have two other films in the early stages of preparation; I wait impatiently even as I thrive on *Pelle’s* riches.