

Seeking Multiple Subjectivities: A Critique of *Born into Brothels*

Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman's *Born into Brothels* (2004) recalls a question that ethnographic filmmakers attempt to answer in their films: how do we convey the subject's way of seeing? Briski and Kauffman take on a quest to answer this question capturing the world of Calcutta's Red Light District through multiple lenses of eight children who live there. Though the filmmakers do not claim to be ethnographers, they encounter the complexities of communicating the native's point of view. Despite their efforts to convey the children's way of seeing, Briski and Kauffman create an otherized depiction of Sonagachi that dominates the narrative. As a result, *Born into Brothels* develops through Briski and Kauffman's Western gaze, which creates a distance between the viewer and the Other. The film has potential to communicate multiple subjectivities, but lacks reflexivity to mitigate the authority of the filmmakers' voice and vision.

Lutz and Collins' discussion of the Western gaze provides a point from which to reveal the Occidental eye behind Briski and Kauffman's camera lens. Lutz and Collins describe how the non-Western Other entices us to look: "Non-Westerners draw a look, rather than inattention or interaction, to the extent that their difference or foreignness defines them as noteworthy yet distant" (1993, 188). Images of non-Westerners allow us to gaze at—rather than engage with—the Other from a safe distance. Briski and Kauffman portray the children's families, for example, as foreign objects that require a gaze rather than an interaction. The filmmakers build rapport with the children, but exclude direct relations with their families. Briski and Kauffman demonstrate their hegemonic gaze in their depiction of Puja's home-life. They present Puja sitting at home

on a bed with her grandmother, mother and younger brother. Briski's disembodied voice emerges and explains to us:

The great-grandmother's a prostitute, the grandmother's a prostitute, the mother's a prostitute, but they have better surroundings, it's a Brahman family...she eats well, she dresses well, she's not obviously poor [camera cuts to a close-up of Puja] but she's heading for prostitution. (2004)

Briski disrupts the intimacy of this moment, and leaves little room for Puja's mother to represent herself on camera. Instead, she commands her authority as a filmmaker by narrating over images of the mother and grandmother. By conversing with her subjects through an off-camera translator, Briski prevents us from connecting with them and understanding their point of view. She positions us as voyeurs peering into a hidden world that she wishes to expose.

Throughout the course of the film, Briski and Kaufman perpetuate a sense of voyeurism by framing shots through doorways and openings. They present stills of Briski's photographs that contain images that peer over the shoulders of men and women embracing. Their faces are out of view, but we see their covered bodies. At first this alienates us from the subjects in the frame, but then stimulates in us the desire to see what is hidden. At one point in their film, Briski and Kaufman show a medium close-up of a half-naked boy, about three-years-old, in a doorway chained to a banister. The filmmakers shoot a close-up of the child's feet, one of which is wrapped in a chain, and then pan upward so that we see the child's penis and then his face. Briski and Kauffman require us to first identify the child by his chained foot and genitals, which fixes him as a subaltern subject upon which we look. Trinh T. Minh-ha shows similar images in her film *Reassemblage* (1982), but does so in order to highlight the Western filmmaker's need to expose the subaltern body. In this film she forces us to look at forbidden Other by

interweaving close-up shots of bare black breasts. In a similar vein as Briski and Kaufman's representation the nude boy, Trinh's portrayal of a breast is the is only way we can identify the woman in the frame. *Reassemblage* illustrates how Briski and Kauffman's voyeuristic imagery reproduce power relations between the observer and the observed.

By reinforcing this dichotomy, the filmmakers demonstrate a lack of reflexivity of their position as Westerners with a camera lens. As a result, Briski and Kauffman remain on the fringes of the community, which situates the children's role as insiders. Trinh explains in "Outside In Inside Out" (1991) that the ethnic subject's contribution to the filmmaker's image positions him/her as an inside voice in which s/he can disclose an authentic depiction of reality. We assume that the insider's way of seeing contains truth that is more valid than that of the filmmaker: "To authenticate a work it becomes therefore most important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image" (Trinh 1991: 67). Trinh's discussion of insider-outsider relations reveals that the photographs produced by the Sonagachi children gives them agency as an insider/Other rather than as a photographer. Briski and Kauffman use a particular sequence of images with the attempts to assert the truth-value in the children's photography. In one scene the camera sits behind Gour as he photographs Puja running. The shot fades into a still of Gour's image of Puja, signifying what he saw through the viewfinder. Using this technique, Briski and Kauffman wish to capture how the children perceive their surroundings but instead validate their own representation of how the children's perceive their world through a camera lens.

Furthermore, the filmmakers portray the brothels as exotic, which causes us to lose sight of the children's ways of seeing the world through a camera lens. Even though they present the children's photography and comments about their work, they focus too heavily on poor quality of their lives. In one scene, Briski and Kauffman introduce us to Kochi sitting on the floor washing dishes. We hear her disembodied voice describing the work she does for the Madame with the accompaniment of dramatic music. The camera cuts to a close-up of Kochi, observing her large eyes that ambivalently scan her surroundings. She then explains to the camera her desire for an education and wonder about what she could become in her life (2004). This sequence of audio and visual fixes Kochi as, "an anonymous subject deserving pity in a historically predetermined tradition, framed to evoke an emotive response" (Smith 2009, 162). The filmmakers present us with a series of her photographs that consist of high-contrast images. When we see Kochi's work, the information about her life colors our understanding of how her photographs reflect her way of seeing. While her pictures suggest that the camera gives her agency, Briski and Kauffman's portrayal of her story prevents us from seeing through her eyes.

Briski's pedagogy in the film in particular demonstrates how she manages to shape the children's sight according to Western aesthetics. She teaches her classes in the format of a group critique, speaking English rather than Bengali. (Throughout the film it becomes evident that she has not made an effort to learn the local language.) Briski focuses more on artistic techniques than technical skill, which shows how she informs the aesthetic quality of the children's photographs. She discusses composition with the children during one of her classes:

Composition means how you put shapes into the box, the *lines* of a picture. These are all very good compositions. You can see everything that's going on around, there's so much information in this picture. [film cuts to a close-up of Suchitra] There are layers of people in the foreground, middle, and background. It's just a beautiful photograph. (2004)

Briski assigns a particular aesthetic value to the children's photographs of anonymous people in the street. When she picks one of Suchitra's photographs to appraise, the camera cuts to a close-up of Suchitra who responds with a smile to Briski's positive comments. We see how Briski judges the work according to what she believes is "good" and "beautiful," and perhaps according to what she thinks would be received well in the West. (The success of the children's photographs in New York and Amsterdam is a definite confirmation.) She does not acknowledge the fact that these are culturally relativistic terms, which would add a reflexive quality to the film. Instead, she mediates between the children and their work, which informs the aesthetics of the photographs and the truths they produce.

In contradistinction to Briski and Kaufman, David and Judith MacDougall employ a different set of techniques in their film *Photo Wallahs* (1992), which illustrates a culturally relativistic understanding of photography in northern India. They avoid disembodied narration, instead relying on the subjects' voices to evoke meaning as they explore the value of photography at a hill station in the Himalayas. The MacDougalls remain unseen and laconic, which both mediates our intimacy with the subjects and creates an intricate text of meaning. The film's observational style permits the photographers to express their understanding of photography as art and record. One sequence in the film consists of four photographers conversing. The film cuts between medium-close ups of the men as they discuss their interpretations of photography:

Man with turban: The photograph is always more beautiful from the real thing because you have selected a good spot, whereas when a person goes to that spot he sees it as a whole.

Man with hat: There are certain limits which are not acceptable in photography [but] are very much accepted in painting. If you want a difference in the two then really that would be the difference.

Man with brown sweater: I think as long as it is real the beauty should extend to the realism, not beyond that. (1992)

One informal discussion provides us with a range of subjective voices to draw from. The MacDougalls use film as an opportunity for these photo wallahs to reflect and interpret their craft, which helps us to understand their modes of seeing. Rather than peering voyeuristically through a camera lens, the MacDougalls use the camera to ally with their subjects in order to produce truth in a particular moment.

Certain moments in *Born into Brothels* indicate the possibility of representing the subject's points of view, but the filmmakers' trajectory interferes. When Briski and Kaufman show children of Sonagachi playing in the streets as they use their cameras, we can understand the potential for Briski's project to encourage the children to use their environment to their advantage. However, the filmmakers develop a narrative that ultimately depicts their collaboration and camaraderie as part of a mission to leave their community behind them. Briski and Kaufman's attempts to use the children's photography to pull them out of Sonagachi (and in Avijit's case, bring him to the West) demonstrate their focus on individual solutions rather than communal ones (Michel, 57). Instead of helping children empower themselves through photography Briski and Kauffman intend to separate the children from their culture and community.

Terence Turner's film project with the Kayapo is an example that demonstrates the camera's potential to be a tool for community empowerment. In the late 1980s, Turner and a team of experts provided the Kayapo with film cameras and gave them

basic instruction, but permitted them to utilize the medium to represent their particular mode of seeing. Turner noted the effectiveness of their project and the political significance film gained for the Kayapo

The act of video making itself, when done by an indigenous person or member of a local community, begins to 'mediate' a variety of social and political relationships within the indigenous community in a way that has no exact parallel when the video maker is an outsider. (1992: 7)

Turner's project enhanced social relationships in the community that an outsider would not have been able to do. The camera grew to symbolize power within the Kayapo's political structure, and became a critical instrument to mediate between the Kayapo and the Brazilian populous. Turner's work with the Kayapo shows that film can be a venue for political change for a marginalized group of people. Though particular leaders monopolized camera use, the camera was no less of a permeating force in community life. In *Born into Brothels*, Briski and Kauffman neglect the possibility for their film to be a vehicle for community activism. They omit information about help they received from local activists, and about the activism of sex workers, social workers and medical practitioners that has helped the Sonagachi community (Michel, 58). Instead the filmmakers emphasize the power of the Western crusading individual as the only solution to the disadvantaged Other (Michel, 60).

Briski and Kauffman fail to acknowledge the power relations reproduced by elevating a Western activist and essentializing the subaltern subjects of their film. As a result, *Born into Brothels* develops into a narrative about Briski's determination to find the best solution(s) for the children. When three of the girls are accepted to a boarding school, Briski and the white schoolmaster attempt to persuade the girls' mothers, who

seem indecisive about letting them attend. The film focuses on a battle of ideologies between the privileged Westerner who wishes to further the children's education, and the poor-uneducated Bengali woman who will limit her child's access to opportunity. The filmmakers provide no explanation as to why the mothers feel ambivalent about sending their children away. By creating this dynamic between the Western Self and the non-Western Other, Briski and Kauffman reduce the complexities of poverty that affect the lives of the children and their families.

Decontextualizing the film permits the filmmakers to essentialize the Red Light district of Calcutta as a doomed environment. The filmmakers neglect social and political context to the film that is critical for us to develop a better understanding of Sonagachi as a community. Briski and Kauffman might have succeeded in their efforts had they considered broadening the scope of their film to include community empowerment. They could have also mitigated ethnocentric qualities of their film if they had considered collaborating with people in Sonagachi. Employing reflexive techniques would have helped Briski and Kauffman decentralize their Western gaze, and communicate the children's subjective voices.

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