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Capitalist Childhood in Film: Modes of Critique

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This paper explores the latent political meanings of cinematic representations of capitalist childhood. The films it examines—three adaptations of the Oliver Twist story, Slumdog Millionaire and a lesser-known Korean film, Treeless Mountain—have much in common: they feature abandoned or orphaned child characters who negotiate precarious existences in a rapacious crisis-ridden capitalist world. But the filmmakers' evolving imaginings of childhood—from the Victorian vulnerable child to more postmodern understandings of children as agents in their own right—invite distinct political responses. While the Dickensian mode of critique rests problematically on an abstract idealized notion of childhood, attempts to update the image of childhood on screen—as in Slumdog—lead to a depoliticization of childhood within the text. Treeless Mountain and other similar "global child" films, however, forge a new—and newly political—filmic approach to childhood. In exploring children's subjectivities, they pick up on children's creative, sensual and active engagement with the world, a way of being in the world that Walter Benjamin explores and that children's geographers have documented in numerous field studies. As such, they reject abstract, idealized conceptions of children as victims or agents. Yet, in capturing the imaginative, embodied ways in which children (re)produce their lives in the neglected landscapes of global capitalism, they retrieve the political, critical, potential of childhood. Rather than the sentimental paternalism of the Dickensian critique, "global child" films suggest a politics of transformation and solidarity.

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The child can be, and almost always is, a powerful presence on the screen. As "modern society's myth of both origins and destiny, our explanation of who we are and what we will become" (Gillis, 33), the child bears a varied and often contradictory but nonetheless intense symbolic weight. From denoting innocence and nature to eroticism, evil and anti-authoritarianism, childhood has long been a handy and effective device for filmmakers aiming to awaken in their audiences a sense of social anxiety and/or, more usefully, social critique. Indeed, the latter, the capacity of the cinematic child to inspire critique, is often inextricably tied to the former, her capacity to elicit sympathy, pathos, and thus fear and anger. This "Dickensian" mode of social critique relies on foregrounding sentimentalized images of the

innocent, natural and often helpless child struggling in a harsh and unnatural world. However effectively this fits the "political and emotional agenda of the interested adult critic," Karen Lury suggests, it "fails to act or represent [the child's] own interests and desires" (109). Rather, it relies on an essentialized abstraction of childhood, albeit one that contains real-world meaning insofar as it invites a sense of moral outrage tinged with nostalgic misgivings about contemporary society.

But at a time when the Western conceit that casts childhood as a period of innocence and wonder is increasingly difficult to sustain, filmmakers are striving to update the image of the child, depicting her as an active participant in her own world, as a "subject" or "agent" in her own right, not all that distinct from adults. Their efforts correspond with the scholarly trend over the last twenty years away from positioning the child as a passive "object" of socialization (James and Prout, Qvortrup et al). This shift in approach in Childhood Studies and related disciplines also has its difficulties. There is a tendency, as Alan Prout and others have pointed out, to emphasize agency and being at the expense of children's socio-political marginalization and their socio-biological developmental realities. And certainly the dominant, Hollywood image of the (postmodern) child similarly neglects these constraints on child agency, offering up a newly—albeit differently—essentialized child. In the process, the cinematic child loses its fangs. Rather than functioning as a lever of social critique, childhood as portrayed in films like Slumdog Millionaire (discussed below) arguably contributes to the naturalization and celebration of capitalist individualism and inequality.

Many independent filmmakers, however, have updated the cinematic child in a way that retrieves the potential critical meaning of childhood while avoiding the sentimentalism of the Dickensian treatment. In offering "new representations of a child's subjectivity, new filmic apprehensions, or imprints, of child identities" (Wilson, 332), their films explore children's subjectivity in a non-essentialized manner, focusing not simply on what she does or doesn't accomplish in the world, but also on how she exists in and interacts with and within the world. Though they abandon the simple representation of childhood as vulnerable and innocent, they do not abandon social critique. Far from it. Like Dickens' 19th century novels, films such as Machuca (Chile, 2004), Treeless Mountain (South Korea, 2008), Ballast (USA, 2008), and Sin Nombre (Mexico, 2009), (hereafter referred to as "global child" films) document the hardships of capitalism in its marauding, unforgiving neoliberal form. But the films' political work operates at a distinct emotional level, one that doesn't rely on and is arguably more profound than the moralism and nostalgia associated with the Dickensian mode of critique. In exploring children's subjectivities, these films foreground the intuitive, embodied ways of knowing that children display sometimes when they work and always when they play. That is, they pick up on children's creative, sensual and active engagement with the world, a way of being in the world which, as Walter Benjamin observes lies dormant within adults (the intended viewers) who have long ago out-learned—but not wholly forgotten—it.[1] [open endnotes in a new window] Such a Benjaminian mode of critique arguably invites a more visceral, less rationally contained response than do films deploying the traditional Dickensian critical tropes. But it is nonetheless a response with a radical political edge in its potential to inspire historical, and thus political, consciousness of the sort that can lead to a politics of solidarity and transformation.[2] That is, the image of the child in these films finds its critical, radical edge in its potential to awaken in viewers their (childish) sense that the world could be other than it is.

The Dickensian mode of social critique

Contemporary reactions to Charles Dickens' 1837 story, Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy's Progress, were mixed. While Queen Victoria found it "excessively interesting," her prime minister, Lord Melbourne, was less enthralled, reporting to the Queen that "It's all among Workhouses, and Coffin Makers, and Pickpockets . . . I don't like those things"(Horne, xiii). But it is Reverend R. H. Barham who identified what was both unsettling and enthralling about the story: "There is a sort of Radicalish tone about Oliver Twist," he commented disapprovingly shortly after its first installment appeared in Bentley's Miscellany (Horne, xiv).

The novel's radicalishness is evident in the way in which the text parodies the inhumanity of the treatment of the poor. With his many quips and stories, such as the one about the "experimental philosopher's" horse who would have lived on even less than a straw a day had he not first died, or the pauper who obstinately "chooses" to die on the street, Dickens exposes the cruel absurdity of the Malthusian-inspired 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. That Act made workhouse labour a condition of relief, instituting the principle of "less eligibility" to dissuade the "undeserving" poor from applying (Berry, 32-36).[3]

But the novel's political meaning also has much to do with the social realism of Dickens' writing. The story exposes the underbelly of 19th century industrial capitalism, the poor and criminal elements, and their lives as they negotiated the degrading conditions of the parish workhouse and London slums. Scenes constructed around food and the lack of it, passages evoking the odors and other sensations of the streets and markets, and recurring references to death by starvation or hanging forcefully evoke the embodied way in which an urban, rapidly industrializing capitalism is lived. And insofar as Oliver traverses between this impoverished, insecure everydayness (where, significantly, he finds some refuge and friendship among thieves), and the genteel, tranquil pleasures of his time spent with Rose and Mr. Brownlow (where he also confronts the greed and dishonesty of his half-brother Monk), he comprises the narrative device by which Dickens reveals society's internal relationship of hardship and privilege.[4]

Oliver, however, is much more than this. Dickens was at the forefront of a current of 19th century writers—literary, scientific and popular—who drew upon not just the child but the victimized child in particular as a lever of social critique (Berry). The endangered child appealed to the Victorians because she was at once subject and object: a moral self, a being with an "interiority" that mattered, and a social self, a being of this world. Berry writes,

"Children in distress can be seen as little citizens, persons whose sovereignty as selves is secured by their unformed and innocent status as children, but whose relation to the social realm is made necessary by the fact of their endangerment" (4).

And the child orphan arguably throws this tension between self and society into even greater relief. Extracted from familial associations which would otherwise mediate the child's relation to society, the orphan is both more radically individualized and more starkly embedded in impersonal social forces. Her very existence as an orphan short-circuits any question of parental responsibility for her well-being and demands a societal, hence political, response.

Dickens' Oliver is indeed the archetypal victim. He's an innocent, homeless waif who escapes the tyranny of the workhouse matron and parish beadle only to fall prey to the "artful" manipulations of a den of thieves. His helplessness is extraordinary, with almost every change in fortune attributable to others, be it his arrest for a pick-pocketing he witnesses but does not commit or Rose's secret counsels with Nancy to secure his ultimate release from Fagin and Sikes. While not entirely lacking, Oliver's agency is always ambivalent. For instance, he lashes out violently at Noah Claypole, the charity boy apprenticing with the coffin-maker, and subsequently decides to run away to London. But this occurs only in response to the extreme provocation of Noah's ruthless, relentless taunting (Dickens, 47-55). Even the pivotal workhouse dining hall scene in which Oliver begs for "some more" is not in fact his initiative. Rather, he draws the short straw, and "desperate with hunger and reckless with misery," he heeds the goading of the other boys to advance upon the master (Dickens, 15). However powerfully this scene goes to the heart of the social issues of the day, representing the daring and dangers of the poor making their claim on the rich, Oliver remains more conduit for the wishes of others than agent in his own right, "an empty stage on which . . . historically typical forces contend" (Eagleton, 128).

This "absence from his own narrative" (Eagleton, 128) centrally defines the Dickensian use of the child as a mode of social critique. Oliver may be a moral—in fact saintly—being, his goodness and innocence evidence of the state of nature from which he sprung.[5] In this he resembles the free subject of liberal philosophy. Yet he is hardly an autonomous being. Rather, he is bound by the society in which he moves—a condition that overdetermines his being, robbing him of a robust agency, and rendering him more object than subject in the world (Berry, 55-58). As vessel for such freighted meanings—the natural goodness of mankind threatened by brutish social forces—Oliver invites the reader's sympathy and anxiety. He taps into their nostalgic connection to childhood as a time of innocence outside of history, and fears about its loss, functioning as an objectified "other" through whose putatively innocent eyes the status quo is judged (Mecchia). The political, radical edge of the novel thus turns on a highly abstract, idealized understanding of what a child is, and the fundamentally sentimental urge this image produces to protect that (never actually existing) child and return to the (never actually existing) state of nature Oliver represents.[6]

Film versions of the novel do not fundamentally alter these Dickensian qualities, although their evolving representations of Oliver are in keeping with a broader trend of representing children in U.S. film. According to Kathy Merlock Jackson, the "innocent child in jeopardy" (35) of the silent film era partially gave way to the more happy-go-lucky pre-WWII child of the sort featured in the Our Gang series or Shirley Temple films. After the war, however, children's darker side was also featured. Not only does the child monster appear by the 1970s (e.g., The Exorcist, 1973; The Omen, 1976), but even good kids were increasingly depicted as "lonely, searching, and often deeply troubled . . . more worldly and precocious" (Jackson, 184) as in the streetwise Tatum O'Neal (Paper Moon, 1973) or Jodie Foster (Taxi Driver,1976).

Taken together, the three film versions of Oliver Twist examined here follow exactly in this trajectory.[7] From pure innocence and vulnerability, to the playfully good, to the more complex and knowing, Oliver's transformation reflects the shifting perceptions of childhood in the film industry.

In his 1948 Oliver Twist, director David Lean stays close to the original story's text and texture, with camera work and editing that convey a sense of poverty amidst plenty, the criminality of law and order, and the sensual disorientation of being a small body in a big city. Oliver is both saintly and naive, his expressions often uncomprehending, his face softly lit. Aside from the workhouse dining hall scene and fight with Noah, Oliver is passively reliant on the kindness or cruelty of others. Even in the culminating scene, in which Bill Sikes drags him onto the steep London rooftops, he screams for help only after the crowd below has been alerted to his whereabouts by a falling brick. Chance, fate and adults control his destiny.

Twenty years later, Carol Reed's Oliver! portrays the orphan as innocent and goodly as well, but in keeping with the upbeat nature of the musical genre, more impish. He is a playful, more active lad, scrambling onto dining hall tabletops and window grates, temporarily escaping capture after his timid request for "more" is denied. Similarly, he scampers with Dodger through the London streets, seemingly anxious to join Fagin's crew "on the [pick-pocketing] game." And later, setting out alone on an errand for Mr. Brownlow, Oliver is at least partially author of his own destiny: distracted by a street puppet show, he lets his guard down long enough for Nancy and Bill to grab him and return him to the criminal underworld.

It's not until 2005, with Roman Polanski's version of the novel that we meet a more complex, less pure, Oliver. To begin, he is more confident. In the pivotal workhouse scene, there is a slight swagger in his gait on the long walk up the dining hall to ask for more, and the ensuing scene shows Oliver giving chase, but not his ultimate capture. Polite and generally compliant, he lacks the sweetness of previous versions. From his initial encounter with Dodger, he seems aware he is implicated in something immoral, first accepting the bread he knows is stolen, and then following his new mate back to their "lodgings" with a sullen resignation. He even appears mildly put off by the mock formality of Fagin's elaborate bow of greeting. Without diverging radically from the storyline, Polanski gives his child protagonist some say in the unfolding events, including a scene in which he deliberately (if meekly) foils the burglary Sikes has implicated him in.[8]

Yet Oliver retains the aura of innocence and vulnerability that characterizes the Dickensian mode of social critique. Indeed, Polanski works to strike a balance between a knowing and naive subject, so that while his Oliver conveys some skepticism and sullen awareness of his circumstances, he still registers confusion and shock at his new mates' thieving practices, and he is quiet and reserved before both Mr. Brownlow and Fagin, indeed graciously thanking them for their kindness. "I'll always remember it," he tells Fagin. And in case the audience fails to pick up on Oliver's traditionally childish qualities, Polanski writes it directly into the script: "I've never met anyone so green," exclaims Dodger's sidekick Charlie, as Oliver appears (but maybe not fully) to believe the boys have themselves made the wallets and handkerchiefs they turn over to Fagin. Similarly, Mr. Brownlow's comment, "I know there is goodness in

him, goodness and innocence," may well speak to the filmmaker's concern that a more sullen Oliver requires an explicit verbal affirmation of these qualities to ensure his audience extends their sympathy.

While Polanski's orphan appears more agentic than his forerunners, he ultimately serves as a pawn in a game over which he exerts no real control. Buffeted between the kindness and cruelty of adults, his fate is sealed only when Sikes slips and hangs himself on a rope used to aid his escape along the London rooftops. The film's final scene shows an expressionless Oliver sitting in the carriage pulling away from the prison where he has just visited Fagin, Mr. Brownlow's protective arm wrapped around his shoulders—a wiser Oliver perhaps, but nonetheless a child in need of protection.

Polanski's portrayal of Oliver is of particular interest because he struggles to update Oliver so that his depiction fits more easily with contemporary sensibilities about childhood. Yet, he cannot afford to go too far in this direction without undermining the critical sensibilities of the story itself. Oliver cannot be both a self-creating, savvy child and a lever of social critique, evoking sympathy and anxiety from the audience. Thus, even in 2005, the tension between the Victorian and postmodern representations of the child is resolved in favor of the former. As I show below, this same tension surfaces in Slumdog Millionaire, but is resolved in favor of the postmodern child. It is one of the more remarkable achievements of the global child films I then turn to discuss, that their depictions of childhood evade this tension, reconfiguring the cinematic apprehension of childhood in a way that gives rise to a distinct mode of social critique.

From Dickens to the "global child" film: spaces and bodies in history

Depicting how a certain geographical and temporal reality is lived is as much a hallmark of the Dickensian mode of social critique as is his use of the child to comment on it. Thus Oliver's goodness and innocence only gain meaning in the context of the gritty, mean spaces of an industrializing capitalist society. With his "evocation of the urban labyrinths," moving the reader "between, among, and through . . . multiple worlds" (Baumgarten, 222, 226), Dickens foregrounds the time/space reality of a modern, rapidly changing world.[9] Subsequent film versions attempt the same. Lean is perhaps most adept, showing Oliver's arrival in a loud, confusing London market and tracking him as he follows Dodger up crude, cobwebbed staircases, stepping over sleeping bodies, transversing a rickety bridge that connects London's rooftops to enter Fagin's lair. But both Good and Polanski include similar scenes, which are then contrasted with the grandeur and softness of Mr. Brownlow's bourgeois neighborhood to great effect.

This same attention to lived experience and childhood also animates the more recent "global child" films. Instead of early industrial capitalism, the setting is early 21stcentury global capitalism. The two periods have much in common. Instability, criminality and state-sanctioned violence mark peoples' lives as they struggle to survive in a rapidly expanding, rapacious economic system. And in both settings, old lives are uprooted and new ones forged, often through a process of migration from rural to urban centers or from less developed to developed regions of the world.

What is experienced in both periods is a crisis of social reproduction. As Cindi Katz argues, the contradictions of capitalism are enacted as a spatial contradiction between the relatively mobile practices of economic production and the more place-bound practices of social reproduction. Since the 1970s, we've witnessed an increasingly intense trans-nationalization of production attended by a neoliberalization of state policy, significantly decreasing capital's dependency on any given place. But social reproduction—the daily and generational maintenance of individuals, households, and communities—remains largely place-bound. Much of the infrastructure associated with social reproduction (e.g., community housing, transportation, healthcare, education) is secured through capital investment in specific places.[10] But in severing the connection between place and production, the era of "vagabond capitalism" has engendered a profound disinvestment in such resources, resulting in the proliferation of the "neglected and undersupported landscapes"– the current sites of social reproduction (Katz, 715).[11] This dynamic has dramatic consequences for children who are at once subjects and objects of the processes of social reproduction. Youth, as Jean and John Comaroff point out,

"tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, unchartered borderlands in which the global meets the local" (278).

These borderlands are explored in a provocative and wide-ranging "children's geography" literature that illustrates the ways in which the local culture of children's everyday lives is bound up with global processes (Holloway and Valentine, Skelton and Valentine, James). Some of this work (to which I return below) deciphers the embodied nature of children's interaction with their environment as they transform their worlds through (often playful) imitation and improvisation on past practices.[12] It grapples with questions about the nature of children's agency, the politics of everyday life, and the critical, even revolutionary, possibilities of the local, embodied knowledges that children enact. And the "global child" films implicitly raise all these questions as well through their unique distillations of neglected landscapes and the survival strategies of the children who negotiate them. Depicting the incessant movement of people and the instability of place—places such as a Queens auto-body yard (Chop Shop, 2007), a South Korean neighborhood (Treeless Mountain, 2008), or the streets of Lima (Oblivion, 2008)—these films focus precisely on the everyday acts of social reproduction that are threatened by the expansions and contractions of global capitalism. In cinematically mapping (children's) bodies as they interact with the materiality of the places they inhabit, they examine "globalization's sensual flesh" (Berlant, 281), capturing the inherent volatility and insecurity of living in the place and time of crisis.

Like Dickens, then, these filmmakers foreground the time/space reality of a modern, rapidly changing world, prominently featuring children's lived experience as they navigate that world. Where they part ways with the Victorian author is in their representation of the child and their approach to positioning her as a lever of social critique. For the current global crisis of social reproduction has also disrupted traditional understandings of childhood. As the infrastructure that supports people's daily lives fractures and disappears, and the boundaries between public and private realms become less stable, notions that children occupy a natural state of innocence have become less tenable. A new representative child has emerged, a savvy, self-creating child consumer. The recognition that children are perhaps not all that

different from adults is partial and shifting to be sure. We seem reluctant to completely forgo the Victorian ideal, which continues to undergird much, often progressive, social criticism (not to mention marketing strategies for everything from financial products to famine relief). But that ideal is also more fragile, more easily shattered in face of the growing gulf between rich and poor that scoops children into both consumer and labor markets, where they exercise their "agency" in seemingly "unchildlike" ways.[13] As a result, writes Stuart Aitken, "the constitution of the global child is unsettled," (123) its indeterminacy as much a hallmark of our era's conceptualization of childhood as innocence was of an earlier era's.

Since the middle of the last century, filmmakers have tried to reconcile the contradictions of modern childhood. They have done so, as Jackson suggests, by complexifying without fully abandoning the innocent child. Polanski's Oliver, discussed above, is just such an example. Today, however, this trend has been amplified, to the extent that children are commonly depicted as savvy authors of their own (mis)fortune.[14] Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) in Home Alone (1990) is the classic example of the agentic child, as are the children featured in Spy Kids (2001) or even the animated retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, Hoodwinked! (2005), among many others. So is Slumdog Millionaire (2008, directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan), which is of particular interest here for its thematic similarities with the global child films.

Slumdog tells the story of Jamal, an orphan growing up in the slums of Mumbai who becomes a star player on the Indian game show, Who Wants to be a Millionaire? The oppression and cruelty of his life history turn out to be his saving grace, as he uncannily finds the answers to the host's questions in the lessons he learned on the streets and walks off with the 20-million rupee grand prize. At first glance, Jamal appears to have much in common with Oliver. His essential goodness is established early on when—against the wishes of his older brother Salim—he invites Latika (his soon-to-be childhood love) into their shelter. Indeed, his troubled relationship with the tougher, criminally inclined Salim ensures that viewers fully appreciate Jamal's strong moral center. And, like Oliver, Jamal does not negotiate the world of poverty and homelessness unaided. Salim is both his tormentor and protector, stepping in at key moments to literally save his life.

Yet Jamal is not a passive victim of circumstance. Neither is he all that innocent. Driven off a train on which they'd been living as stowaways and landing near the Taj Mahal, both boys set gamely to work, profiting from the trust and naivety of the tourists visiting the famed mausoleum. Older and with plenty of cash, they return to Mumbai where due to Jamal's dogged searching, they rediscover Latika, rescuing her from the crime boss from whom the boys had earlier escaped. But Jamal must leave when Salim asserts his "right" to Latika and turns a gun on his younger brother.[15] After a bold though naïve and unsuccessful bid to save Latika (now beholden to the boss of the rival crime gang), Jamal becomes a contestant on the game show he knows she watches. As his winnings and fame grow, Latika makes her way to Jamal, who meanwhile, suspected of cheating, has withstood the torture tactics of the police and convinced them to let him return to the show to vie for the final prize. Motivated by love not money, Jamal walks away with the girl and the pot of gold.

The question of Jamal's agency is hardly straightforward. At key points it is Salim, not Jamal, who turns the brothers' (and Latika's) fortunes around.[16] It is thus tempting to see Jamal as a Polanski-esque Oliver, a somewhat knowing but ultimately powerless victim of his circumstances. Yet Jamal is not an "updated" Oliver. Not only does he consistently collude with Salim to survive, he drives the plot in important ways: the return to Mumbai, seeking and finding Latika are all his initiative, for example. The goodness and naivety that inspire his actions are his strengths—fortifying him in a corrupt world. This is nowhere more apparent than in the police torture scenes. Neither electrocution nor near-drownings move him, nor prevent him from adopting a mildly cocky attitude with the cops. For Oliver, innocence and saintliness are markers of passivity, which Polanski qualifies in an effort to establish a modicum of agency. For Jamal, these qualities are markers of steadfastness and even manliness. He refuses to compromise them. In this, he is most adult-like, albeit an adult who has not compromised his integrity. Most significantly, though, the film's plot turns on the premise that children know things about the world and will use that knowledge to further their own ends. In this regard both Salim and Jamal are highly agentic, lifting themselves from the poverty that would otherwise (were they truer to Victorian ideals of childhood) be their fate.

Slumdog thus transcends the Dickensian view of childhood, and instead it offers viewers a more contradictory, "unsettled" image of the child. Jamal is naïve and savvy, a manlike child in many ways (just as he becomes a childlike man). But it is his quintessentially "adult" qualities that fuel the story's development, making it ultimately impossible to see him as a victim of his circumstances. Whereas Oliver is over-determined by the social and must be saved by adults acting on his behalf, Jamal is an individual with free will, a more fully liberal, autonomous subject acting on his own behalf and saving himself. Slumdog's creators thus resolve the indeterminacy of the global child in and through the mechanism of childhood agency—and not just any agency, but a liberal individualist agency that has much in common with the child at the centre of the "new" sociology of childhood (James et al).

That new scholarly emphasis on childhood autonomy and participation, on giving children a voice and place in society, has provided a long overdue corrective to the socialization thesis in which children were conceptualized as passive objects of socialization en route to adulthood (Prout). But it also has introduced its own set of conceptual blinkers, often one-sidedly emphasizing children's creative appropriation of the world as if they were somehow beyond the social, beyond history, substituting one (Victorian) abstract notion of childhood for another (post-modern) ideal. As Vandenbroeck and Bourverne-de-Bie suggest, the "autonomous child . . . [is neither] a breach in history or a page turned," suggest. Rather, it is "another historical construction and a dominant discursive regime that expands the repertoire of the possible as much as it narrows it down" (140).

Representing the cinematic child in these terms also narrows the possibilities insofar as it neutralizes the critical potential of childhood. While Slumdog's images of the Mumbai slums, the motif of money and money-making, and the illegality and crassness of the game show antics may lead viewers to consider the failures of global capitalism, Jamal's successful negotiation of that system is not a basis for social critique.[17]

"Global child" films, on the other hand, take up the indeterminacy (and agency) of the child differently, in a way that suggests a level of critique unavailable to Slumdog-like treatments. Refusing the sentimentalism of a Dickensian treatment of the child as innocent victim, they reimagine what it means to represent the child as agent. Their child protagonists are first and foremost subjects or more precisely subjective beings. That is, audiences are invited to ponder children's subjectivity—how children experience the world as much or more so than what they achieve in the world. As I demonstrate below, such an approach allows for a more evocative, more powerful cinematic experience than either Slumdog or Oliver because it taps into our shared experiences as embodied subjects under capitalism. It potentially unsettles and possibly inspires viewers —not because they are anxious about the threat to innocence and goodness but because they have (likely) repressed—have had to repress in order to live in a capitalist world—the "childish" feelings and bodily expressions featured in the films' portrayals of childhood.

Treeless Mountain and the "Benjaminian" mode of critique

In order for the social criticism Dickens intends to emerge, Oliver has to be cast as an innocent victim. For if his innocence is seriously in doubt or if he is capable of exercising significant control over his destiny, the broader social forces would not be deemed as corrupt and threatening, and the story would lose its "radicalishness." We see precisely this occurring in Slumdog. Here, the agentic if nonetheless victimized child prevails, leaving viewers to look elsewhere for any political message. Childhood loses its critical edge. It thus appears that just updating the image of childhood on screen leads to a depoliticization of childhood within the text.

Both Oliver Twist and Slumdog Millionaire draw on abstract stereotypes of children, and as such they objectify the child in terms of his presumed core identity. These are not children that we readily recognize in our real social interactions but symbolic children, repositories of adult fears and wishes. The "global child" films, on the other hand, refuse to pigeonhole children into an idealized image—either Victorian victim or postmodern agent. And in so doing, they develop a different filmic approach to childhood, one that focuses on how childhood is subjectively experienced. This approach picks up upon another tradition of filmmaking[18] to update the image of the child in film without sacrificing its potential political meaning. I elaborate here on just one of a number of "global child" films, So Yong Kim's Treeless Mountain (South Korea, 2008). I look first at the film's rejection of the passive/agentic child duality, and then I discuss its focus on children's embodied experiences in an insecure world and the mimetic qualities of children's playful interaction with that world. In the final section of the paper, I consider the political implications of this approach to the cinematic child.

Treeless Mountain revolves around six-year-old Jin (played by Hee-yeon Kim) and her four-year-old sister, Bin (played by Song-hee Kim), who are deposited first with an alcoholic aunt and then with grandparents as their mother leaves in search of their father. While Jin and Bin are not technically orphans, they are—as in most of the "global child" films referenced here—children who must nonetheless make their own ways in the world. This is consistent with past and current periods of

restructuring, which tend to disrupt familial arrangements, creating "surplus" populations of itinerant or migrant children (see Seabrook's Landscapes of Poverty and Children of Other Worlds, and Katz). So, as with Oliver, in films featuring "abandoned" children or children left to their own devices to get by, the question of society's responsibility is arguably more starkly posed.[19]

Economic hardship is a recurring theme in Treeless Mountain, beginning with the family's initial eviction from their city apartment, through to Big Aunt's constant complaints about the cost of putting up the girls, to Bin's nagging hunger and the holes in Grandma's winter shoes. Although the sisters never lack a house or guardian, they are often left to their own devices. They are also emotionally alone, clearly missing their mother, who has promised to return once they have collected enough coins to fill a plastic piggy bank she gave them before leaving.

Certainly the image of two young girls abandoned by circumstance and flawed adults is reminiscent of Dickens. And on one level, Jin and Bin are victims. They can only follow their elders onto buses that carry them into the next stages of their lives. They are powerless to stop Big Aunt from forgetting or refusing to feed them. They get jostled by passersby, listen soundlessly as adults wrangle over whose responsibility they should be, and most momentously, cannot bring their mother home, despite having filled their piggy bank with coins. Yet, Jin and Bin are actors in the world. When hungry, they go in search of food. When missing their mother, they convince a stranger to call her number on his cellphone. And when she feels so inclined, Jin teaches Bin to read. Moreover, adopting a fully entrepreneurial spirit, the sisters catch and roast grasshoppers—not to eat but to sell for pennies to fill their bank. Their achievements are constantly frustrated by wider circumstances they do not control, but unlike Oliver, they do what they can to influence the situation.

Also, unlike Oliver, the children are neither essentially good (or bad). Jin, tasked with looking after her little sister, is sometimes caring, sometimes neglectful, sometimes resentful. After wetting the bed, she lets Bin take the fall, but then she protectively rushes to join her sister as the younger girl is sent out to beg for salt. Bin largely follows along behind Jin, neither supporting or abandoning her as Jin occasionally stands up to some of the adults in their lives. They often appear calm, watchful and sad, but playful and happy as well at key points in the film. They do not seem all that naïve and are not saccharinely sweet or saintly.

While the girls' complex characterization is consistent with the modern sense of childhood as indeterminate and somewhat resembles Polanski's Oliver or Boyle's and Tandan's Jamal, there is an important difference: Treeless Mountain offers no resolution in favor of one quality or the other, ending with Jin and Bin still powerlessly awaiting their mother's return, but nonetheless creating a new life with their grandmother. They find some happiness but must also resign themselves to the circumstances. This more existential outcome suggests that Treeless Mountain is not about the girls' innocence, victimization, nor achievements. Director So Yong Kim's cinematic interest in her child actors dissolves any dualistic consideration of agency and passivity. Rather, her focus is on the way children approach, experience and transform the world they inherit. Such a perspective offers us an altogether new way of thinking about agency. And it is in this exploration of Bin's and Jin's everyday practices of social reproduction that the film deploys childhood as a critical comment on the social.

Like Dickens, Kim depicts the lived experience of a certain time/space reality. She captures the instability of place in an era of globalized "vagabond" capitalism in two ways. First, the girls are uprooted twice. From their home in a large urban center (likely Seoul), they move to Big Aunt's house in a smaller city and then to their grandparents' farm in the countryside. Their travels recall an earlier journey, one presumably made by their mother when she left her home for the city, rehearsing (in reverse) the migratory pattern of global capitalism. Second, the places the girls seek out in their wanderings are borderlands, the sort of "neglected landscapes" to which Katz refers. Most significantly, these include a small hill of construction rubble, the "treeless mountain" overlooking the city street where their mother boarded the bus that took her away, and also an area with tall grass on the edge of their neighborhood where they hunt grasshoppers. Unnamed, neglected, these are the unstable, in-between spaces typical of a neo-liberal capitalist world (Harvey) that are also featured in films such as Manchuca (Chile, 2004), Chop Shop (U.S., 2007), and The Pool (India, 2007). Considered collectively, the neglected landscapes featured in these and other films illustrate the fact of their internal connection within an overarching capitalist system. Distinct local cultures are caught up in the shared global dynamic in which a light-footed capital abandons the spaces of social reproduction (Katz).[20]

It is perhaps because place is so fragile in this era—because one cannot count on sufficiency when it comes to the infrastructure of social reproduction—that some filmmakers are drawn to exploring how children "make do" in these decidedly non-domestic spaces. As with the above-mentioned studies in children's geographies, these "global child" films often pay close attention to children's bodies, tracking the sensations of their existence in the spaces they inhabit. In Treeless Mountain, for example, the camera offers close-up scenes of Bin chewing her dinner and picking her teeth; Jin breathing on the bus window and drawing words on the fog; or Jin carefully accepting a sticker from Hyun, a boy the girls befriend. It shows both girls exploring the piggy bank, testing its flexibility by pressing into its smooth plastic shell, peering through a tiny hole to see the coins inside, feeling its weight as the pennies shift. In these small moments, captured with contemplative camera work and a sparse soundtrack, viewers are intimately connected with the sensations and gestures of the girls' interactions with and within the material substructures of their everyday worlds. (One is reminded here as well of the scenes in Beasts of the Southern Wild, in which the lead child character, Hushpuppy, listens intently to the world around her, real and imagined.)

Yong's focus on such interactions suggests that if place is unstable, its spatial and temporal coordinates are also incredibly important. Borderland spaces—the hill of rubble and the grasshopper hunting grounds—are places Bin and Jin return to in an effort to creating meaning and comfort in their worlds. After the film's somber opening half hour, the scene cuts to Jin sitting on the hill of rubble from which she had witnessed her mother's departure. Bin approaches, carrying a sizable tree branch. The ensuing dialogue gives a sense of the transformation that occurs:

Bin: Sis! I found a tree.

Jin: But it's dead.

Bin: No it's not.

Jin: Oh yeah. Let's try planting it. Hold it up high [as she works to create a cavity in which to lodge the "tree"].

Bin: Here?

Jin: Now get me some rocks.

And then, after a little more work and instructing, Jin says, "We did it. That was hard."

In this short scene, Yong shows Bin and Jin strenuously rearranging their world as they transform a dead branch into a living tree. Their bodies are hard at play/work, manipulating both nature (the tree branch) and the detritus of human society (construction rubble). At one level this is "just play"—an amusing way to kill time and release some of the tension of their situation. But it is also an act of meaning creation, a small moment in their girls' process of (re)producing the world in which they live. And like players everywhere, the sisters imitate a world they know (planting a tree in the ground), but they do so imaginatively, mimetically, so that their actions don't simply reproduce old, established, meanings but actually change the world around them, creating something new, meaningful and valuable.[21] Their imaginations infuse the given world to make it other than it is, better than it is: a dead branch becomes a living tree; a hill of rubble becomes a mountain of hope. Not content with the world as it has been handed to them, Bin and Jin strive to make it something else. That the "mountain" is in fact treeless— and thus signifies the reality principle to which they eventually will and must learn to surrender—does not matter for the moment. It is the creative action that absorbs the children, as well as the filmmaker.

In the grasshopper hunting grounds, Jin and Bin play/work in much the same way. They wander through the tall grasses looking for grasshoppers. The hunt is purposeful, but not all-absorbing. Jin, for instance, pauses to hold her prey between her fingers, playfully flicking its legs. Bin and Hyun wander off, distracted by a nearby stream. Later, crouching by the makeshift barbecue, a boy offers (possibly silly) advice about skewering and roasting the grasshoppers. Bin admonishes the others to "stop goofing around" before commenting on the smells: "Wow, it stinks." The sisters wrap their delicacies in newspaper, and sell them in the streets to older children for 10 cents a package. Later, dropping their earnings in the piggy bank, they sing, "One, two, three, Grasshopper," while jumping and playing a hand-clapping game.[22]

While the grasshopper venture more closely resembles the social reproductive practices of adults, it too involves infusing the given world with new possibilities, an imaginative refashioning of the world. True, Jin and Bin are not play-acting in this case, They don't imitate, they are hunters, cooks and sellers. Though instrumental and this-worldly, their quest is nonetheless an act of imaginative transformation. Their play/work has a practical outcome certainly: the girls are producing food and exchanging it for money. But they don't spend their earnings; they save them, using them to fuel a fantasy about their mother's return.[23] As with the tree-planting scene, the sisters appropriate what is at hand not to reproduce what already exists but to create a more hopeful world. Moreover, the playfulness of their purposeful activity—which mirrors the purposefulness (recall Jin's exclamation, "We did it. That was hard") of their playful tree-planting—suggests a unity of fantasy and action that distinguishes the girls'

reproductive activities from that which adults understand work to be.[24] Survival and fantasy appear as "indistinguishable affects" (Berlant, 289) for these children.

In foregrounding children's sensual, imaginative, exploratory relation to the world, Treeless Mountain and films like it reject conventional modes of representing children. While Jin and Bin may be more similar to Jamal than Oliver—representing an "unsettled" image of childhood and exercising some meaningful agency in their lives—there's plenty to distinguish them from the postmodern portrayal of childhood. With Jamal, the distinction between adult and child blurs. Despite his sometimes playful antics and naivety, Jamal is morally stable, mature and sure of himself—qualities which guide him back to Mumbai, onto the game show, and allow him to survive the torture. It's difficult to imagine Jin and Bin in such solid control of their fate. Furthermore, Jamal's and Salim's "work" at the Taj Mahal also shades into play. They clearly take some delight in stealing tourists' shoes and duping them into believing the stories they concoct as ostensible tour guides. But its purpose is not to reimagine their world. Rather, it has a highly unplaylike purpose: getting money to survive and (in Jamal's case) return to Mumbai to find Latika. What Salim and Jamal produce, they sell. What Jin and Bin produce they save in order to work magic.

Bin and Jin cannot be contained by an abstraction, the agentic or passive child, the savvy or innocent. They exercise significant agency and are wise (and become wiser) to the ways of the world, but their identities are not reduced to these qualities. This is because rather than treating them as fully realized individuals, unchanging beings with stable "characters" or "identities," the film captures the children coming-into-being. Bin and Jin are depicted as "becoming" (over "being"), but in a dialectical, non-telelogical way. The end is not prescribed, as it is in those sociologies of childhood that position children as "becoming adult" (Curti and Moreno, Prout). Rather, the process is open-ended, shifting constantly and with great subtlety in relation to their actions and physical/sensual engagement with the socio-material substructure of their world.[25]

Freed from the need to see the children as representative of an abstract other, Yong and other filmmakers concentrate on capturing and portraying the child as embodied subject.[26] In Jin and Bin, Yong captures much the same sort of thing that Katz describes in her comparative study of the ways in which children in the Sudanese village of Howa and Harlem negotiate the effects of economic restructuring in their daily lives. Katz documents children's "playful practices of social reproduction" (240) through which they learn and survive in the unstable time/space of neo-liberal governance and global capital mobility. In Howa, for example, she documents children "reclaiming the debris of geography" in their play, using "china money" (258), currency constructed out of found bits of crockery, to imaginatively enact the marketplace relations that are becoming more central to their everyday lives, while at the same time creating a world of abundance that is distinct from—and better than—their lived reality. Similarly, she notes that in playing house, girls will fetch water, traditionally a job reserved for boys and men. Here again children are imitating their worlds, but adding to them, shaping them in ways that align with their needs and wishes—much the way Jin ad Bin do in Treeless Mountain.

Others are similarly struck by the ways in which children subjectively experience their world and the things in it. Whether observing street children of Ethiopia (Abebe) or Indonesia (Beazley), British school children (James, Thomson and Philo), the children of Calcutta's sex workers (Sircar and Dutta) or of drug-addicted parents in San Diego (Curti and Moreno), field studies bring to light the texture of children's subjective engagement with the world—its sensual, imaginative and exploratory nature. This is agency, but of a different kind: it is

"the situated agency of the body and a view of the body as not divorced from the conscious, thinking and intentional mind" (James, 27).

In Benjaminian terms, it is a sense of agency that attends to the mimetic qualities of children's way of being in the world—their capacity to bring imagination and action together, to create a world that fits with their ideas and ideals, to refuse the accepted given reality and way of being. In the final section of the paper, I explore the political meanings that can be attached to such observations.

The critical potential of childhood

One way to approach the political possibilities of children's subjective engagement with the world is to ask how the filmic apprehension of children in Treeless Mountain and similar "global child" films inspire a radical critique of the societies they depict. Children on screen, suggests Mecchia (following Deleuze),

"exist in a temporal plane that is both past and present, a specifically cinematic possibility that modern cinema has developed to its fullest potential" (138).

As a result, child characters are uniquely capable of evoking "an erased past" and their "gaze" denaturalizes the adult world, invoking standards of innocence to judge it by and hold adults accountable to. That power, however, can take different forms. Insofar as it recalls an idealized, objectified childhood triggering sympathy and moral outrage, the power can end up being as trivial as the sentimentalization it banks on. At the same time that they remind adults of their (idealized) childhood, such characterizations also fix and naturalize the separation between adulthood and childhood as if adult and child were two distinct forms of humanity—as if the child were natural and the adult not. Thus, while the Dickensian child can indeed suggest a social critique, it does so at the cost of reaffirming an essential difference between "them" (children) and "us" (adults). As such it inspires sympathy, not solidarity, philanthropic paternalism, not radical transformation. One need think only of famine relief appeals featuring soulful, dark-skinned children with distended bellies and wide eyes.[27] These are creatures to be pitied and helped, possibly even empowered, but they are not the "us" to whom the messages are addressed; they do not represent our common humanity. They are (only) innocent children.

Yet when the child on screen is not an abstraction but a complex and contradictory being whose sensual and transformative relation to the world is foregrounded, children's cinematic presence evokes an "erased past" of a different order. Instead of relying on nostalgia, which is as much if not more about

forgetting as it is about remembering, these representations bank on the power of memory as they connect with viewers' one-time but now largely repressed experiences of their bodies in the world. Karen Lury makes this point in her discussion of certain war-time films:

"It is the way in which film can portray the materiality of bodily experience that reveals how the presence of the child allows for a sensual impression and response that takes the viewer . . . to a more visceral or haptic confrontation with the violence of the war-time environment" (125).

The "global child" films, I'm suggesting, take viewers to a visceral encounter with the violence of neo-liberal capitalism. In foregrounding children's embodied subjectivities, they potentially put viewers in touch with their earlier selves, with a form of subjectivity and often non-instrumental mode of knowing that they experienced as a child but have likely lost or devalued since. Rather than distance childhood from adulthood, such a portrayal emphasizes the shared humanity of adult and child, grounded in a pleasurable and imaginative embodied interaction with the world.[28]

The radical possibilities of ascertaining such interaction turn on two key points, both developed by Walter Benjamin in his observations of children's play. First, as he emphasizes in his essays "The Cultural History of Toys" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," the "mimetic faculty" that guides this mode of existence—the capacity to rehearse and invent the everyday world in line with one's imaginings—draws attention to the socially constructed nature of the given world (Benjamin, 115, 720). Quite simply, as Katz puts it, "immanent in making the everyday world is the knowledge that it is made" (257) and thus can be unmade or remade differently. Accepted meanings are challenged, as are the boundaries of what is deemed possible.

In other words, a playful mode of existence potentially releases the sort of historical consciousness essential to the development of revolutionary consciousness. Moreover, that mode of existence is of a two-sided nature, and this is the second point Benjamin develops about the radical possibilities of foregrounding children's subjectivities. Play or mimesis brings thought and action together: it is both physical/material/sensual on the one hand, and abstract/ideal/fantastical on the other. The fantastical aspect of play has been widely noted by others. The "imagined world," writes Christensen, "represents the simple, spontaneous, unconditional and infinite dimensions of social relations, unconstrained by conventional restrictions or limitations" (43). And what Marcuse refers to as play's "refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle . . . its refusal to forget what can be" (135). But for Benjamin,

"Children's cognition had revolutionary power because it was tactile, and hence tied to action, and because rather than accepting the given meanings of things, children got to know objects by laying hold of them and using them creatively, releasing from them new possibilities of meaning" (Buck-Morss, 264, emphasis added).

Thus, it is not only the capacity to fantasize new worlds and ways of being that will be the foundation of a new and better society, it is also the sensuous, active element of play—the physically creative element emerging from the meeting of fantasy and reality—that must be mobilized for such a project. As adults, we have lost touch with that pre-contemplative way of knowing (see Benjamin's essays, "The Lamp" and

"A Berlin Chronicle"), as we strive to get along in an instrumentalist, individualist world. But it is not lost to us completely, and engaging with children, Benjamin posits, is a bridge to those buried feelings.

This emphasis on praxis—this insistence on the two-sidedness of life—is precisely what Marx emphasizes in his discussion of alienation.[29] To be a free (nonalienated) subject is to be a conscious, creative being interacting freely with nature and other free subjects. But interacting how? Marx states: "human relations to the world" consist of "seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of his individual beings" (138-9). And it is through the exercise of these faculties that we appropriate "human reality." Private property and acquisition, by prioritizing having over being thwart these senses. The state of alienation, then is as much about "chang[ing] the worker into an insensible being" (149, emphasis added), or engendering a "dulled" subjectivity as one commentator (Henricks, 41) puts it, as it is about workers' lack of control over the fruits of their labor.

Thus, while capital inexorably denies, disrupts and negates the praxic element of life activity in and through labor for capital, following Benjamin we can appreciate how play or childish existence is one of the few experiences in which alienation (as Marx describes it) is at least temporarily suspended. Play's simultaneous and integrally related conscious (intellectual) and physical (practical) nature makes it a forceful space of critique, but not only in the sense of a rational critique. In relearning the cognitive mode associated with play, an alternative, bodily relation to the world comes into view—one that privileges sensibility/feeling and being over owning/having and getting.

While this discussion has taken us a long way from the issues associated with the cinematic treatment of children and childhood, the route back is relatively straightforward. I want to suggest that the sort of filmic apprehension of children that Yong and similar filmmakers offer—the foregrounding of children's subjective interaction with the in-between spaces of the neo-liberal, global capitalist world—contains these radical political possibilities. Like Benjamin's observations about children playing, in providing a glimpse at what it means to "be" in the world differently (imaginatively, sensually), these "global child" films have the potential to awaken a part of us that we do not generally associate with political critique. The films evoke feelings about the ways in which we do, and might possibly, interact with the world, feelings about what it means to be a subject in the world, while also they also remind us of the constructed nature of that world. Here the cinematic child certainly evokes an "erased past" as Mecchia suggests, but it does so on a more visceral, less rational level than the Dickensian screen-child effects. And it does so without collapsing children or childhood into an abstract, value-laden category of existence or positioning them as mere objects of our desire.

Of course, the radical political meanings of these films are not self-evident. A revolutionary consciousness does not spring forth from the mere act of watching Treeless Mountain or Chop Shop or Sin Nombre. But the films are politically significant insofar as they draw attention to the difficult question of political consciousness, and specifically to the important, though often—in political practice at least—ignored questions of the revolutionary imagination. As such, they allow us to see how childhood can function as social critique without the moralism and nostalgia associated with the Victorian child-as-victim trope. And importantly, they provide a means of rediscovering the corporeality

of that life activity as a basis for imagining another world—one that will be forged not out of dialogue alone but out of struggle, experience and that bodies, not ideas alone, will create.[30]

Notes

1. Benjamin makes these observations across a number of essays including: "The Cultural History of Toys," "Old Toys," "Toys and Play," "The Lamp," "A Berlin Chronicle" and "On the Mimetic Faculty." He proposes that children's ability to come to know the world in and through their bodily senses and to physically enact that which they imagine and desire is a revolutionary cognitive mode—revolutionary in that it refuses to accept the given world and aims to create something that more fully aligns with human needs and desires (see also Susan Buck-Morss, 262-275). [return to text]

2.The politics of solidarity and transformation is radical compared to the philanthropic paternalism of the Dickensian mode of social critique, a politics whose goal is to protect (rather than empower) society's most vulnerable beings. I elaborate on this point below.

3.England's Poor Laws date back to the Elizabethan era, when parishes provided relief to the waged and unwaged poor, ensuring (at least in theory if not always in practice) a minimum standard of subsistence was met for all. By the 1800s, as capitalist relations increasingly drove the poor from their small plots of land, employing them at below-subsistence wages, the plight of the poor had become a national preoccupation. Reformers blamed the old Poor Laws for obstructing progress, arguing that they led to rising poor rates (e.g., taxes) and falling wages. In continuing to provide relief to the able-bodied, but tying it to the brutality of the workhouse, and calibrating the amount awarded to fall below the lowest labor market wages, the 1834 Act was as much about changing people's expectations as it was about "fixing" the economy. According to E.P. Thompson, the Act "was perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history" (295; see also Himmelfarb).

4. Bakhtin argued that the modern novel, with its polyphony of voices and its attention to the embodied, lived experience of individuals draws attention to the repression and inequality of the dominant social order—a form he saw as emerging as early as Rabelais's 16th century works, Gargantua and Pantagruel (see Rabelais and his World).

5. Describing the swaddled baby, Dickens writes that Oliver "might have been the child of a nobleman or beggar," (5) emphasizing the social origins of inequality. This passage, however, also signals Oliver's actual (though hidden from him) noble origins, a fact that lies in tension with Dickens' intended social critique.

6. None of this takes away from the fact that the power of Dickens' social critique is compromised by his anti-Semitic demonization of Fagin, and his positioning of Oliver as an aristocrat-in-waiting (Holt, Eagleton).

7. Nine film and TV renditions of the novel are listed in the Independent Movie Database, www.imdb.com. I discuss here the three most prominent "talkies" made for distribution in movie theatres.

8. In the original story, Oliver intends to foil the burglary, but doesn't get the chance. Startled by Sikes' voice, he fumbles the lantern he's carrying and is rendered immobile: he "knew not whether to advance or fly" (Dickens, 183).

9. Baumgarten, referencing Bakhtin, suggests Dickens creates "a modern city chronotope with pre-historic dimensions and historical memories," writing that "has much in common with...the dream-work of films" (225).

10. The infrastructure supporting social reproduction in the 19th century comprised the then-faltering institutions of the "moral economy," which upheld the principles of "just price" and outdoor relief—principles undermined by the Poor Laws Dickens criticizes (see Thompson).

11. Katz provocatively flags the need to produce "topographies and countertopographies" of these spaces, "thick descriptions of particular places" that highlight the inner connections between "vastly different places made artifactually discrete by virtue of history and geography but which also reproduce themselves differently amidst the common political-economic and sociocultural processes they experience" (721). The "global child" films, considered collectively, can be seen as contributing to just such a project.

12. See especially, Jones' chapter in Holloway and Valentine, as well as Beazley, Katz, and Curti and Moreno.

13. See Seabrook's article in Capital and Class for a searing critique of consumer agency, as well as a critical discussion of the internal relatedness of the child consumer and child laborer.

14. In her book Coining for Capital, Jyotsna Kapur analyzes how the social anxieties provoked by the autonomous, "grown up" child are played out in Toy Story (1995). She elaborates this thesis in a later essay, discussing the missing child in such thrillers as Syriana (2005) and The Good Shepherd (2006).

15. At this point, the characters shift from childhood to adulthood. But for Jamal, the shift is merely physical: he remains the slightly naïve, morally sound person of his childhood self. This, combined with the film's flashback structure of scene editing, blurs the distinction between his adult and child selves.

16. Salim's portrayal of childhood is itself complex: on the one hand, his morally suspect ways place him within the 1970s tradition of "bad seed" children (Jackson). On the other, Salim uses his street-smarts for good, saving Jamal from having his eyes burned out, and—as an adult—setting Jamal and Latika free by ultimately killing both crime bosses (while sacrificing his life for their happiness).

17. Another commercially successful film featuring a child negotiating the post-hurricane US Delta largely without parental protection is Beasts of the Southern Wild (U.S., 2012). However the two films differ in their portrayals of childhood. While Beasts' protagonist, five-year-old Hushpuppy (Quvenzhane

Wallis) is, as bell hooks' withering critique suggests, tough, she shares little of Jamal's strong agency (see also note 23). Director Benh Zeitlin focuses less on whether or not Hushpuppy conquers her circumstances, than on how she negotiates her life, playing up the imaginative and sensual aspects of her existence in the world. In so doing, he transcends the agent/victim binary, and registers a more Benjaminian sensibility (elaborated below) to childhood.

18. This tradition has been traced by both Karen Lury and Emma Wilson. See Lury's perceptive readings of Pan's Labyrinth (2006), Spirit of the Beehive (1973), and Ivan's Childhood (1962) among others in her book The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales; Emma Wilson offers another insightful discussion of the filmic child's embodied subjectivity in the films Lilya 4-ever (2003) and Martha . . . Martha (2001). See her essay "Children, Emotion and Viewing in Contemporary European Film."

19. Films such as Little Cheung or Beasts of the Southern Wild, featuring children who are firmly embedded in familial relations and help to sustain themselves and their struggling families by contributing their (formal and or informal) labor can and at points do partake of a the same Benjaminian sensibility. That is, while the Dickensian mode of critique depends upon the child's status as an orphan, the Benjaminian mode does not.

20. This is one of the achievements of Katz's Growing Up Global, showing how children in societies as distinct as Howa, Sudan and Harlem, New York negotiate and respond to the same over-arching set of global capitalist relations.

21. See Benjamin's essays The Lamp and On the Mimetic Faculty on mimesis and childhood.

22. I've collapsed two grasshopper hunting scenes in this passage to avoid needless repetition of details concerning plot development.

23. It's worth emphasizing how remarkably unadultlike their entrepreneurship is: it is not about entering into an exchange-based economy, but about producing a single, non-reproducible, use value—their mother's return. A similar negotiation with the reality principle can be seen in Beasts of the Southern Wild, when Hushpuppy dresses up a chair in her absent mother's clothing and imagines (creates?) the comfort of her presence.

24. Thomson and Philo suggest that what adults often conventionally designate as "play" may well be children "just existing, just being" (111). And certainly, the play/work continuum that characterizes children's subjective interaction with the world is widely discussed (ex. Katz, 59-108). It is also evident to varying degrees in other films referenced here. In Little Cheung, for instance, the children's work delivering tea slips constantly into play, specifically into playing a joke on a gangster who buys and enjoys the "pee" tea—a brilliant enactment of a fantasy that temporarily upends the given power relation between thug and child.

25. bell hooks' critique of Beasts of the Southern Wild revolves precisely around this point. She argues that Hushpuppy, is "a miniature version of the 'strong black female matriarch,'" embodying (or sometimes learning) the toughness and independence needed in a Survivor-esque world—a portrayal

that hooks believes helps to establish the film's ultimately conservative message "that the strong will necessarily rule over the weak." While this provocative thesis requires a more developed response than possible here, I would counter that neither Hushpuppy or the film's resolution are so unambiguous—a point hook inadvertently acknowledges in her comments about Hushpuppy's uncertain future: Hushpuppy, she suggests, seems likely to end up as a wild woman, "wandering in a wildness of spirit so profound that she is forever lost"—a racist stereotype to be sure, but not evidence of the strong overcoming the weak. hooks is, I believe, better attuned to the essence of the story and character when she notes (but does not fully explore) that Hushpuppy's "strength lies in cultivating the imaginary and living life as fantasy."

26. Of course, the filmmakers "objectify" the child by the mere act of filming and then again in the screening. What I'm trying to get at here is the aspect of the child that their artistic objectification captures.

27. In fact in most Western contexts the featured children are doubly "otherized," first as innocent victims, second as "foreign."

28. To be clear, such sensual affiliation is sexual in nature, stirring a desire within the viewer for the child. But I believe Lury (and many of the "global child" filmmakers) are striving to articulate something more complex than the scopophilic desire that Mulvey describes. To begin, they stress a polymorphous sensuality (in the films this is established by shots of children's generalized sensual engagement with the world, while Lury suggests the same in her discussion of the role played by mud, rain and fire in war-time films about children). Moreover, as I've been arguing, because the child is portrayed as a complex subject/object in films like Treeless Mountain, the audience is invited to sensually identify with her, rather than simply objectify her.

29. See also Lebowitz.

30. I'd like to thank David McNally, James Cairns, Jyotsna Kapur and the Jump Cut's editors and anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of earlier versions of this article, and their insightful commentary and suggestions. I'd also like to thank Sam Ferguson for his help retrieving stills of the films for publication in this journal.

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