**Sample Film Reviews #1 *Born Into Brothels***

Nurturing the Talents of Children in Calcutta **By A. O. SCOTT** Dec 8, 2004

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| A picture taken by one of the children of Calcutta prostitutes who are taught photography in the documentary "Born Into Brothels."Thinkfilm-HBO/Cinemax Documentary FilmsA picture taken by one of the children of Calcutta prostitutes who are taught photography in the documentary "Born Into Brothels." |

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he impulse to document the lives of poor, neglected and oppressed people, which motivates countless filmmakers and photojournalists, is unquestionably noble, but it is not without certain ethical difficulties. Vital as it may be to bring news of human suffering to audiences who might otherwise remain comfortably ignorant, such exposure does not always help the suffering.

While most films of its kind allow this contradiction to hover in the background, ["Born Into Brothels,"](http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=299929&inline=nyt_ttl) a new documentary about children growing up in Calcutta's rough and squalid red light district, faces it squarely.

Rather than simply record the lives of those children, Zana Briski, a New York-based photojournalist who is one of the film's directors (along with Ross Kauffman), became their teacher and their advocate. They, in turn, started out as her subjects and became her collaborators. The resulting film is moving, charming and sad, a tribute to Ms. Briski's indomitability and to the irrepressible creative spirits of the children themselves.

At some point after arriving in Calcutta in the mid-1990's, Ms. Briski had the simple, improbable and altogether inspired idea of organizing a photography class. The seven children, four girls and three boys, who are the focus of "Born Into Brothels," were given cameras to take pictures of the world around them. Their work provides the film with some of its most beautiful and revealing images, offering glimpses of life in the crowded, colorful alleyways of the red light district that no outsider could capture.

The young photographers approach their tasks with impressive seriousness, and a few of them seem to be budding art critics as well as fledgling artists, offering detailed analyses of lighting and composition.

They also benefit from Ms. Briski's presence, and from her connections. In addition to taking them on photographic field trips to the seashore and the zoo, she organizes exhibitions of their work in India and in New York, and persuades Avijit, an especially talented boy, to enter an international competition. But while "Born Into Brothels" recounts her tireless efforts to help her protégés escape from the poverty and sex work that seems to be their destiny, it also shows the limits of what a single person, however dedicated, can do. Ms. Briski's goal was to find boarding schools for the children in her class, which would offer both educational opportunities and, more important - especially for the girls - a refuge from the violence and degradation of the brothels.

The challenges she faced ranged from the chaotic state of Calcutta's government bureaucracy to the resistance of the children's parents. "Born Into Brothels" tempers its optimism with realism in a way that is both uplifting and heartbreaking. Like Jonathan Kozol's books about young people in American cities, it takes an almost naïve delight in the pluck and intelligence that blossom in middle childhood, while exposing the cruelty of social arrangements that allow those qualities to be squandered. No film can dispel that cruelty, but in giving a handful of children the opportunity to regard themselves as artists and to perceive their surroundings as raw material, Ms. Briski snatches a measure of hope from depressing circumstances.

[**http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/movies/08born.html?\_r=0**](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/movies/08born.html?_r=0)



**Born into Brothels (2005)** Review By [Roger Ebert](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/roger-ebert) February 10, 2005

In a movie named "[The Five Obstructions](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-five-obstructions-2004)," the Danish director Lars von Trier creates an ordeal for his mentor, [Jorgen Leth](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/jorgen-leth). The older director will have to remake a short film in five different ways, involving five obstructions which von Trier will devise. One of the five involves making a film in "the most miserable place on Earth," which they decide is the red light district of Mumbai. The director is unable to deal with this assignment.

Now here is a documentary made in a place which is by definition as miserable: The red light district of Calcutta. I thought of the Danish film as I was watching this one, because the makers of "Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids" also find it almost impossible to make. They are shooting in an area where no one wants to be photographed, where lives are hidden behind doors or curtains, where with their Western features and cameras they are as obvious as the police, and indeed suspected of working for them.

[Zana Briski](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/zana-briski), an American photographer, and [Ross Kauffman](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ross-kauffman), her collaborator, went to Calcutta to film prostitution and found that it melted out of sight as they appeared. It was all around them, it put them in danger, but it was invisible to their camera. What they did see were the children, because the kids of the district followed the visitors, fascinated. Briski hit upon the idea of giving cameras to these children of prostitutes, and asking them to take photos of the world in which they lived.

It is a productive idea, and has a precedent of sorts in a 1993 project by National Public Radio in Chicago; two teenagers, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, were given tape recorders and asked to make an audio documentary of the Ida B. Wells public housing project, where they lived and where a young child had been thrown from a high window in a fight over candy. Their work won a Peabody Award.

The kids in "Born Into Brothels" (which is one of this year's Oscar nominees) take photos with zest and imagination, squint at the contact sheets to choose their favorite shots, and mark them with crayons. Their pictures capture life, and a kind of beauty and squalor that depend on each other. One child, Avijit, is so gifted he wins a week's trip to Amsterdam for an exhibition of photography by children.

Over a couple of years, Briski teaches photo classes and meets some of the parents of the children -- made difficult because she must work through interpreters. Prostitution in this district is not a choice but a settled way of life. We meet a grandmother, mother and daughter all engaged in prostitution, and the granddaughter seems destined to join them. Curiously, the movie does not suggest that the boys will also be used as prostitutes, although it seems inevitable. The age of entry into prostitution seems to be puberty. There are no scenes that could be described as sexually explicit, partly because of the filmmakers' tact in not wanting to exploit their subjects, partly no doubt because the prostitutes refused to be filmed except in innocuous settings.

Briski becomes determined to get several of the children out of the district and into a boarding school, where they will have a chance at different lives. She encounters opposition from their parents and roadblocks from the Indian bureaucracy, which seems to create jobs by requiring the same piece of paper to be meaninglessly stamped, marked, read or filed in countless different offices. She goes almost mad trying to get a passport for Avijit, the winner of the Amsterdam trip; of course with his background he lacks the "required" papers.

The film is narrated mostly by Briski, who is a good teacher and brings out the innate intelligence of the children as they use their cameras to see their world in a different way. The faces of the children are heartbreaking, because we reflect that in the time since the film was finished, most of them have lost childhood forever, some their lives. Far away offscreen is the prosperous India with middle-class enclaves, an executive class and a booming economy. These wretched poor exist in a separate and parallel universe, without an exit.

The movie is a record by well-meaning people who try to make a difference for the better, and succeed to a small degree while all around them the horror continues unaffected. Yes, a few children stay in boarding schools. Others are taken out by their parents, drop out, or are asked to leave. The red light district has existed for centuries and will exist for centuries more. I was reminded of a scene in Bunuel's "[Viridiana](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-viridiana-1961)." A man is disturbed by the sight of a dog tied to a wagon and being dragged along faster than it can run. The man buys the dog to free it, but does not notice, in the background, another cart pulling another dog.

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/born-into-brothels-2005>

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**Born Into Brothels: Ethical Questions, and Links Saturday, March 05, 2005**

We finally saw *Born Into Brothels* last night. The documentary won an Oscar last week, but it will never be shown in India, [apparently to protect the identities](http://in.news.yahoo.com/050302/32/2jxw2.html) of the mothers of the children in the film.

There have been some complaints about the film's negativity, but I think it's fair to dismiss those. Though the filmmakers are clearly making *Born Into Brothels* with an ethical and humanitarian goal in mind (i.e., help keep these kids out of the life of prostitution and crime that seems to be their fate), it's not a protest film or an "exploitation" film. These are the children of prostitutes, living in a notorious neighborhood in Calcutta, but remarkably, there are no scenes of violence against them or explicit sexuality around them in the film. (There is one scene with implied violence, which also features a string of the most aggressive Bengali curse-words imaginable, but it only lasts a few seconds). Instead, the film focuses on the mundane aspects of their lives, and of course on photography -- which is often quietly remarkable (as the above image shows).

One of the interpreters Briski worked with has also complained about the film:

Meanwhile, the documentary has had its share of controversies. It has "ethical and stylistic" problems, says Partha Banerjee, interpreter between the filmmakers and the children. He has reportedly written to the Academy Of Motion Picture Arts And Sciences, complaining that the children's lives had worsened. Authorities at Sabera Foundation's home, where some of the children live, said other kids didn't know about their Sonagachhi connection. Now, the award has brought the kids into global prominence.([link](http://www.academia.edu/690465/Born_Into_Brothels_the_Insider_Story))

The fact that the lives of some of the children worsened doesn't surprise me. Briski is quite clear that her goal isn't to extract the kids, or save them at any cost. Rather, she wants to help them help themselves, without severing them from their families or their surroundings. With that goal and that methodology, it's virtually inevitable that there will be some failures.

One can also justify the film along a "greatest good" argument. Some good will come from the money that the sale of the children's photographs has presumably raised, as well as from the revenue from the film, and even from funds sent in by viewers of the film who see it and want to help. Briski has already started a school. It's possible that the lives of many more kids than just these seven or eight will be helped by what she started.

And finally, many of the [American reviewers](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/born_into_brothels/) had issues with the film's tone. Here I have to concede they have a point. Briski tries hard to ensure that this isn't a movie about herself (i.e., as a saint), and also not a voyeuristic "look at how miserable these kids are" affair. The result is a film with an approach I haven't seen before. It's original -- and that, more than anything else, is why it probably deserved the Oscar -- but it sometimes seems a little unsure of what it's trying to do.

\* \* \* \* \* Amardeep Singh, Assistant Professor of English at Lehigh University [amardeepsingh.com](http://www.amardeepsingh.com)

**Some links**
A commentor on [Tiffinbox](http://www.tiffinbox.org/2005/02/born_into_broth.html) posted some additional links about the film, including the site [Kids With Cameras](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/www.kids-with-cameras.org), which many other [blogs](http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/000764.html) have linked to:

It leaves out, for instance, the work of many other photographers who have introduced young people who have few worldy prospects to a new life by introducing them to photography.

Shahidul Alam and his colleages have worked for eight years with a group of young photographers who call themselves Out of Focus. ([link](http://www.drik.net)).

Nancy McGirr teaches photography to children who worked in a garbage dump in Guatemala. ([link](http://www.fotokids.org). [Also here](http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/stories/s910493.htm))

And Zana Briski is doing her best to make her work in Kolkata more than a one-time event. She started Kids With Cameras ([link](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/www.kids-with-cameras.org))
to send other photographers to countries around the world to train children to become photographers. Gigi Cohen (whoalso has worked with Child Labor & the Global Village) is currently in Haiti.

And Ms. Musings links to an [NPR interview](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4516884) with Briski the day after she won the Oscar.

UPDATE: See [Shashwati Talukdar's response](http://blog.shashwati.com/index.php?p=97) to the [nasty review in Outlook](http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20050314&fname=Film+%28F%29&sid=1&pn=2).

**5 Comments:**

* [Ms. World](http://www.blogger.com/profile/5661279) said... Very interesting post! I look forward to seeing the film when I can.[10:42 AM](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html#111003737944310347)

* [Ennis](http://www.blogger.com/profile/459555) said... They took down this page, but you can still see the BBC article about the controversy via [Google's cache](http://216.239.63.104/search?q=cache:dESl5Ja5LoIJ:news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/film/4291331.stm+&hl=en). [11:20 PM](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html#111008285849383739)

* [arnab](http://www.blogger.com/profile/7200289) said... there has been some discussion of this film and controversy on [another subcontinent](http://www.anothersubcontinent.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=1436&st=0&#entry16237) as well. i haven't seen the film yet myself--will have to wait till it comes to dvd. [3:32 PM](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html#111040034125700195)

* Anonymous said... well this was IMHO one of the most dishonest attempts at documentary filmmaking. ms director should have, at least, taken one or two courses in basic ethnographic research methods. that way she could have at least anticipated that these kids' lives would be forever and ever changed for the worse, as she goes around the world reaping the benefits (most of them monetary) while the kids still rot in their homes. very sickening attempt, missionary-style cheap morality that was... just my two cents. congrats on your blog! [12:56 PM](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html#112334736496307497)

* [Davester](http://www.blogger.com/profile/204118) said... Uh if you read the BBC article you'll learn that 100% of the kid's photographs go towards their education. So do your research before commenting. [2:25 AM](http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html#112374154359168155)

<http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/03/born-into-brothels-ethical-questions.html>

Note: If you want to watch this film, it is on You Tube (the whole film)