CHAPTER 4
Romanticizing the Poor

Even as the economic gap between the rich and the poor is growing steadily larger, the physical gap between the rich and the poor is narrowing.\(^1\) Slums are often just a short walk from upscale beaches or border posh neighborhoods, and shantytowns can be found near luxury resorts. The media brings images of the poor into the living rooms of the advantaged everyday. It is not possible, nor politically correct, to just ignore poverty. The affluent can actually visit poor neighbourhoods and photograph or film the poor in their “natural habitat,” either sanitizing or romanticizing their lives. Indeed, entertainment and poverty have come together: poortainment.

**Poortainment**

In 2008, the fashion magazine, *Vogue India*, featured a 16-page spread of poor Indians wearing ultra expensive accessories by top fashion designers such as Fendi, Burberry, and Marc Jacobs.\(^2\) *Vogue India* editor Priya Tanna stated in the *Independent*: “For our
India issue, we wanted to showcase beautiful objects of fashion in an interesting and engaging context. This was a creative pursuit that we consider one of our most beautiful editorial executions.”3 Thus, in this “creative” outlet you can see the poor, but not really see them. Poortainment uses poverty as just another prop, a colorful backdrop for marketing to the rich.

The people in the Vogue India photographs are not that poor, at least not by Indian standards, and seem quite happy and dignified. The photographic spread, however, provoked much criticism from both Indian and foreign commentators, ranging from distasteful and vulgar to callous and exploitative. Surprisingly, the magazine was taken aback by the negative reaction to the photographs and even asked the critics to “lighten up.” At a minimum, Vogue India needs to learn the first rule of global marketing: sensitivity to local culture and people.

### Slumdog Millionaire

If you want to see real poverty in its gritty detail, filthy grime, and even its revolting brutality, then Slumdog Millionaire is the venue. The movie swept the Academy Awards in 2010 and became an international box office sensation. The film chronicles the rise of a young boy from the slums of Mumbai to riches and romance.

For the affluent with a weak stomach, poverty is made palatable by romanticizing it. Film critic Nikhat Kazmi of the Times of India calls the movie “a piece of riveting cinema, meant to be savored as a Cinderella-like fairy tale…It was never meant to be a documentary on the down and out in Dharavi [the slum].”4 The critics and its own publicity materials branded it a feel-good movie. The desperate squalor of poverty is but an exciting backdrop for a traditional rags-to-riches fable.

Columnist Anand Giridharadas of the New York Times wrote that the movie portrays “a changing India, with great realism, as something India long resisted being: a land of self-makers, where a scruffy son of the slums can, solely of his own effort, hoist