

Nominations for the Best Underdog Picture Are...and the Winner is...

A review of the film



Slumdog Millionaire

(2008)

Danny Boyle (Director)



Reviewed by

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If Hollywood's heartfelt endorsement of a film accurately reflects the passions of popular culture, evidence supports the hypothesis that we are collectively in love with the underdog. At this writing, the quintessential underdog story, *Slumdog Millionaire*, has been nominated for 10 Academy Awards and recently won awards in the four Golden Globe categories in which it was nominated. The rags-to-riches struggle of Jamal, one of three orphaned Indian children representing the poorest of the world's poor, is capturing a worldwide following.

Adding to the underdog tale illustrated in the film is the story of the movie's distribution and release. The first American distributor for *Slumdog* was hit hard by the economic downturn and was forced to stop operations before the film was released. Desperately looking to unload the film, the company sold the distribution rights. However, the purchaser bought only half of the rights, acquiring them for a very limited North

American release. The new distributors doubted that a film set in the squalor of a Mumbai, India, slum could ever have broad appeal. The decision for full distribution came only after the limited release provoked an unprecedented amount of word-of-mouth “buzz” and extremely positive responses at the film festivals where it was shown. *Slumdog* easily could have gone to early DVD oblivion and been lost forever, but instead it is this year’s Cinderella film, and it is fast becoming an international sensation. Talk about an underdog winner!

Slumdog, of course, is just the latest in a long history of films glorifying the underdog. Underdog movies are a staple for Hollywood, and it seems everyone has his or her own list of favorite underdog films. For us, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Star Wars*, *Rocky*, *Forrest Gump*, *Hoosiers*, and *Seabiscuit* come immediately to mind. But *Slumdog* may become the underdog movie of all time, and on the basis of recent social psychology research, it is easy to see why. Research suggests that we are attracted to those in a lower social position when they are vulnerable, struggling, and are treated unjustly, yet represent noble causes.

Previous lines of social psychology research have shown that people are not always attracted to the underdog. For instance, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that people protect their self-esteem by aspiring to emulate and associate themselves with high-status persons or entities. This tendency is reinforced when our self-interest is involved. We may not support the opening of megastores like Wal-Mart, as we think that they cause smaller, local merchants to go out of business. However, when such big-box stores open in our community, we shop at them, supposedly because their prices are lower (Kim et al., 2008).

Although these researchers and others (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007) recognized that protecting our self-esteem and self-interest attracts people toward the top dog and away from the underdog, there are circumstances when this is not the case. For example, in one of the Kim et al. (2008) studies participants were asked to read scenarios of a winning basketball team playing a losing basketball team or a large construction firm bidding for a job against a small construction firm. Participants were then asked to rate which team or company they would root for. Participants significantly supported the underdog in both scenarios, suggesting an attraction to the lesser competitor.

Kim et al. (2008) speculated that emotional identification with the underdog may be universal as it harkens back to childhood memories of being smaller, weaker, and, thus, vulnerable. If so, *Slumdog* taps into this rich emotional vein unabashedly. The three protagonists in the film are two brothers, Jamal and Salim Malik, and a girl, Latika, all orphaned at a prepubescent age. Although India is gradually coming out of centuries of widespread abject poverty, its society is still ill equipped to care for its tens of thousands of orphaned and homeless children. Through flashbacks, the movie depicts these young children as totally left on their own, rummaging through a Mumbai garbage dump and committing petty thievery for survival. If Kim et al.’s speculation is plausible, anyone with

any memory of his or her own childhood will have a strong emotional sympathy toward the three children caught in such a pitiful situation.

A hypothesized mitigating factor for supporting the underdog is the perception of effort attributed to the underdog's struggle. An underdog who struggles valiantly to overcome suffering, to obtain a goal, or beat the top dog in a competition is rooted far more strongly than an underdog who gives up and accepts his or her fate. Kim et al. (2008) tested this hypothesis in a clever study using animated shapes. Circles were seen trying to climb a hill—some of the circles struggling with the effort and some not struggling. The researchers found that participants both identified with and sympathized with the struggling circles significantly more than with the nonstruggling circles.

Here again the *Slumdog* heroes are portrayed as fighters and scrappers. In almost every scene the kids are running or behaving with high energy and spirit. But one of the most memorable scenes in the movie is when Salim locks Jamal inside an outside toilet. Salim thought it would be a good joke to play because a helicopter, transporting a famous Bollywood actor, had inexplicably just set down in their slum. Being trapped in the outhouse would cause Jamal to miss seeing the actor, whom he idolized. In an unforgettable depiction of pluck and determination, the young Jamal literally swims through human feces to see the movie star and get his autograph.

Vandello et al. (2007) tested the hypothesis that people's positive evaluation of the underdog is also related to deeply held beliefs about justice and fairness. By manipulating perceptions of one country's unfair power over another in a well-known conflict (i.e., between Israel and Palestine), these researchers found that support increased for the underdog when perception cues indicated that the other side had the ability to wield unfair power.

Slumdog's director, Danny Boyle, uses this injustice theme repeatedly in the film to increase sympathy for his three characters. In fact the film opens showing the main character, Jamal (played by Dev Patel), being tortured by an Indian police officer, Sergeant Srinivas (played by Saurabh Shukla). What was Jamal's crime? He successfully answered questions on the nationally televised game show, *Kaun Banega Crorepati* [Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?]. The show's host (played by Anil Kapoor) and producers suspected Jamal, now a young man employed as a poor chai-wallah (tea server) at a telephone call center, of cheating. For the workers in the call center, a chai-wallah could not possibly have answered all of the questions on his own. The torture was calculated to find out how he cheated. But, of course, it did not work because he had answered the questions honestly.

But this injustice is only one of many heart-rending injustices the film illustrates. In fact, through a series of flashbacks to explain why Jamal is playing in the game show, the movie shows that injustices define the childhood of the three characters. For example, Jamal and Salim were orphaned when marauding Hindus violently drove Muslims out of the city and killed their mother. After they were orphaned, they came under the power of criminals,

like those in *Oliver Twist*, who exploited children in their care by demanding the income they made through begging in exchange for food and shelter.

Their heinous enterprise included blinding some of the children by pouring hot liquid in their eyes; they blinded the kids who were cute and could sing well because it greatly increased their begging income. Jamal's brother, Salim, found out they had chosen Jamal to be blinded. Jamal and Salim escaped, but in doing so, left Latika behind. Although Latika also survived this episode and grew to be a beautiful young woman, she was forced to become an exotic dancer and a prostitute.

In addition to building the characters into worthy underdogs, other plot developments make *Slumdog* a very entertaining picture and make us root especially hard for the title character, Jamal. For instance, Jamal's motivation for appearing on the game show is not to win the money but to find and win over Latika, who was his childhood love interest. Therefore, his desire to win is for love and not for the money. His noble cause makes the audience root for him all the more.

But the strong emotional tie-in that Boyle hits in almost every scene is the underdog status of the three protagonists. It is almost as if he were specifically referencing the underdog psychology research. Did we feel emotionally manipulated by Boyle's effort? Perhaps we did. Did we feel good and happy when we left the theater? Definitely we did. Do we recommend the film? By all means. It is definitely our pick for the Best Underdog Film for 2008 and maybe for all time.

References

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