

CUNNAMULLA

DENNIS O'ROURKE INTERVIEWED BY RUTH CULLEN

RC: One of the astounding things about Cunnamulla is the level of the performances that you were able to get and that obviously is to do with the relationship that you had with the people in the film.

I've been saying it for a long time now — since *The Good Woman of Bangkok* — that the critical thing in documentary filmmaking is the relationship between the filmmaker and her or his subjects. This relationship informs what sort of film it is, how the audience can read it, what the audience can accept as “truthful” or believable. It creates the sense of realness, or verisimilitude — the sense of what I call “is-ness”.

RC: What does it take to get that intimacy on camera?

Firstly, it takes a lot of time. You must be observant, empathetic (sometimes sympathetic) and committed to revealing those moments in time, which have a transcendent quality. You've got to be very persistent. You have to reveal the hidden conflicts or paradoxes, which will have a greater force of revelation. Always, you must have a willingness to allow situations to speak for themselves, and you must not be didactic — or, worse, self-realising.

As well, I think it's to do with the fact that I am always filming by myself so I don't have any extraneous distracting elements around me. Importantly, also it's to do with the fact that, insofar as I can, I make myself vulnerable to the people that I am filming, as they are vulnerable to me; not only do I get to know them well, they also get to know me very well.

The process of filming itself is done very casually and without drawing attention to that process. I don't deny that one must be very skilful — intuitively making a number of critical, technical and aesthetic judgments, while being casually engaged in dialogue with those you are filming. My friends in Cunnamulla were often more interested in asking me what I thought about something that had occurred down the street the night before, rather than what was happening in the filmmaking process. The one word to describe it all is engagement. You can't place yourself outside any situation and then hope to record what is inside. As Joseph Conrad said, “Before all, to see.”

RC: Before I saw Cunnamulla, I thought it would be very much the black side of town versus the white side. Yet, when I watched it, they were all mixed up even though there are very clear threads.

I've always said, “You don't make the film, the film makes you”. What you expected was, in fact, exactly my own expectation when I first went there. However, I soon understood that the reality was far more complex. I say about Cunnamulla that it is a town, where half of the people say they are white while the other half say that they are black. Jack, who had an Aboriginal mother and an Afghan father, always refers to Aboriginal people as “them”. Marto [his adopted white son] identifies as a Murrie [Aboriginal]. You only know Cara is Aboriginal when you see her with her mother. It's all mixed up, and for my film it is just not the issue.

RC: Were you conflicted about using Cara and Kellie-Anne, given that they are both so young and talking so frankly about their sex lives?

No, although there were, and are, complex issues involved. For me, the overriding issue is the way that Cara and Kellie-Anne are spoken of and abused by men and boys in the town. It's not the girls who are bad, but those around them — the hypocrites. I realise that it's a huge thing for them to be recorded, but what they admit is not going to be news to anybody in Cunnamulla. Most of the "good folks" think that the girls are, as the graffiti states, "sluts". Well the same man in the bar who's calling them sluts is also having sex with them. It's that sort of immorality and hypocrisy that I wanted to show. My role is to record certain truths — no matter how uncomfortable they are. I don't mean it pretentiously, but if artists are not able to record the realities of our lives in this way then how are we going to progress? All I can say is that there are worse things happening in these kids' lives than being in the film, and worse things will probably continue to happen, although I hope not.

RC: What qualities were you looking for in the people that you used in the film?

I was drawn toward the people who were not officials or spokespersons in the town but who were, instead, emblematic of all the issues that confront and affect people who live in places like Cunnamulla. I wanted to make a film about so-called "marginal" people. But they're not marginal in their own heads and in their own hearts, and they're not marginal to me. These are people who show their ability to express the inner condition of humanity through the description of their own, often banal, experiences... If the film has any genius, it's that... If I have succeeded then I will have made a film which is like a play that has been written out of life; the film will have gone beyond those banal events and everyday happenings to tell a story, which is universal.

I think it will be a big shock for many people in Cunnamulla, to realise the depth of understanding and feeling that people like Cara and Kellie-Anne and Paul, the young Aboriginal man, have about their own condition.

RC: But that's a toughie because you're letting the people speak but Cunnamulla is Dennis speaking. The film is your point of view ultimately, isn't it?

I wouldn't call it my point of view but it is my artefact — that is, I *made* it. I made it and the film clearly reflects my concerns and my personality, as does any work of art of any kind. A filmmaker always carries his world with him — his experiences, both personal and artistic, and both are intertwined. Each new film that I make is a project to connect my past experiences with new ones.

I'm very conscious of the various levels of privilege that exist between documentary filmmakers and their subjects. I don't enjoy it and I work very hard to destabilise that idea. That's what I did in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, and I have tried to do the same thing in *Cunnamulla* — to collapse the "secret contract", which exists between the three parties — filmmaker, subject and audience. It is an implied contract, which has the filmmaker firmly established as an authority over the subjects, so that audiences can experience the film from a safe and insulated vantage point.

RC: Most of your films have been set in other cultures. Can you talk a bit about why?

That is truly a mystery to me. Truthfully, I thought it was some failing that I had. I never got to the point where the light came on and I saw what I could do at home, until I dreamed of what was to become *Cunnamulla*. Gee, I don't know... more and more I see the universal, all the big themes, in the most unprepossessing of situations. Now I'm likely to be working with Channel 4 and the ABC on a film about landmines, which has that "epic" sense about it, but I'm really keen to make a sequel to *Cunnamulla*.

RC: In Australia? In a country town?

It's going to be set in a caravan park, somewhere on the coast. It will be a film about marriage and raising children, work (or looking for work), intergenerational conflict, money and economics, exploitation and politics... and dreams. I am calling it "*Fun*". To me, caravan parks are, in some ways, like tribal villages in Papua New Guinea. In the new year I'm going to search to find the right place, then move in and stay until I can reveal what's going on. Once again, it will be total immersion.

RC: In all your films what would you say is the one thematic thread?

I understand that there is something there that's in all of them. I know that. It's to do with the notion that life is a tragedy. Yet at the same time we're here, we have to make the best of it, we're living. I still have this notion of redemption. If there's one thing that's in all of them, it's that tragic-and-farcical sort of thing. Life is beautiful, but also tragic, and everyone just wants to be loved — ultimately.

RC: You said earlier that Cunnamulla took a lot out of you.

I grew up in Queensland, and there's that aspect of it, because there was an immediate level of similarity between the characters and me. I knew I had to make the film on their terms — you know, to see the world their way — but I had to be able to see past that. I felt strongly that there were things to be expressed concerning what it is to be Australian, and not only in Cunnamulla; yet I did not, and still do not, understand precisely what they are. But because these ideas are ineffable, it does not mean that they are any less true. I feel that it was the most difficult film that I've made — more so than *The Good Woman of Bangkok*.

RC: But you weren't involved as directly on camera.

It was really difficult because of the level of intimacy that I wanted. The word intimacy is not quite right. It's more than that because the film required *reflected* intimacy — the "filmic" intimacy, not the personal intimacy. It was, in some ways, my culture — Western Queensland culture. That's where my father came from. I already knew what was there and I couldn't rely on the ... gloss that working in a foreign culture automatically gives you.

RC: What I've always found with you, particularly in the post-production stages which is where I know you from, is that you've always known instinctively what it is that you want and that you've been able to get to that right away. The structure has evolved and come about later.*

You're right, but it's only the stuff that has that magical quality — that transcends the mere recorded moment — that is automatically selected. My way of working, or intuiting, goes right back to when I was young and had to make the choice about whether to be a criminal or an artist; and I taught myself to take still photographs. One day, I had the epiphany: I was pulling something out of the developing bath. I saw what was, probably, a mediocre photograph, which I had created. I trembled, because I realised that this image had a meaning, which I had helped to create, and that meaning was *more than me*.

RC: Sacredness?

No, not sacredness, that's too elevated a term. What I realised was that there was a way to create meaning through the recording process. I call the cameras and tape recorders my "recording angels", because angels are always listening, and they're not judgmental. You need to know how to use them very well and then have the mad intuition to recognise the moments of *verisimilitude*. These are the moments that the voice inside one's head tells you are "sacred", if you want to use

that word. They set the *tone* — the all-important tone. I'm worried about the use of the word "truth" because documentary has always been thought of as pure and unadulterated truth. Well, truth, as we know, is not a simple thing. Truth is messy. Most truths we know are subjective truths, not objective truths.

RC: God comes up a bit in the film.

I am a doubting atheist but in my conversations with people God will always come up, because I like to engage with characters in the film at the level of "What does it all mean?", "Why are we here?". It turns to God because everything I do in all my films is only addressing this ultimate question. God is dead in terms of the absolutes that we have always accepted; we are all searching for meaning, and we all want to be loved. They're the three concepts that apply to everything that I do as a filmmaker. You know how I used to toy with the idea of making fiction films? Well, now I am not the least bit interested. But I am interested in pushing this form of non-fiction (call it documentary, if you must) filmmaking, which *Cunnamulla* is... I think I've found this new avenue for the expression of my madness — my obsessions.

* Disclosure: Ruth Cullen was the co-editor on *Couldn't Be Fairer* and the sound editor on *Half Life*.