

Afterword by Dennis O'Rourke, for book to be edited by
Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton & Layleen Jayamanne,
concerning The Good Woman of Bangkok

(working title: "The Film maker and the Prostitute -
the Controversy about Dennis O'Rourke's
The Good Woman of Bangkok)

Before I went to Thailand to commence filming what became The Good Woman of Bangkok , the AFC (Australian Film Commission) and the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) both requested that I write a full description of the film I intended to make. The production funds, which were to be contributed by them, had already been guaranteed, as part of what was called a Documentary Fellowship. In principle, winning this fellowship allowed me to make a documentary film about any subject and in any form that I wished, and I was not obligated to provide a treatment or script. So I resisted their insistent request.

It was known that I planned to make a film with prostitutes in Thailand, because I had produced a budget and a schedule and those other pieces of paper which bureaucracies need; but I was determined to approach this particular film without the restrictions of having to comply with a pre-written statement of its content. Indeed, I was going to make the film which, in all other circumstances, would never be approved for funding.

The powers-that-be at the ABC and the AFC were wary of my attitude. Before they would hand over any of the production money, they wanted to see a treatment and a synopsis - they wanted details of "the form, the method and the likely result". They insisted that qualifications placed in the contract, or I would not be able to commence. Eventually, I had to comply; and in February of 1989, in staid, suburban Canberra, with my children sleeping in the next room and my bags packed for Thailand, I sat down and wrote, in a slightly ironic tone, the following statement-of-intent.

*"Prudishness is a kind of avarice,
and the worst of all." - Stendhal*

Not to compare, but I hope this film will be like *Waiting for Godot*. By this I mean to say: nothing happens, but it happens very quickly.

The "subject matter", loosely defined, is the phenomenon of the sex industry in Thailand - that section of it which caters to foreigners.

The sanctimonious television documentaries have been made (how many times?), always with thinly-disguised prurient intent. Their makers can be seen wringing their hands - media-wise - as they point to "the shame and horror of it all". It is a titillating shame and titillating horror; not the horror and shame of those Thai women who are the subject of their pronouncements and the object of their desires.

My film will be about the poetics of prostitution; about that elemental quandary, the struggle between the moral

and the carnal, the spirit and the flesh. My film will seek to invert the situation where, in speaking of prostitution, we proceed to hide behind bankrupt moral codes. Those who wring their hands in front of and behind their cameras are the same who, after their day of production, return to the bars and brothels where they can experience their guilty pleasures. Are they oblivious to the discordance, to the lie?

The "approach", loosely defined, will be that I shall meet bar girls/prostitutes in a manner which is (ostensibly) no different than any of the other 5,000 foreign men who, each night, crowd the one-mile-square area known, infamously, as Patpong: I know she is a prostitute and she knows I am her client, the rest of our relationship - however short, however long - is meant to be predicated on this simple equation of sex and power.

Starting from this worst-possible condition, as a film maker, I shall track the evolution of our relationship from a situation of absolute sexual intimacy (albeit fake) to the situation where two people - so different, yet the same - united in their shared experiences of helpless victimisation - become friends who understand each other, if only a little.

The "method", loosely defined, is to depict the lives of these women whom I meet in Patpong - the totality of their lives, not only their work. (Their work as prostitutes is less contentious than my work as a film maker.)

"Nothing happens but it happens very quickly." The film will consist of all kinds of minutiae - banal moments, scrappy conversations, idle gazes, anonymous streets, ordinary life - all precariously balanced on a base which is the concept of our shared victimisation.

I do not believe in God but I do understand the concept of God. I wish to understand this phenomenon as He or She would; I wish to depict it as He or She would see it: with humility and compassion, and without all of the 'moral lies'.

Prostitution as a metaphor for capitalism, here played out across the borders of race and culture; prostitution as a metaphor for sexual relationships, here with the additional relish of this other great taboo - we are all implicated in some way.

And the "result", loosely defined, is something about which I cannot write.

Despite the fact that the film is, inevitably, not quite the same as the statement (and even if the statement now seems to me to be quite preachy and pretentious), I am glad I was compelled to write it before I ventured into the precincts of Bangkok's demi-monde. I am pleased because I have a record of my thinking at that very chaotic time; and I believe it is some kind of evidence to refute the nasty accusations and insinuations which have been made.

The practical arrangements for the making of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* were much the same as those which had applied in the production of my

earlier films - I was the cinematographer and sound recordist and, for most of the time, I worked alone. I filmed over a period of nine months and every day's events were tied to the film in one way or another. Afterwards, with a few of us working in an environment which was hermetic and obsessive, the editing and post-production took another nine months. Before the editing was completed, I returned to Thailand and filmed (or filmed again) a few scenes which had suggested themselves during the post-production.

I want to place on record something of my credo for film making: always, for it to work, the filming process must be an ordeal of contact with the perceived reality - I must place myself within the flux of what I'm attempting to film - in order to discover the 'authenticity' of people and places and to fix my emotional perspective within a social and political process which is not academic. What is 'authentic' is only my perception - the process is empirical, emotional, instinctive. I always try not to be rational but instead to trust my emotions and intuition. In fact, I think you have to be irrational, because when you try to be rational the true meaning and the beauty of any idea will escape you.

In Bangkok, I certainly met my own criteria for irrationality; but there was this plan . The plan was to make this film which, inter alia , addressed and provided a critique of the notions of 'higher claims to truth' in the documentary (notions which are virtually encoded in the name). That was my starting-point.

In my film work of recent years I have sought to resist and repudiate the lure of that self-gratification which comes from making earnest statements-to-the-converted. These days, I feel more rewarded when certain sanctimonious critics are upset or outraged by my films, rather than when they smugly praise them. My acts of provocation and my deliberately-committed heresies are a way of flushing out these frightened ones, who are not interested in the expression of an ultimate 'truth' with all of its messy and upsetting ramifications, but who prefer a more palatable 'truth', which is their fantasy of it (and which they want to prescribe for the rest of us).

I think it is critical that both film makers and film viewers be rid of the fantasy that a documentary film can be some kind of pure and non-problematic representation of reality, and that its 'truth' can be conveniently dispensed and received, like a pill to cure a headache. So many documentary films, despite their political and cultural pretensions, primarily serve to make the audience feel good - feel part of an enlightened elite - as though they have achieved some cachet or absolution for themselves by the simple act of watching a film.

And it follows that those who watch-to-feel-good will identify with their omniscient heroes: the film makers, who thus become the heroic protagonists in their own films, even if they are never seen or heard. Their positive characterisation is no less effective because it is implied; they are alluded to by the sense of their own cleverness and goodness and worth; alluded to by their theological position as the deliverers of the important and politically correct message - the 'good news' (or, more fashionably, the 'correct' version of the bad news).

But, if we really want to understand the world in which we live, we must oppose simplicity and slogans and, instead, seek meaning in chaos and complexity. Any tendency to place the film makers on a pedestal, whether coming from the consumers or the practitioners, will subvert this goal.

When used as the generic noun to describe the films I make, the word 'documentary' is misleading. However, as an adjective the word is useful; and *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is certainly a documentary film, but it is also a fiction, because it is an artefact - that is: s o m e o n e made it . This is why *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is self-consciously named "a Documentary Fiction film".

Documentary Fiction, as I define it, is a form of cinema which relies on some of the techniques of the traditional documentary, but which ignores and then subverts the naturally accepted implications of truth and meaning which these techniques foster. Documentary Fiction is cinema which feels like life - and which is taken from real lives - but which, nevertheless, clearly asserts its own aesthetic - one which is recognisable as being related to the fiction film. The authenticity of the film - its 'truth' is entirely subjective.

The problem of representation - how to articulate the relationship of the subject to the author to the audience - is the fundamental challenge which faces any storyteller. In my films, the observed reality - the subjective experience of observation - is coated with a 're-description' which becomes another narrative and which offers to the viewer a more complex experience. In *The Good Woman of Bangkok* , this other narrative - one of difficult relationships, dark and forbidden ideas, conflicting emotions and ethical contradictions - informs every frame of the finished work.

The re-description - the process wherein the film reflects on the voyeuristic embrace of the spectacle which it throws up - can be both the meaning and the subject-matter; because, in a profound sense, the viewer and maker and the subject can be one-and-the-same. We can be embarrassed to be inside and outside the frame and the film making process ... simultaneously. For me, this experience of self-recognition and embarrassment is the subject-matter.

The primary narrative of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* was created so as to partially conform with, and refer to, the myths of earlier, mostly grand narratives - colonial, popular and literary (Puccini, "60 Minutes Reports on the Shocking Sex Trade" and the *Emanuelle* movies, if you like). However, I believe that the film escapes the limiting traditions of any 'grand narrative' - by simultaneously and overtly believing and disbelieving in them. To this end, the film includes a character - "the film maker" - who reflects me and others of my race and class, gender and profession, but who is not me (the person who was/is me was/is very different; because every day and every night I had to make the film). Through the description of this character, I took the rhetorical but sincere position that "the film maker" was implicated and guilty along with the sex tourists.

"The film maker" (and Dennis O'Rourke) procured a prostitute, Aoi, who initially knew him as just another in a succession of more than one thousand of the 'clients' she had endured over the years. Before she learned of his project and agreed to cooperate in the making of the film, she saw him and judged him as what he was behind the mask of his "professionalism" - her first and abiding sense of this man was that he was as bad as all the rest. Any notion of moral superiority on my part (and I don't mean "the film maker") was demolished in one act of sex-for-money. To start from this "worst-possible condition" was essential. How else could I have made this film?

Indeed, for the film to conform to the 'documentary tradition', and to have simply excoriated the practice of what is a timeless and universal habit of humankind, but from the moral high-ground, would indeed be to reinforce the old rhetoric of moral lies - witness the prurience of every other documentary film and current affairs program that has been made about prostitution in Thailand (or anywhere?).

In the transaction of meaning in a documentary film there is this de facto agreement - a 'secret contract' between the author and the spectator - where it is accepted that the film maker is the heroic protagonist, as well as being a 'moral shield' for the spectator. This secret contract allows for a comfortable, disengaged, and highly moralistic (prurient?) reading of almost all documentary films. In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, by deliberate acts of transgression and exposure (fictional and real), I contrived to expose the secret contract, and to collapse this insulating critical-distance which normally exists between the documentary film maker and his audience.

In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, the character of the film maker is at once abstracted to be an everyman - a presence embodied in the gaze of the camera - a conscience or identity whose values the spectator is forced to wrestle with in the course of watching the film ... and experiencing the disconcerting notion that there is no 'safe place' from where he or she can regard what is being played out on the screen. The messiness of lives and the power of feelings (Aoi's and mine), plus the dangerous paths of sexual desires (yours and mine) are not willed away because of the evil social context of prostitution.

Even as we detest them, we can recognise the hopelessness of the experience of these Western sex-tourists - characters in a film - metaphorically lost in their grotesque fantasies. Just as we can admire her Stoic heroism, we can recognise the contradictory forces at work in Aoi's portrayal of herself, and we can sense that her motivations and desires are not completely revealed by what she says. We can sense the malevolence of the Patpong streets, the bars, the Rose Hotel; we can recognise the imperfections of "the film maker" character in his naive, imperialistic and morally impossible stances; and we can recognise something about ourselves. This last act of recognition is surely the most painful. (Especially, it seems, for professional critics.)

In this post-religious age, we modern humans desire to inhabit a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished - we have, as Milan Kundera puts it, "an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before we understand." This dogmatic imperative is well served, if not well understood by most documentary film makers; and I think it is the guiding rule of most critics. They are inclined to shoot first; and, as Jean-Luc Godard famously said "critics are like soldiers who fire on their own men."

Nevertheless, and despite my expectations that the film would engender some controversy, I was stunned and hurt when the avalanche of vitriolic and ad hominem criticism first appeared. In particular, I was distressed that the layers of meaning in the film - the re-descriptions - were usually (and studiously) overlooked. In the negative reviews, all the beautiful-but-painful insights that the film offered were ignored - overshadowed by the impetus to see the film as some kind of evidence of my crimes - both physical and ideological - committed in Bangkok. The fact of the opposing praise and the positive reviews was not much solace.

I am always amazed when so-called 'professional' critics make conclusive statements about my film-making 'ethics', or my moral flaws, by citing statements or events in the film - scenes which only I could have decided to include. They do so to support their simplistic ideas about representation (and to assert their moral superiority) - all the while ignoring that it was my powerful decision to create and include the material to which they refer. A scene where Aoi complains or shoots a dirty glance at the camera is all they need to condemn the whole project. Would they have been so perspicacious if I had left all these constructed references to myself and to the process of film making on the cutting-room floor? (Of course, it was so naive of me to set up, photograph and then include the scene where Aoi is lying on the bed dressed only in a bath towel, not expecting that it be perceived by the critics as 'voyeuristic'. I really thought they would take it as a sign that the film maker was politically correct!)

The point-of-reference for these critics is journalism - the news and the current-affairs programmes - the most crude form of storytelling that exists - official storytelling by men-and-women-in-suits, with their Boy Scout code of 'ethics'. A couple of three-year-olds playing together will tell more sophisticated stories.

On the subject of journalism, no one should assume the veracity of the descriptions of my behaviour or the direct quotations of my speech which are included in some of the articles which have been written. I did not write them, endorse them or authorise them. They often say more about their authors than about me. As true representations of my thoughts and feelings, they are forgeries. Other criticism could be written about some of these articles and their authors could defend themselves.

The inscrutable aphorism by Stendahl, which, back in 1989, I intuited was relevant to my as-yet-unmade project, seemed prophetic when I was faced with some of the prudish responses to the film. What astounded me, and still astounds me, is that the end-point of most of the sanctimonious criticism of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* was my starting-point. I wanted to make a film about the evil which occurs when spiritually impoverished Western men travel to Bangkok, where they act out their fantasies of imperial, racial and sexual superiority; I specifically wanted to show how men have so consistently used women as a commodity; and I wanted to comment on the prurient and self-defeating way in which the phenomenon of sex-tourism is represented in the media. But I was a man - a Western man, a film maker - who was going to make this film. That was my dilemma - so I made an ironic narrative with myself as a character admitting, "Yes, I share complicity in all of this" ... instead of playing the role of the crusading film maker or journalist, who stands outside the brothel and says, "Isn't this disgusting! We know who are guilty here; now we will leave."

Like the play by Bertholt Brecht which inspired the title, the film is an ironic parable about the impossibility of living a good life in an imperfect world. It is also about the voyeuristic tendencies which are inherent in all film making and film viewing. It was my hope that, as with Brecht, the work would confront its audience with a vision of themselves, thus forcing the consideration of how personal sexuality affects our political and philosophical beliefs. But so many of the critics, when forced to confront the message, including this dilemma-of-identification which implicated them, chose the easy way out and decided, instead, to kill the messenger.

It is not really possible to anatomise or methodically refute individual criticisms; because to do so would require that I precisely define what I

have done in creating the film, and this would be like a cat chasing its tail. How I actually make my films is a mystery to me; when I watch at a film which has my name on it I certainly do not think that the author is exactly the same person who is me watching the film. However, I can respond to some of the political issues which have been raised in many of the commentaries.

Those critics who take the Manichean view of first world/third world relations and of culture relations (they are often the same who have a proto-feminist concept of gender relations) always speak of colonialism. They mean, by definition, the white-vs-brown colonialism. They mean Dennis O'Rourke versus Aoi. They cannot imagine or admit the reality of Thailand, which has never been colonised by the West but wherein the most gross forms of economic and cultural colonialism are practised by the Bangkok Thai/Chinese elites who exploit the poor (and racially different) peasants of the North and North East of Thailand, in every conceivable way, including in the business of prostitution.

Aoi's village, and Aoi's family, and Aoi's history - they all exist in a state of miserable synergy with the phenomenon which is the modern city of Bangkok and its fantastic, grotesque appeal to the sex-tourists of the West. To make an artistic work which is a succinct statement and critique of this situation, the invented stereotypes (the good-hearted prostitute and the imperialistic film maker), and the binary oppositions (the bars of Bangkok and the quiet rural village), are both necessary. They are neither naive nor facile as some of the commentaries imply.

There has been a lot of talk about "self reflexivity" and "informed consent" in certain circles where the documentary film is taken seriously. If the film maker is to behave in an ethical way, informed consent is considered essential. But what is it? It certainly isn't getting someone to sign a release form. Who knows how any film will turn out? Even after a film is completed and shown, its effect cannot be fully gauged. To completely overcome the formal imbalance of power (which is inherent in the very idea of creating any form of art), and to have informed consent, is, I believe, impossible. Even if one makes a film about one's mother, I don't think it's possible. And self reflexivity is a quality - it is not a prescription.

A key and distinguishing point about this film is this: not only did I get to know Aoi very well - a normal thing to happen when one makes a documentary film about a person, and it's always implied - but that she got to know me very well. It was confused, compromised and difficult, but there was love - a melding - which was at the heart of the project. Surely, it is because of the emotional imbroglio which Aoi and I allowed ourselves to create that the film exerts its powerful and unsettling effect. We were exposed to each other - dependent on each other - in deep conflict - and this made us, for a time, equals in each other's eyes. Aoi realised she had the power to hurt me, in both emotional and practical ways (although the two were, for the most part, inseparable). I would wait for weeks in a dingy hotel room, while she, was away with other customers - some of whom came to visit Aoi, their "Thai girlfriend", every year; and there was always the lurking presence of her Thai lover (and part-pimp) who resented Aoi's involvement with me and who threatened to have me shot if I ever tried to film him.

The project was always at risk; I could never be certain that Aoi would stay around (the rice farm was purchased and given to Aoi in the first few months, before any substantive filming had occurred). Along with the melding I wrote about earlier, that was a strategy to force our relationship

beyond the sterile and formally unbalanced arrangement which normally exists between a film maker and a subject (especially in this context). Also I know that Aoi could not have spoken so revealingly about her life and feelings, and about our differences (for inclusion in a film which she understood would be seen widely) unless there was also the co-equality of power which intimacy creates.

As a self-understood, axiomatically-unethical film maker, every day and every night, in Bangkok or in Aoi's village, I would think about the fundamental inequality which existed between myself and this woman. I also understood the benefits, in terms of the emotional tensions in the film, which would derive from our intimacy and co-dependence. My 'ethical' concern was no more than what Immanuel Kant said about lying: if the act takes away any of the autonomy of the other, it is always wrong.

I did not attack or reduce Aoi's autonomy by the making of this film. Without seeing me in the film, or even hearing me; without any external evidence of the actual arrangements - personal, financial, practical - which existed between us; and relying only on the qualities of Aoi's responses and performance in front of my camera, I believe that this shows. And if it doesn't, then I have failed.

That so many didn't agree is still a sadness for me. I can't bring myself to read any of the reviews again; but I do remember that not everyone decided I was a bastard. I, for one, have never ceased to have misgivings and contradictory responses concerning the whole experience; however, I don't regret the decision to make the film; I celebrate it.

Nevertheless, as I postulated back in February of 1989, a prostitute's work is less contentious than a film maker's. Because my primary aim and motivation was to, in some way, satisfy my ego by making the film, I cannot claim the ethical high-ground. And, besides, there are too many rats on there already.

Dennis O'Rourke, 14 August 1996, copyright © - 4,400 words (approximately)