

ON THE MAKING OF “*Cannibal Tours*”

by Dennis O'Rourke

To explain my film making process is a bit like a cat chasing its tail; in any case, I confess that how I actually *make* my films is a complete mystery to me. I can sit with you, looking at a film which has my name on it and gaze in wonderment at what is transpiring on the screen; but I certainly will not think the author is exactly the same person who is me, watching that film.

The act of creating a documentary film is one of synthesis upon synthesis. Every stage of the film making process – from imagining through filming through all the stages of editing – becomes the modifier of previous stages, in both direct and subtle ways. Also, for it to work, the filming process must be ‘an ordeal of contact with reality.’ I must place myself within the perceived reality of what I am 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.

I believe that documentary films should not exist outside of the reality they attempt to depict. The magic of the documentary film is that one can start to create with no idea of the direction of the narrative and concentrate all thinking on the present moment and thing. It is important, when you make a film, not to be rational but instead to trust your emotions and intuition. In fact, you have to be irrational, because when you try to be rational the true meaning and the beauty of any idea will escape you.

I think the story is much less important than the ideas and the emotions that surround it. I try to give you my idea of a palpable 'truth', but which is presented comfortably, imperceptibly, as an illusion. I try to concentrate on the small, intimate details; using reduction and understatement. I like to think that, in my films (as in *Waiting for Godot*), nothing really happens but it happens very quickly.

All this is made possible by those beautiful recording angels - cameras and tape recorders – who watch and listen for me while I stumble, trance-like, through the field of ideas. Like the ideal tourist, I travel on a journey of discovery – on an unmarked road, to see where it leads. And

I travel not in order to return; I cannot return to the point-of-departure because, in the meantime, I have been changed. This is why I say: "I don't make the film, the film makes me."

I find that most documentary films are painful to watch, because their makers are so certain of the factual truth of their productions, and seemingly so unaware of the time bomb which the notion of truth contains. As well, they are often so ignorant of their real place in the process of audiences' readings of their work. In my film work of recent years I have always sought to resist and repudiate the lure of that self-gratification which comes from making the statements-to-the-converted, which most documentaries tend to be.

So many documentary films, despite other 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 the audience identifies with their omniscient hero, the filmmaker. (I know about this phenomenon, because I have noticed it in the reactions to some of my films.)

The public role of the committed documentary filmmakers thus becomes, essentially, one

where they become the heroic protagonist of their own films, even though these filmmakers are not necessarily seen or heard. But, of course, they are the real heroic protagonists in their films. 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 likely, the sanctioned version of the bad news).

The corollary is that, if a filmmaker deliberately sets out to collapse this comfortable and secret contract between the audience and himself (such as I did in my film *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, which takes the rhetorical-but-sincere position that the filmmaker is, in his own way, as culpable and as implicated as the sex-tourists depicted in the film), then, his formerly adoring audience, when forced to confront this dilemma of identification which implicates them, will chose the easy way out, and kill the messenger.

I am convinced that humans are not interested in reality or truth, in themselves. What we seek is truth, which is our fantasy of it (just listen to the discourses in “*Cannibal Tours*”). And yet, if we really want to understand the world in which we live, we must oppose simplicity and slogans and seek meaning in chaos and complexity.

Unfortunately, the level of critical debate is so basic that most filmmakers seem not to be conscious of what they're doing: that they are performing the role of secular gurus to their constituencies who do not, or cannot, differentiate between slogans and ideals. I detest the theological pretensions of those filmmakers, who seem to me like Don Quixote tilting at windmills; and I reject the whole notion of the documentary filmmaker as a culture-hero. This role is ably filled by the reporters from the current affairs shows – those men-and-women-in-suits, with their arrogant notions of authority and their Boy Scout code of ethics – those who give us “official storytelling.”

Jean Baudrillard has made the point that it is precisely when they seem the most faithful, true and accurate that images are the most diabolical. It is when images start to contaminate reality – when they conform to reality only to distort it, when they telescope reality, when they short-circuit reality – that they can transmit true knowledge. But it seems to me that the facile images and stories that now proliferate in our cinemas and on our television screens are driving the more powerful, true and complex ones out of circulation.

This problem of representation – how to articulate the relationship of the author to the

subject to the audience – is the fundamental challenge which faces every storyteller. It is critical that filmmakers and film viewers be rid of the fantasy that the documentary film is a pure and non-problematic representation of reality, and that its 'truth' can be conveniently dispensed and received – like a pill to cure a headache.

I make documentary films (as opposed to fiction films) not because I think they are closer to the truth, but because I am convinced that, within a reinvented form of the non-fiction film, there is a possibility of creating something of very great value – a kind of cinema-of-ideas, which can affect the audience in a way that no Hollywood-style theatrical entertainment films can. I make documentary films because I believe in a cinema, which serves to reveal, celebrate and enlighten the condition of the human spirit and not to trivialise or abase it. I don't do it to provide information to people; I do it to touch people and to provoke and astound them, and to make the truth that we *already* know more real to us.

“*Cannibal Tours*” is certainly a documentary film but it is also *a fiction* because it is an *artefact*, that is: someone *made* it. The making of art is, after all, only artifice – playing with the undifferentiated mess of life to get a little

product. But this can be *both* the meaning and the subject matter. In a profound sense the viewer and the subject can be one-and-the-same. We can be embarrassed to be inside and outside the frame (and the process of film making), simultaneously. This experience of self-recognition and embarrassment *is* the subject matter.

In “*Cannibal Tours*” we can recognise in these Western tourists both the hopelessness of their experience *and we can recognise ourselves*. We can also recognise (at least sub-consciously) the tourists’ implicit understanding that anyone who will see them in the film shares their sense of hopelessness, in the face of such a futile search for utopian meaning, which is their touristic experience.

I can only touch on some of the ideas that influenced me during the making of the film and I will confine my remarks to tourism in traditional societies, because this is where I have some experience. However, I can imagine that what applies in Papua New Guinea does also apply in many other places in the Pacific and around the world, including even, some which are in the developed world.

It must be stated that most of the theoretical ideas only registered with me when interested

people brought them to my attention, long after the film was completed. Firstly, I would like to quote from a review of my film by Professor Dean MacCannel. Professor MacCannell wrote the seminal book *The Tourist*, which was first published in 1976, I read it only in 1989, when he sent me a copy after he had seen my film. I have often speculated, “What if I had read this wonderful book before I made “*Cannibal Tours*” ? Would the film be better or worse? In keeping with my philosophy of filmmaking I am sure – perversely sure – that it was better to read the book after the film was made.

This is part of what Professor MacCannell wrote:

“It is disheartening that any group of human beings, simply caught in the eye of the camera, could appear to be so awkward and in such bad faith. It is to O’Rourke’s great credit that he does not simply leave us with these disturbing images. The film quietly provides answers to the questions it raises, and to do this O’Rourke goes to a psychoanalytical level. Freud does not speak here directly, except perhaps in the final scene where the Bette Midler-type American woman climbs in the plane brandishing her five realistically carved dildos (“I get to ride back with these in my lap!”). It is the camera, which throughout assumes the role of the old paternal

analyst, steady, listening, silent, pretending to be non-judgemental...

“A lesson of the film is that the New Guineanans experience their myths as myths, while the tourists experience their myths as symptoms and hysteria. An old man tells the story of the New Guinean reactions to the first ships carrying German colonialists: “Our dead ancestors have arrived! Our dead have come back.” and he continued with a smile, “Now when we see tourists, we say the dead have returned. That’s what we *say*. We don’t seriously believe they are our dead ancestors - but we say it!” One does not find among the tourists any similar lightness of sensibility...

“This is what frightened me most about the film. The tourists, throughout, seemed incapable of a conscious detachment from their values, which was so evident a feature of the New Guinean images and discourse. The tourists’ detachment takes the form of repression and denial of the myth of modernity so it necessarily expresses itself always as an out-of-control force leading to non-ritual violence. The New Guineanans do not see this difference between themselves and the Europeans. They rigorously maintain there is no difference with the single exception that the Europeans have the money and they don’t. This film is a reminder that the task of anthropology

is far from done - we have yet to explain ourselves.

There are certain statements about tourism, which I find interesting in the context of the film. Claude Lévi-Strauss said "It is the differences between cultures that makes their meetings fruitful. But this exchange leads to progressive uniformity." The second part is clear, but what does he mean by 'fruitful'? If he means commercially fruitful, I might agree. As the village leader says, "They want the photographs, so they pay" (even if what they pay is a small fraction of what they pay for one Gin-and-Tonic on board the ship). If he means sexually, even romantically, fruitful, then I saw some evidence of that between the Papua New Guinean ship's crew and some of the more adventurous female passengers.

But I saw little fruitful interchange of any other kind, such as cultural, educational or spiritual. As the old villager, Camillus, states in the film: "Now we live between two worlds... All we know is that they are from another country. We sit here confused while they take pictures of everything."

I suppose it's an improvement on one hundred years ago, when the villagers thought the Europeans were from another planet, and I can

see that the voyeuristic experience in tourism works both ways. On the Sepik River, where tourism is a relatively new phenomenon, the natives still do experience the thrill of looking at the tourists. It is for this that the film begins with a self-composed epigram: "There is nothing so strange in a strange land as the stranger who comes to visit it."

Since ours is a society – now a global society – which strains to reach certain objectives, of which profit towers above all the others, it is obvious that tourism as a Twentieth Century phenomenon and ‘leisure activity’ is strongly, intensely, utilised to this end: profit. Following the laws of capitalism, in order to satisfy and *capitalise on* the demand for leisure, this demand is itself stimulated, promoted and, at times, totally created so that the tourist business can continue to exist. This leads to the situation depicted in “*Cannibal Tours*” - the commodification of the actual *act of living* of a group of people. This, to my way of thinking, has to be less than ‘fruitful’.

But this quest for profit is not only economic profit; it often is an ideological profit. I mean the achievement of influence by one culture (the culture of the West and all post-industrial nations) over the people of the underdeveloped countries who are visited. As my film suggests,

modern-day tourism is, in a sense, the successor to the colonial expeditions. It is interesting to note how tourists from countries, which had colonies, tend to favour their former colonies as holiday destinations.

This could be due to the fact of a shared language and some inherited practices (the baking of baguettes), but I feel it is more due to nostalgia for that ‘romantic’ colonial era. There is a nostalgic wish to revisit ‘the scene of the crime’. As the German tourist says in the film, “I met a native man who was something like a mayor, he explained how his village had been under the control of the Germans, and what a good time it was!”

The raw display of economic and technological power, in the form of television American television, (see my film *Yap...How Did You Know We'd Like TV?*), which is transmitted by satellite to the remotest villages of the Third World, is given flesh and concreteness when the tourists – the living examples from the Hollywood sitcoms – step ashore. One hundred years ago they may have been perceived as dead ancestors but now the natives believe they are the relatives of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sharon Stone.

The villagers know that when it comes to

appreciating their culture the average tourist cannot go much closer towards understanding it than a certain condescending curiosity. They realise that, at best, to the Western tourists they are merely picturesque (“... they take pictures of everything”). Therefore, it is reasoned, to be taken seriously and on equal terms they must cease being picturesque and replace traditional customs, behaviour and clothing by things Western. It is a new form of colonialism.

How can young men and women from the Sepik River villages fully believe that their cultural way of life is satisfactory in the face of this juggernaut? Europeans, the Japanese, Australians, Brazilians, the Chinese – the rest of the world – cannot resist it – they watch American TV, eat American food, play American sports, wear American clothes; and they have allowed their antiquities and great public places and rituals to become tourist theme parks. An American woman while climbing Greek ruins said: “You’d think, with all these tourists around, that they would put in an elevator here.”

The promoted idea of tourism as ‘a dialogue between cultures’ is, I believe, a myth; because there exists such an economic and cultural disparity between the protagonists and all human encounter is inevitably distorted.

Another obvious reason is that the actual tourist encounters with the people *who are the culture* are too short - squeezed into the three-week annual holiday and the 'free days for shopping' before going home.

The occasional word is exchanged – someone gives directions, a tip is paid – and people stare at each other, but what else? The tourists who wish to engage naturally find themselves in the company of the local people who are the most confidently acculturated – hotel staff, tour guides, trinket sellers, prostitutes – those who are relatively well-off and who profit through the cultural naivety and confusion of the tourists. Meanwhile, the truly poor get very little. Some would claim this as 'progress', in the sense of modernisation and development. However rapid social change and cultural transformation is traumatic and it causes more havoc and damage to the society than can be offset by any improvement in the balance-of-trade statistics.

Mr Claude Lévi-Strauss also claimed that in order for the Western world to continue to function properly it must constantly get rid of vast quantities of waste matter, which it dumps on less fortunate peoples. He went on to say: "What travel discloses to us first of all is our own garbage, flung in the face of humanity."

The following anecdote will (only obliquely, I hope) illuminate some of what I have been saying. When I was filming "*Cannibal Tours*", I had to negotiate with the leaders of the various villages along the river and explain my film to them at a series of community meetings. This was made a little easier for me because I speak Melanesian Pidgin, and because I had a history of involvement with the Sepik Province going back to before Papua New Guinea achieved its independence. I had visited some of the villagers with Mr Michael Somare who was the first and long time Prime Minister of the country, and who is a Sepik chief.

Agreement to film was achieved easily and amicably at all places except for one village, Tambunam. This was the place where the redoubtable American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, had done a lot of her famous work. The villagers were angry, they told me that they resented how she had profited from them and that, despite promises, she had not even returned copies of her books. I promised, as I always do, to supply the village with copies of the finished film. Some of the younger men were distrustful and so, as a gesture of sincerity, I offered to provide them with several copies my other films about Papua New Guinea. The offer was accepted and I was told how useful the

videocassettes would be for showing in the community (the tourists also saw my other films – the tour operator had them on the ship and they were watched in the evenings as part of their itinerary).

A few weeks later, when I returned to the village of Tambunam with a different group of tourists, I was astounded when, as we were leaving the village, one of the tourists came up to me on the ship, proudly holding one of those videocassettes, saying: “Guess what! A young man was selling your films and I bargained him down from fifty to twenty Kina!”

Semiotics takes as a basic premise that meaning is determined by what something is not. It is established differentially. Tourism is about actively seeking out difference. Tourism therefore throws semiotic exchanges into sharp relief. The subjects as tourists, finding themselves in a location where symbolic codes are not necessarily shared, are more anxious to interpret signs and locate meaning than the subject in their own homes. If meaning is only possible within shared codes, then the tourists are challenged by incomprehension. A lack of understanding threatens the established unequal power relations which characterise tourism: between the observer and the observed, the penetrator and penetrated.

The tourists, seeking a 'natural' and unmediated experience of 'the other', and of general or exotic difference, paradoxically also demand something easily readable and well provenanced. In these circumstances, guidance in the form of clear 'markers', or a simulated experience – rich in signifiers and easily consumable – is often preferred to the more complex and problematic everyday 'real'. The tour guide leads the hapless American matron through the process of bargaining, she is propagandised to think that this is the correct way to relate, the cultural norm: "Then what do I say... 'half price?'" The villagers wearily go through this theatre-of-the-absurd, playing the role which the tour operator requests, because he (the tour operator) thinks the tourists require their trip to be like something from a 1940's Hollywood jungle movie.

It is a doomed search for meaning.

In fact, our semiotic abilities as tourists are unlikely to be any greater than our semiotic abilities in any other situation. Semiotic play is, however, the stuff of the tourist industry, which carefully nurtures and directs our conscious semiotic inclinations, exploiting the anxiety generated by immersion in an unfamiliar code. A key manifestation of that anxiety is this futile

quest for 'authenticity. There is no place to go, and so we travel, you and I; and what for? Just to imagine we could go somewhere else

One condition of modernity is that nobody knows who they are any more. "*Cannibal Tours*", like most of my work, is situated out on what I call the shifting terminus of civilisation; where modern mass-culture grates and pushes against the original, essential aspects of humanity and where much of what passes for 'values' and 'good taste' in Western culture is exposed, in stark relief, as banal and fake. Some of the actions and throwaway lines of the tourists, which seem so ridiculous in the context of the film, would pass unnoticed if uttered at home.

People have asked about the film, "Where did you get those amazing characters?" They thought that they were actors. The reality seems too fantastic. But they weren't characters in that sense; they were actual Western tourists - they were, in the jargon term, 'the real thing'. I certainly didn't find them at the Central Casting Agency and they certainly never saw themselves as amazing characters. Yet they reveal the ignorance and insensitivity that lies under the surface in all of us when we are tourists. But these are not bad people, no worse than you or me, and I am sympathetic to them all.

I've had the opportunity to show the film to many of those people in it and, with one or two exceptions, they loved the film and enjoyed recognising their own personalities. However, instructively, their reactions changed after reading newspaper commentaries or reviews, which described them as "ugly tourists". I am sure that the journalists who wrote these articles were wallowing in a state of cognitive dissonance (thinking to themselves: "I couldn't possibly behave like that!") as they identified the "ugly tourists". To be a tourist is in part to dislike tourists. Tourists can always find someone more 'touristy' than themselves to sneer at.

However, in the context of my film, all of these real tourists are, in part, invented characters and they should not vilified because of what they reveal *about us*. This can be understood by accepting that all my films are not so much 'documentary' but 'fiction', because they don't purport to be the objective truth.

In the act of first imagining a film and then photographing and editing it, all my subjects lose their authenticity as individuals and become manipulated characters in the drama that is created. The authenticity of the film – its 'truth' – is entirely subjective. There is this

amazing and simplistic notion, almost universally believed, that documentary films are found objects – a box, neatly wrapped and tied with a ribbon, with the ‘truth’ inside. I think it stems from the same idea I talked about earlier – that people really want their truths as fantasies.

I like to think of “*Cannibal Tours*” not so much as a film about the negative effect of mass tourism on fragile cultures, which should be obvious to everybody; but more as a philosophical meditation set in the milieu of this kind of tourism. The film is much more about the whole notion of 'the primitive' and 'the other', the fascination with primitivism in Western culture and the wrong-headed nostalgia for the innocence of Eden.

It is this nostalgia which fuels the Noble Savage myth. I think it stems from our quest to conceive and define that pristine state of existence we intuitively feel that we once enjoyed and have now lost. I believe that this nostalgia is inseparable from our pessimism, religious, sexual and otherwise. I believe that we all have a particular longing to be elsewhere, to be alive in a timeless past.

And the film is about voyeurism and the act of photography itself. This is described in both the

acts of the tourists and in my acts of photographing. You must see that I incorporate all kinds of self-reflexive moments, which create the embarrassment of complicity which I talked about before.

My camera will shift from a point where its/my/your gaze is privileged, 'correct', and safe – where it looks at the natives beyond the tourists who are photographing them – to a new frame, where no tourist appears, and where my camera and my act of photography replicates the tourists' framing. Then its/my/your gaze is reciprocated by the one who is preyed upon; then we feel uncomfortable, and no longer so privileged and correct.

For the tourists the camera is simply a mediating device, carving out distance between tourist and attraction, capturing experience to be re-lived in the safety of one's own living room. The artefacts, which are haggled for would not be so valued on that living room wall without the story of the so called 'authentic' transaction it took to acquire them. The only points of intersection between tourists and villagers are two: the act of photography and the act of bargaining. Is this a process, which can lead to greater understanding between cultures? There must be a better way.

It could be said that I am painting a very bleak picture of tourism as it affects traditional societies. It could be said that I have concentrated on the negative aspects of tourism; and that I have failed to consider what positive aspects there are, especially as they might be perceived by the host countries. However, the history of encounters between the West and these societies, from colonialism to tourism, has not been a happy one and I strongly believe that we must confront this reality before contemplating a progressive future for tourism. It is not a solution to leave things as they stand and hope that by incanting the mantra of “Economic Development” all these essential problems of unequal relations will evaporate.

It might be considered that this is a problem without solution – a problem as profound as original sin. Tourism forms part of a general framework of unequal North-South relations just as it is a manifestation of the impoverishment of human relations in the post-modern, post-cultural, consumerist world. In order to change this one element of the system one has to first, and the same time, change the whole.

To modify the relationships of tourism also means to modify all attitudes towards modern life – ours and theirs. For surely, if the tourists in my film had known what was in the minds of

the natives *before* they visited them, the experience for all parties would have been as Mr Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested ‘fruitful’.

If what I have written seems to you to be too personal, even solipsistic, I am sorry. As I explained at the beginning, I can only speak about things, which are within my own orbits of experience and imagination. Certainly, I do not feel that I am insulated from the problematic condition that I have described. Under the thrall of our separate agendas and desires, we are all implicated in some way.

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