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Documenting a Life

Documentary Fictions: Bibliography, Truth and Moral Lies / Dennis O'Rourke

In a ideal world, I would be able to refuse to discuss the form or the style of my films; it is inevitable that any explanations I give will be arrogant and pedantic. I am aware that what I believe I am doing is not necessarily what others will think. Each film is the result of the accretion of millions of tiny details - in image and sound and movement and text - and every one of these details can be the subject of interpretation. Also, in my ideal world I would never have to elaborate on the content of my films or their sources of inspiration because the films contain enough of what I want to say and what I believe (but not necessarily what is 'true'). The rest can only really be gossip and speculation.

In any case, how I make my films is actually a mystery to me. Sometimes I will sit, looking at a film which has my name on it, certainly not thinking that its author is exactly the same person who is me watching that film. Indeed, to try to explain the process of creativity is impossible; it is like a cat chasing its tail.

To accompany my seminar talk, I was asked to show an excerpt from *The Good Woman of Bangkok* and to choose the piece I had to watch the film - something I haven't done for a long time. I did not enjoy the experience. The film still shocks and upsets me, and this is despite the fact that I was present, looking through the camera, when those events unfolded, and despite having watched these scenes hundreds of times. So I became convinced that, in this context, it would be better if nothing was screened. Also, I felt that the showing of part of my work was a type of 'special treatment' - to somehow justify the presence of the 'odd man out' in this company of true biographers. However, the organisers of the seminar prevailed on me to include the film, because we are not here to avoid difficult issues or to pretend that they do not exist.

[At this point in the seminar an extract from *The Good Woman of Bangkok* was shown. The extract depicted aspects of a Thai prostitute's working and private life.]

So, without further caveats or apologies, I will describe my credo as it relates to my work as a film maker, especially in terms of this film. I hope that many readers have seen more than the short excerpt of the film shown at the seminar, and I also hope that what I am about to say will resonate with the ideas discussed and considered by others who spoke at this seminar.

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. The process is empirical, emotional and instinctive. I always try not to be rational but instead to trust my intuition and my feelings. In fact, I think you have to be irrational, because when you try to be rational the true meaning and the beauty of any moment or idea will escape you.

In Bangkok, I certainly met my own criteria for irrationality. After all, my starting point was to be the client of the prostitute whose life story I would later attempt to tell (in my funding proposal to the Australian Film Commission I described this as 'starting from the worst-possible condition'). But, behind the mad idea, *there was this plan*. The plan was to make a film which, among other things, addressed and provided a critique of prevailing notions of 'higher claims to truth' in the documentary film genre (notions which are virtually encoded in the term). That was my other, and earlier, starting-point.

I believe 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 un-problematic representation of reality, and that its 'truth' can be conveniently dispensed and received, like a pill to cure a headache. So 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 heresy are a way of flushing out these frightened ones who are not interested in the expression of an ultimate, indefinable idea of truth with all of its messy and upsetting ramifications. They prefer a more palatable truth, which is their fantasy of it (and which they want to prescribe for the rest of us). I think of their fantasy as something like 'the truth in a box' - giftwrapped and with a nice satin ribbon on top. You only need to delicately pull that ribbon and peek inside in order to get at it - to have 'the truth'.

It is regrettable that so many people slip into this comfortable attitude when they watch a documentary film, but I do not think the fault lies with the audiences or the so-called 'critics'. Mainly, it rests with the practitioners. So many documentary films, despite their political and cultural pretensions, primarily serve to make the audience

feel good - that is, feel part of an enlightened elite - as though they have achieved some cachet or absolution for themselves by the simple act of watching that 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 rarely or 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 story or message, 'the good news' (or, more fashionably, the 'correct' version of the bad news).

In the transaction of meaning in a documentary film there is a 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 (even prurient?) reading of almost all the documentary films.

In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, by deliberate acts of transgression and exposure, both fictional and real, I contrived to expose the secret contract, and to collapse the insulating critical distance which normally exists between the documentary film maker and his/her audience. The primary narrative of the film 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 the grand narratives - 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 and gender and profession, but *who is not me*. The person who was/is me was/is very different; because, in Thailand every day and every night, *I had to make the film*. Nevertheless, through the description of the film's main character, I took the rhetorical but sincere position that 'the film maker' was implicated and guilty (and, in a collective sense, responsible) along with the sex tourists.

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

I procured a prostitute, Aoi, who initially knew me as just another in a succession of more than one thousand of the clients she had endured over the years. Before she learned of my project to document her life story, and before she agreed to cooperate in the making of the film, she saw me and judged me as what I was behind the mask

of my so-called 'professionalism'. Her first and abiding sense of me was that I was as bad as all the rest. Any notion of moral superiority on my part was demolished in the one transaction of sex for money/money of sex. To start from this 'worst-possible condition' was essential. How else could I have made *this* film?

The conditions for the making of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* were thus established. These conditions included: the correlation of the two kinds of power-relations: client/prostitute and film maker/subject; the tensions of our competing needs (which were not to be hidden, as in almost all documentary films); the collapse of any moral pretensions concerning sex; and the atmosphere of fragile trust (which had been created because neither of us could hide behind our professional mannerisms).

A key and distinguishing point 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 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. 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.

Also, I know that Aoi could not have spoken so revealingly about her life and feelings, and about our differences (knowing her words would be included in a film which she understood would be seen widely) unless there was also the co-equality of power which intimacy creates. For the film to conform to the hallowed '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 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?).

When I use the generic noun to describe the films I make, the word 'documentary' is misleading. However, as an adjective the word is useful: *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is certainly a documentary film, but it is also a fiction because it is an artefact in that *someone 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 ignores and then subverts the naturally accepted implication of truth and meaning that these techniques foster. Documentary Fiction is cinema which feels like life and is taken from

real lives, but nevertheless clearly asserts its own aesthetic - one recognisable as being related to the fiction film. The authenticity of the film - its 'truth', if you like - 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 all my films, the observed reality - the subjective experience of observation - is coated with 're-description', which becomes another narrative and 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 ethical contradictions - informs every frame of the finished work.

Even as we detest them, we can recognise the hopelessness of the experience of these customers of Aoi - characters in a film - 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).

The re-description - the process wherein the film reflects on the voyeuristic embrace of the spectacle 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.

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'.

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 that 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 the obvious fact 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?

The point of reference for these critics is journalism - the news and the current affairs programs - 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.

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*. By telling Aoi's story in this way, 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 am a man, a Western man, a film maker, and I 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.'

Aoi's village, and Aoi's family, and Aoi's history - all exist in a state of miserable synergy with the phenomenon that is the modern city of Bangkok and its fantastic, grotesque appeal to the sex-tourists of the West. 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 members of its audience with a vision of themselves, thus forcing the consideration of how personal sexuality affects our political and philosophical beliefs. We are all implicated in some way.

To finish, and since this is a seminar on biography, let me quote one line from the very beautiful Psalm 90. I would often read this psalm in the copy of the Gideon's Bible which was in my room in the squalid Rose Hotel. Not all versions have this translation (and perhaps there is a bit of my own poetic licence here too). The words are:

We live our lives as a tale that is told.

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