The same is true of class. The film's images of post-colonial domination are also depicted in class terms internal to the West, as well as between the West and the 'other culture' represented in the film. For example, it is the Western working class which inherits the role of colonial rapist: the brutish client of the Bangkok whore exhibits behaviour appropriate to his low social status. (In fact, in the film, there is a curious affinity between emasculated Thai men and the brutishly sexual Western working class, linked together in an inchoate way by their social status.) The Western middle class (i.e. the filmmaker) is only there to orchestrate affairs, to pass judgment from a superior position, to intervene when things run out of control.

JEANNIE MARTIN teaches in humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Dennis O'Rourke's remarkable achievement with his documentary fiction, The Good Woman of Bangkok, is a challenge to the present state of documentary filmmaking. Its exploratory and subjective treatment of third world prostitution contrasts vividly with the moralising, thesis-driven approach of so many of today's social documentaries. In making it, O'Rourke has deliberately renounced the overdetermined way of working in which you first do your 'objective' research, then piece together your 'objective' film—rarely stopping to consider what ideological preconceptions and unconscious projections you impose upon the material in order to fulfil your thesis. Given the way most social documentaries are made, it seems quite incredible that they still present themselves, and are generally perceived by their audiences, as virtually unmediated representations of reality.

Theoretically most film makers admit that every documentary film is constructed as fiction—albeit a fiction unlike any other—but Dennis O'Rourke is one of the few prepared to come to grips with this proposition. A highly self-conscious 'artist', his interests constitute a relentless obsession to, at once, deepen his exploration of society's inner processes and relationships, position his audience in a different way towards his subject matter and play out fully his own subjective role in the filmmaking process.

O'Rourke's past work (including Yap—How Did You know We'd Like TV, Half-Life and Cannibal Tours) can be broadly characterised as a critique of imperialism and development in the Pacific. Now, with The Good Woman of Bangkok, he focuses a similar interest upon Bangkok prostitution. But this film is as much O'Rourke's response to his own film practice and personal position as it is to third world prostitution for first world men. The power of the film originates in the paradoxical correlations between his own personal relationships and the complex social relationships he documents.

The now highly controversial vehicle for exposing these relationships is their actual enactment by O'Rourke himself in the character of 'the Filmmaker', exploring the life of 'Aoi', a Thai woman working as a prostitute. He pays her for the illusion of sexual 'love' and to be a subject in his film. Significantly, in the opening subtitles, the filmmaker suggests the breakdown of his marriage as the impetus for this personal search for 'the meaning of love'. In this he is basically no different to the western males around him. And Aoi, both as film subject and as love object/prostitute, is thus positioned to express most profoundly many levels of objectification and exploitation.

Working with his one-person rig, O'Rourke devoted resources usually spent on crew and equipment to the nine months of intimacy it took first to 'cast' Aoi and then to establish and explore his relationship with her. He also shot considerable footage of himself which he ultimately deleted, believing that this would undercut his more important focus on Aoi. It is through her life that he creates such a forceful picture of the destructive workings of capitalist development—development which has always ridden, one way or another, on the backs of women.

While Aoi in no way comes across as a 'victim', it is clear that great damage has been done to her. We learn, particularly through Aoi's aunt in the village, that the damage began in childhood with a gambling father and family relationships under severe economic stress. A bad marriage intensified Aoi's own sense of rejection, self-hatred, hatred of men and duty to her family in Thailand's patriarchal system; and this, in circumstances of acute poverty, has led her into prostitution. At the time of filming she has abandoned all hope of love but nevertheless survives with dignity.

This emotionally complex dynamic is revealed through O'Rourke's relationship with Aoi in a way which no other film method would have been capable of. Aoi is reacting on film to an intimate personification of the exploiter and O'Rourke does not soften the film with any expression of love or forgiveness towards him from her.

While his critics have reacted with indignation to the fact that he participates in the prostitution of Thai women, I do not share their outrage. Firstly, such criticism should be reminded that there is a great deal of artifice involved in making a film. O'Rourke didn't just happen to capture some sort of pre-existing reality 'out there'; he filmed what he chose to film (and often provoked it into expression) and then, sensitively, carefully and consciously, put these bits
together to give meaning to the final film. Events did not necessarily unfold as he portrayed them.

O'Rourke has very deliberately constructed a parallel between the other men in the film and his own character—nowhere more to the point than in shattering the excuses which exploitative men make about the liberating benefits of their cash payments to needy women. When the filmmaker—believing himself motivated by love and concern—buys Aoi a rice farm, this gesture is deliberately shown as a self-interested and inadequate response to her complex economic/emotional needs. Linked with this is the hatred and horror the prostitutes feel for the men who use them, which is shown vividly in sequence after sequence. Likewise, O'Rourke shows Aoi's rejection of his use of her, in words which he does not heed (“This is not for your film.”) and most strongly in the prolonged shot, early in the film, of Aoi in bed. There, O'Rourke's camera remains trained sensually upon her as she dismissively, resignedly, resentfully and gracefully draws the covers up to hide her body and her face.

Nowhere does O'Rourke exonerate or seek to create sympathetic understanding for the men with whom he himself clearly identifies. The film works against vicarious thrills and fantasies. The viewer can romanticise neither the world of prostitution nor the intrepid filmmaker. This is an exceptional accomplishment for such a foray into the exotic.

The process between filmmaker and subject which O'Rourke makes explicit in The Good Woman of Bangkok was always present in his previous work. In those films, however, this power relationship was obscured by formal construction and audience acceptance of the filmmaker as cultural hero—that is, as the righteous, objective author who aligns himself with good against evil, thereby aligning his viewers in the same way and exonerating them and himself from complicity in the documented crime. Here, the power relationship is not only a central issue, but occurs within an area of emotional pain which exists far beyond the specific circumstances of a Thai bargirl. No wonder the critics have been provoked.

Perhaps those who excoriate O'Rourke for making The Good Woman of Bangkok would prefer serious filmmakers to leave the subject of third world prostitution to the superficial shock-horror merchants of current affairs. Perhaps they would prefer no critique at all in the hope that the requisite ideologically-sound female filmmaker will arrive on the scene and hand over control to a Thai prostitute. Perhaps O'Rourke should be obliged to stick to his own broken marriage in the Canberra suburbs if he wants to explore love and exploitation. Perhaps he should be a different man altogether to the person he is. Or if he must explore the consequences of his own behaviour, he should just go to Thailand like all the others and shut up about it. Let us sleep in peace.

The world of creative social documentary is not a perfect place. It is not an arena of totally considered actions, no matter what rationale we give our impulses. Every filmmaker has at least some inkling of the deep personal function which making any film fulfils. We all project our personal dilemmas upon our choice and treatment of subject, but we rarely acknowledge this in our work.

Ideology cannot direct creative work, only inform it. No area of human experience should be taboo for the serious filmmaker. The ultimate moral question for me is to what degree a film will deepen or alleviate human oppression. This is a question which The Good Woman of Bangkok answers to my satisfaction. While I am hardly overjoyed that Dennis O'Rourke shares so many of the characteristics which make men so difficult to live with, it gives me hope that at least one of them can produce a film on such a subject so thoughtful and so beautifully realised.

MARTHA ANSARA’s most recent film was The Pursuit of Happiness.