Missionary Positions

Dennis O'Rourke's Good Woman of Bangkok stirred up a storm. Supporters thought it a heartfelt document; others criticised the standpoint of the filmmaker, and the camera. Here Jeannie Martin makes a case for the prosecution. Below, Martha Ansara responds defending the film.

By its author's own account, The Good Woman of Bangkok is a fictionalised rendition of the life of a Bangkok woman working as a prostitute, written from the West, by a white Australian male, in the late 1980s.

According to the flyer that accompanied the preview of the film, the representation of the life of the prostitute is a metaphor for the social relations between the sexes that hold sway under capitalism. In particular, the life of the prostitute stands for the relations between men and women in conditions where capitalist relations also entail racism, and where racism is a product of colonisation. Hence, the location of the film in Bangkok rather than, for instance, Sydney's Kings Cross.

Franz Fanon, in his A Dying Colonialism, argued that one aspect of a dying colonialism is the harnessing of a Western rhetoric of progress, a rhetoric of women's liberation, to a forced link between colonising men and colonised women. Here, male agents of a one-time colonial power reassert their privileged position by an aggressive intervention on behalf of one-time (or metaphorically) colonised women.

The important points here are that this action rewrites the forced sexual link (rape) typical of the colonial period as a salvationist activity; and restates the power of the coloniser in the post-colonial period in the language of sexuality. The purpose of this rewriting is the active exclusion of the colonised male so as to fracture communal solidarity among once colonised people (divide and conquer). The effect is to rewrite the struggle against colonial domination as a struggle initiated by the West; to represent post-colonial domination as a victory for liberation; to locate domination as a battle over the possession of women.

Wittingly or not, The Good Woman of Bangkok is almost a textbook example of this process—right down to the exclusion of the post-colonial male. What struck me first about the film was not the treatment of 'women'—just more of the same—but the treatment of men; in particular, the absence of Thai men. In fact, in a symbolic gesture worthy of the colonial task, the only Thai men who speak in the film are a pimp and a blind beggar. Apart from these, the only other Thai men in the film are Aio's ex-husband and her dead father—and these features as disembodied catalogues of sins and failings endlessly reiterated throughout the film.

Compare this with the images of Western men. In The Good Woman of Bangkok Western men are either racist, sexist boors, driven by aggressive, drunken sexuality (for instance, the Western clients of the prostitutes—the working class, the contemporary rapists), or they are disembodied Knights, solitary heroes (i.e. the filmmaker, the contemporary missionary) committed to the salvation of fallen maidens (whores) distributing largesse and moral education as a product of their privileged position.

And the imagery is clear enough. Thai men are emasculated, crippled, pimps: they are corrupt menservants in a vast seraglio. The seraglio is Thailand (meaning Asia); the Master is the West. Thailand/Asia gives up its women to the Master. The currency is women, and the arrangements are strictly feudal. It is 'woman' that is the metaphor here, not the relations between men and women. 'Woman' functions as a metaphor in an allegory of relations among men in a global battle about the control of resources.

In The Good Woman of Bangkok the shift from colonial to post-colonial domination is faithfully recorded in the language and morality of sexuality, as relations among men played out across the bodies of women (i.e. the land). Indeed the film itself—and specifically the confessional technique employed in the film—actively contributes to the process.

It has also been argued that one aim of the colonising period was to produce colonised subjects stripped of their will. Once achieved, colonised subjects function as the bearers of the coloniser's will, or at least are represented as such.

In many films post-colonial women, older women, mothers, are scripted as the moral voice of the community, as the guardians of tradition. This is especially the case in relation to those forms of behaviour of post-colonial men at odds with Western morality, and at odds with their projected role in systems of global domination (drunkenness, fighting, financial irresponsibility and so on). In The Good Woman of Bangkok, a similar mechanism works in a minor way: for instance, the village aunt was scripted thus, as was Dennis O'Rourke's lover Aoi, particularly in relation to the behaviour of men.

And these sets of meaning are doubly coded. For example, the sexual language pertaining to post-colonial societies mimics the internal sexual division of labour of the dominating power. An image of the role of Western women is captured inside the discourse on the post-colonial society. And it functions to tell the women of the West what they should be (i.e. grateful, but replaceable, whores—who should realise they are well off).
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 whose 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.

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A Man's World

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 virginal 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 critics 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...