

Notes on The Good Woman of Bangkok (1992)

Which is worse - promising self-exposure and then failing to deliver or indulging in self-exposure and finding no one bothering to look? Dennis O'Rourke's latest documentary, **The Good Woman of Bangkok**, would seem to realize at least one of these possibilities. In an interview with *Cinema Papers* prior to the release of the film, O'Rourke (1991) described what appeared to be a scandalous project. He had gone to Thailand, he asserted, in order to fall in love with a prostitute and make a film about their relationship. Rather than adopt the position of morally superior observer, he wished to reveal the human and necessarily tainted character of the relationship between documentary-maker and subject. Despite engendering some embarrassed gossip this didn't seem to create an audience for the film. Instead, the film seems to have flopped in Australia, gaining only a short run in the cinemas and attracting very little critical comment. This is a shame because the film, though short on scandal, raises many interesting aesthetic and ethical questions. My aim here is to assemble a few notes which in a wayward fashion attempt to specify and tackle some of the questions raised.

Is that all? A few interviews, some bar footage, a bit of intimately observed behind the scenes stuff? After all the gossip concerning **The Good Woman of Bangkok**, I expected a bit more. This is not necessarily a criticism of the film - perhaps it says more about my own expectations. Why demand revelation (visceral or cerebral) from all films? - although the promotional poster, with its large close-up of Aoi's face (she is O'Rourke's prostitute lover) seemed to suggest a revelatory mode, as did O'Rourke's pre-release remarks (1991) concerning the transgressive nature of his film.

How long did *The Good Woman of Bangkok* run in the cinemas? A week? Two at the most. Who watches films like this? Too low budget - you pay your money you want opulent fantasy and special effects. And for the alternate cinema going crowd the film's nutritional value probably seemed questionable - exposes of Thai prostitution are the stock-in-trade of television current affairs and O'Rourke's involvement with Aoi may have appeared an ideologically tawdry twist.

I know only a few people who have seen the film and they have tended to be dismissive - "it's boring", "the '4 Corners' report was better", "an absolute wank". The contemptuous tone of the criticism seems to be marked by something more fundamental than aesthetic displeasure - something more like embarrassment. Here is this white, mid-life-crisis, governmentally-funded, Australian film-maker making a film about his relationship with a Thai prostitute. Documentary is expected to preserve a very proper, socially concerned, attitude and the sexual proclivities and transactions of the film-maker should, it seems, be expressed in a more indirect fashion - better to encode them cryptically within a fiction film and leave the critics to infer the connections back to real life. For me though the 'impropriety' of the film is less a question of its discursive status in relation to the audience than of its concrete relation to the lives of those participating in the film.

Let me explain. Documentaries about social problems often adopt a didactic, morally righteous tone. They take on the mantle of crusader - discovering the truth, defending the innocent, and tracking down the wicked. **The Good Woman of Bangkok** represents a reaction against this crusading style, an attempt to make manifest the human complicity of the documentary film-maker and the compromised and exploitative character of the film-making process itself. Denis O'Rourke makes a film about Thai prostitution, but not from a position of tut-tutting omniscience - he arrives as a customer and films from inside. Shots of naked bar girls and lecherous clients gain an ambiguous charge, they may observe and condemn but they also convey desire and a sense of unavoidable involvement and complicity. The voyeurism of the observational style is here rendered less objectional because there is no bad faith involved, no pretence that the camera gazes only as a concerned citizen. So in its relation to us, the audience, the film is actually more honest (more ethically scrupulous) than many others which pursue similarly titillating social themes. But what of its relation to the subjects of the film - to the brothel denizens, to Aoi, to Denis O'Rourke himself? Does the film treat its subjects as ethically as it addresses its audience? Clearly not, and it is O'Rourke's intention to make this manifest.

I could perhaps try to link the film to the paintings of Utamaro or Degas - placing O'Rourke in some kind of tradition of artists in brothels - but this seems a pat way of avoiding the

discomfort of the film. And this discomfort is what seems to interest O'Rourke as well - gestures of identification and distance, attraction and repulsion, condemnation and obvious complicity. I think particularly of the bar footage and the interviews with the male clients. It seems to say, "Who are these repulsive men? And yet I am one of them - there is no other reason for this film." The film-maker sits in the bar as client, as uncertain social conscience, as voyeuristic and benign observer. One of the best aspects of O'Rourke's films is that he is always sitting in the canoe during the shark hunt - he positions himself as inextricably, agonizingly, within; he moulds cinema verite into a passionate relation to otherness rather than a dull machinery of truth.

The titles which tell the story of Aoi and O'Rourke have a contrived simplicity - "He would meet a prostitute and make a film about that." They lend a sense of purity and clarity to a relationship which seems far more grey and complex. They fashion a fairy-tale beyond the range of fairy-tales. Is this naivete or irony? Or could it be a mingling of both?

Everything hinges on the fact that he produced a film. There were some ingredients - the world of the brothels, his own personal crisis, the desire to produce a different kind of documentary. Then the idea - to meet a prostitute and to make a film about their relationship (or just about her? - did O'Rourke ever adequately resolve this question?). Then the tangible realization - Aoi: the prostitute, the person, the ruined life, their relationship mediated through the agencies of prostitution and film-making, leading to the final film in which everything comes together. The film, the need to make a film, motivates and shapes everything. I can't resist the question: what does it mean to conduct a relationship through a camera and to fall in love with somebody in the interests of producing a film?

Especially worrying that the film should appear as a kind of safety-jacket of respectability, lending crisis - the crisis that led him to fall in love with a Thai prostitute and the crisis he inflicts upon her - a bogus aesthetic form, thus holding it back from annihilatory silence. Whether the film ended up being good or bad seemed irrelevant. It was the fact of the film that disturbed me.

Wouldn't the genuine crisis sweep everything away. The artistic work, the film, or whatever is only possible before the crisis becomes total. Total crisis - which can take the form of love - demands silence and loss. Representation is inimicable to it, except in terms of the representation that collapses. O'Rourke's desire to make a film inevitably compromises his love for Aoi. There can be no such thing as a document of love. Yet clearly there is a need for one. The impossible desire is to produce an intact document of love, but if it is genuine it must always be ripped, smeared, illegible, ruined.

O'Rourke's avowed 'corruption' - his complicity - is only partly related to his status as the first-world client of a third-world prostitute. Much more crucial is his loyalty to the film - a loyalty which over-rides his love for Aoi, which indeed even seems to motivate that love. O'Rourke (1991) sees things the other way round - sexual love providing the basis for art - yet this seems unlikely here. Sexual love merely appears as a suitably blinding subject for the desire to film to pursue. It is a conceit which enables the game of representation to take place.

"I'm eating now, this is not for your film...you're crazy". We get to see her eating and to hear her objections - cinema verite prompting and discovering a relation to reflexivity. But why does he film? Surely he could only ever have truly established his love for her by abandoning his camera, just as she could have proven her love for him only by sleeping with him for free. The camera is a peculiar, clumsy, and ambivalent means of expressing love. It inevitably distances whereas the very appeal of love is that it opens up the impossible prospect of contact. To film her while she eats seems also to deny their relationship a non-representational aspect - the moments of silence and loss that bind people together. While intervening, shaping, and destabilizing the present, the camera also maintains a responsibility to a future which is not, and can never simply be, their own.

Although, to be fair, a great deal of their relationship is not depicted. We see nothing, for instance, of their meeting or of their parting - the narrative of their relationship is recounted solely in the titles. We are left only with the incidental moments and those mediated and constructed by the film-making process itself - the revelatory interviews and so on. Perhaps then he has left everything genuinely personal out. Perhaps the camera did not altogether determine and impinge upon every aspect of their relationship. But then I remember that O'Rourke made a home-video of his first night with a Thai prostitute. A blue memento or something more ostensibly interesting, it scarcely matters - the point is that the camera

was there at the outset. Perhaps the silent, non-represented aspect of his relationship with Aoi and the other women never existed, or never properly existed. Perhaps it has little more than a diegetic status - existing only as an inferred fiction rather than as a real foundation. Certainly he would never have been sitting eating with her if it weren't for the film. Their unlikely relationship, in which distance and contact become indistinguishable, had only one genuine terrain - the here and not here of representation.

And why does O'Rourke fail to include footage from this original night? Because it includes him too obviously? But this must have been his temptation? He should have included that footage - subtlety is not the best strategy here. The film needed to be more confronting and offensive. Rather than tamely chipping away at the hypocrisy of conventional documentary, O'Rourke needed to make a statement that was literally scandalous. We see rather too much in the film that suggests O'Rourke's intimacy with Aoi (all the behind-the-scenes footage). We needed to see that intimacy questioned. What better way than to show them literally having sex (for the camera)?

Then there is Aoi's part in all this. What is her role? Does she fall in love with him, or almost fall in love with him, or does she remain throughout the calculating prostitute dealing with a rich but difficult client? Probably not a question that can be answered decisively either way. She makes it clear at times that she perceives it as a business exchange - he gets a film, she gets a rice farm - but he demands things from her that pass beyond a prostitute's ordinary skills. He demands other kinds of exposure, intimacy, and compliance. She must reveal herself, all of herself, both in unguarded moments and in staged claustrophobic scenes/interrogations. The camera can initiate a gentle erotic play - Aoi, aware that she is being filmed in bed, pulling up the sheets with her toes - as well as demanding from her moments of intense self-examination and revelation (with all the machinery of avant-garde inwardness - mirrors and reflexive TV sets). How does she answer to these demands? - by genuinely revealing herself or by performing to satisfy this client's particular kinky tastes? Who is to know again? Though I can't help feeling that she interprets the moments of self-examination as demands for the expression of melodramatic sentiment and performs knowingly as the prostitute victim (ill-fated, hating all men, but loving her distant family). It would seem prudent that she adopt a clichéd cultural mask in such a situation in order to fulfill her part of the bargain without having to really reveal herself (just as prostitutes will fuck men but resist kissing them). This would help to explain the gap between Aoi's calm and cynical public exterior and the melodrama of the revelatory interview. Both may in a sense be true but it is difficult to believe that the former has not helped shape the latter. At one point Aoi even tells another prostitute what to say when O'Rourke asks a question. The other prostitute dutifully gives the prompted response. Aoi laughs. She seems to laugh at the ease of the cliché she has provided and at her own recognition of what O'Rourke expects. This is her client and she knows how to please him. When at the end of the film she explains why she has left the rice farm and returned to the city, her answer seems to have precisely just such a non-committal edge - "It is my fate." This revealing and yet mask-like answer is the contradictory means by which she maintains her self-identity in the face of the demands O'Rourke has placed upon her.

In capturing Aoi's pathetic aspect - even if he has actually accomplished no such thing - does this free O'Rourke of his desire for Aoi? She is no longer now merely cold and indifferent. The prostitute loses her enslaving power and becomes a vulnerable object of pity. He gives her a rice farm and thus somehow sublates his own exploitative and exploited relation to her. His generosity and the film as an objectification of his own personal crisis (through her crisis) empower him and render her irrelevant. That she leaves the rice farm concerns him only in as much as it provides a nicely ironic ending. Perhaps the film was also a means of falling out of love with her, of making sure that their relationship would always only cohere in the past.

The rice farm is a problem. Whereas the other men merely pay prostitutes, O'Rourke does something more - he gives Aoi something intended to save her. His gift implicitly condemns the squalid conditions which she endures and opens up something better. Evident is a common male redemptive scenario - the base financial exchange of prostitution is transcended by a show of love and altruism. If his act of redemption is not also her moment of salvation that is because she has fallen too far - she has lost altogether the capacity for love and gratitude. While he is ennobled by his impossible effort to restore innocence to the damned, she comes to reassert the tragic and inevitable truth of corruption. So a moral scheme is still evident in the film. O'Rourke may not adopt the conventional pose of clean crusader but he adopts a moral pose nonetheless - that of the sinner passing into a state of

grace through an act of altruistic love. Either pose places Aoi amongst the damned.

Also, what can be more morally conventional than to oppose pure and simple rural life to the corrupt and mercenary world of the urban red-light district? The editing sets up and relies upon this dialectic even if the substance of the interviews sometimes questions it - the gossipy Aunt, for instance, manifests the hypocrisy of the rural folk who rely upon and yet condemn their 'fallen women'. That Aoi is unable to make a go of returning to the country surely suggests that this dialectic deserved much further interrogation. Perhaps O'Rourke should have stayed with Aoi as she tried to make a go of the rice farm rather than let the real problems she faced take on the enigmatic guise of Fate.

Of course, O'Rourke was not particularly interested in posing conventional political questions. He was concerned instead with exploring the phenomenon of Thai prostitution at another level - that of the particular, the personal, the intimate, the complicit. And yet, almost inevitably, this seems to lead the film to a dubious kind of universalism. Scenes of the red-light district are played in slow-motion with an opera soundtrack - here is the universal comedy of human flesh far more than the representation of a specific place. And Aoi - beautiful, suffering, surviving, helpless, enigmatic - becomes a kind of feminine archetype, well-suited to the universalist demands of melodrama and tragedy. O'Rourke needed to question the entire structure of this morality play if he genuinely wished to pass beyond pat moralization and cliché, depthless, accounts of Thai prostitution.

To return to the gift of the rice farm. It could be interpreted differently - not as a means of redemption but as an act of stupidity. What can be more foolish than the prostitute's client adopting a parental tone with the prostitute - "It's not safe any more; you must promise to stop." Moreover, the gift is obviously impractical - we know from the interviews that there is no rural idyll for Aoi to return to. As a solution it is clearly little more than romantic wishful-thinking. Perhaps rather than absolving O'Rourke of his 'sins' the gift actually turns the screws on his complicity - the traditional, distanced, rational perspective of the documentary film-maker is abandoned; O'Rourke appears instead (if only as an off-screen voice) as a foolish participant. The film enables us to recognize this and so seems to distance itself from the excesses of its maker. As a mode of approach then complicity is simultaneously pursued and questioned.

Worth noting in this regard the discontinuity between O'Rourke's obsessive vision of the his documentary - the very personal charge it obviously had for him - and the final, restrained, even repressed, film. The film takes far less risks than the film-maker. With its gentle juxtapositions, long interviews, and telling observational footage the film is a slowly paced, deliberately crafted mosaic. These formal strategies have served O'Rourke very well in the past but here the reserved, ironic tone that they help to construct seems to clash with and even struggle to ameliorate the scandalous intention of the film. Whether this is the saving grace of the film or a sign of confusion and compromise depends upon one's attitude to O'Rourke's initial scheme. In my view, the film needed to be both more and less clearly conceived. O'Rourke's risk - his amour fou - needed to involve and affect not only himself but also the film. *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is a far too intact document of love.

Which is to question its status as a document of love altogether. The crucial question is whether it is possible to be ironic and in love. Doesn't irony depend upon a distance antithetical to the impossible demands of love? The film seems much more to me a document of falling out of love, of establishing distance through ironic reflection. Love is replaced by wryly smiling affection. The film brought O'Rourke and Aoi together, but in a non-place where separation was always present and where it alone would characterize their future.

References

1. Cinema Papers, August 1991, no. 84, "Dennis O'Rourke and *The Good Woman of Bangkok*", pp.4-13.