

The Filmmaker and the Prostitute

Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*



edited by Chris Berry Annette Hamilton Laleen Jayamanne

THE FILMMAKER AND THE PROSTITUTE

DENNIS O'ROURKE'S
THE GOOD WOMAN OF BANGKOK

**edited by Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton
and Laleen Jayamanne**

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CB, AH, LJ



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Foreword

It is commonly observed that, in these postmodern times, the question of value — what is right and wrong, good and bad, true and untrue — has become a matter of profound and continuous interrogation. Whether we like it or not, we live in a world in which our cultural identities, knowledges and standards are constantly thrown into doubt, faced as they are with the challenge of other truth claims and the self-assertion of other identities; other, previously submerged ways of being and seeing. “Multiculturalism,” “political correctness,” the “clash of civilisations” — these are some of the major sites of contention which signify the extent to which the problem of how to live with difference has acquired a place centre stage in the current new world (dis)order. Indeed, today’s heightening of intercultural discord and dissension (at both national and international levels) compels all of us increasingly to question, from our particular vantage points, the very basis of our senses of “us” and “them,” and to reflect on how “we” construct and relate to those with whom we share a common world which nevertheless remains riven with difference, disparity, and divisiveness.

This is not an easy task, particularly for those whose authority to speak, set standards and pass judgement used to be taken for granted; whose epistemic power to speak for others has until recently remained unchallenged by virtue of their hegemonic position in the global and national cultural economy. From such a position, having to explicitly question oneself in one’s relationship to cultural others cannot but generate feelings of discomfort and unease — feelings all too often disavowed, or simply denied, because they are too annoying, too threatening, too difficult to come to terms with.

The Filmmaker and the Prostitute, which documents the extended international controversy around Dennis O’Rourke’s film *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992), is a unique book precisely because it illuminates the irresolvable tensions evoked when a heterosexual white Western middle-class male puts himself on display (and in doubt) as he enters into a problematic relationship with an Asian, third-world, female “other.” The Asian woman, Aoi, is a Thai prostitute whose life story is featured by the white Australian filmmaker who, significantly, also entangles himself in a love affair with her. In the course of the ninety-minute “documentary fiction” the viewer is treated to a complex and searching representation of the complicated and contradictory cultural negotiations played out in a cross-cultural encounter overdetermined by the conflict-ridden divisions of male/female; rich/poor; white/coloured; first world/third world; Western/non-Western; dominant/subaltern. The intense controversy provoked by

the film highlights the profound dilemmas involved in the unsettling of the given parameters of such an encounter, established by a centuries-old history of European colonialism, capitalist exploitation and male dominance. Reading the manifold and diverse responses to the film — from theoretically-informed film analysts and mainstream media journalists, from feminists of divergent persuasions, from “Asians” as well as “Westerners” — gives us a rare insight into the intractability and complexity of those dilemmas, especially when the intricacies of (inter)subjectivity and identity are at stake.

While for some O'Rourke's project is a courageous exercise in post-colonial, post-patriarchal self-questioning, making himself vulnerable to feminist or “third-world” condemnation in the process, for others it is an act of exploitative hypocrisy, of selfish posturing wrapped in bleeding-heart white liberal guilt, a case of having-your-cake-and-eating-it-too. As one reviewer put it: “Certainly by sticking his camera so relentlessly into the wounded psyche of a woman he bought and paid for, this middle aged man has done himself proud — by manipulating her he's made a good film better, but in doing so, has he also made an imperfect world worse?”

Perhaps the greatest contribution made by the film — and this book — is not just the claim that there are no easy and definitive answers to such a question, but, more importantly, to show how the process of unsettling long-established power relations is inescapably marred by multiple complicities, double-binds and ambivalences. O'Rourke himself describes his film as “an ironic parable about the impossibility of living a good life in an imperfect world.” At the same time, the very debate around *The Good Woman of Bangkok* gives us an opportunity to reflect with more honesty, more sensitivity, and with a greater sense of urgency on the ethical difficulties facing us as our divergent life-worlds become increasingly complexly entangled across the power-laden boundaries of class, gender, race, culture and region. The search for a viable practice of ethical life in the cultural minefield of a globalised capitalist postmodernity: this is the painful but insistent motivating force behind both film and book, and one which makes both so utterly relevant and timely as the millennium draws to a close. It matters less whether the search ultimately fails or succeeds than to acknowledge its pressing necessity, even if it is bound to be a never-ending, often frustrating search.

For some time now, contemporary cultural theory in the West has been obsessed with the politics of identity and difference, the pitfalls of orientalism and other modes of “othering,” and the transgressive potential of border-crossing, transculturation, and hybridity. But the increased critical-theoretical awareness of one's positionality in practices of representation and modes of speaking and writing has seldom translated into a full engagement with its practical consequences in the much more perilous and convoluted terrain of our everyday encounters with a multiplicity of *real* social others. It is to Dennis O'Rourke's credit that he has

at least tried to destabilise the powerful certainties of his own subject position as a white, middle-class Western male in his all too real engagement with Aoi — even though, as a filmmaker, he was inevitably and undoubtedly constrained in his deconstructive project by a desire to complete the film (as much as he was driven by a desire for the Asian prostitute). But such contradictory tendencies cannot be avoided in such intimate situations; they must be worked over in the practices of everyday life, and it is precisely from the admission and illumination of such contradictions — powerfully evoked and addressed in the essays and articles in this book — that our search for an ethics of living with difference in these postmodern times stands to gain. Perhaps what is minimally needed for living a good life in this imperfect world is an open recognition of our own subjective imperfections, and a willingness to live with and through them.

That O'Rourke is an Australian white male is significant in view of the rapidly changing global geopolitical and transcultural dynamics in the late twentieth century. Unlike, for example, the United States, Australia is not a world power, and, in both economic and political terms, it is much more dependent, for its future prosperity and well-being, on the increasingly powerful "dragons" and "tigers" of East and Southeast Asia. As a result Australia, as a country which traditionally luxuriated in the imaginary comfort of being a white, Western nation, finds itself gradually (but irrevocably) marginalised in relation to a region to which it is geographically so proximate, but which until recently could only be imagined by most Australians as the distant and inferior Orient. Against this background the crisis of unreconstructed white Western masculinity manifests itself much more uncompromisingly and with many more immediate strings attached than elsewhere in the Western world. In this sense, the fact that *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute* documents a predominantly Australian controversy should not prevent it from having much wider, international repercussions, which will only become stronger in the coming century.

Still, O'Rourke has the last word in this book, which is an apt confirmation of the prevailing power imbalance between the Western filmmaker and the Asian prostitute, no matter how unsettled the filmmaker's own subjective and national/cultural positionality is. Aoi, the subaltern, does speak, but only within the framework of the film. It is unlikely that she will benefit much from the capitalist economic growth that Thailand, too, is currently experiencing. Equally, it is uncertain whether the time will ever come in which the Aois of this world will have control over the means of their own self-representation, be it on film, in politics, or in global culture. And recognising this uncertainty is perhaps the most disturbing and uncomfortable experience of all. To turn this discomfort into an integral part of our practice of ethical life is a challenge to all of us.

Ien Ang

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Editors' Introduction

A number of years have passed since the worldwide release of Dennis O'Rourke's self-styled "documentary fiction," *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, in 1992. Now that the whirlwind of debate inspired by the film has well and truly passed, this may be an opportune time to bring out this collection of responses to it. Some may be so horrified, embarrassed, or otherwise dismayed by O'Rourke's provocation that they would rather it went away forever. We tend to believe, however, that both the film itself and the international media event it became have an ongoing relevance, and not least because of its ability to inspire this desire that it did not exist. No doubt, when O'Rourke took a major cash prize for documentary filmmaking and spent part of it hiring a Bangkok prostitute and making this film about what ensued, he knew he was breaking all sorts of polite rules. After all, he has made a career out of calling smug self-assurance into question. But surely even he could not have anticipated just how "incendiary" *The Good Woman of Bangkok* has turned out to be.

As it ricocheted around the globe, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* revealed that for all our postmodern sophistication, we are still very capable of being shocked, angered, inspired and in other ways moved. The reviews, interviews, feature articles, and essays collected here show that the film forced us to focus again on exploitation along first world/third world, city/country, upper class/working class and male/female axes and face the fact that for all our self-proclaimed efforts it is as endemic as it ever was. It has forced us to recognise the continuing power of the stereotypes of the White Man and his Desire, the Colonised Woman and her Need — to see how they are animated by the dynamics of sin, karma, fate, guilt, sexual desire, prostitution, redemption, duty to one's family, and morality. It has forced us to think once more about the ethics of making documentaries and viewing them, and to realise that questions of who has the right to speak, who controls access to the camera and the microphone, and the obligations that ensue from the inevitable unequal distribution of power over images are still important today. We believe that this collection provides a useful touchstone for considering the film in the light of all these questions and more.

For us, the experience of putting together this collection has been a fascinating revelation that we hope you share as you read through these materials. We embarked upon this project after a small one-day seminar on the film in Melbourne in August 1992. All three of us spoke that evening, and we were all surprised and struck by how polarised and angry the debate about the film had been. By then the

film had already been in release for a few months. Even in Melbourne, that most reserved and well-mannered of Australian communities, we found passion lurking not far beneath the surface of polite discussion. Our curiosity was aroused.

Some months later, when Dennis kindly allowed us to examine the press responses that had been collected from all over the world as the film went into global release, we realized that this was not only an Australian debate but an international one. We also realised the scale of the selection task ahead of us.

In drawing up a final table of contents for this volume, we have attempted to represent the range of responses to the film as fairly as possible. If you are wondering why your particular favourite article on the film is not included here, there are a number of possible reasons. First, some pieces were excluded because their authors did not want them republished. Second, we excluded some very interesting pieces by well-known authors because there was too much overlap with another equally interesting piece by an equally well-known author.

Last, and most interesting, we declined the requests of some authors that they be allowed to edit or amend their own work. We wanted the book to represent the debate as it happened. Yet, even now, a number of years since the flames died down, we found that when we asked for permission to republish we were in fact blowing on some surprisingly hot embers. Many writers felt they had more to say, wanted to rebut someone else's remarks, or felt a need to take up some new issue in regard to the film. Although we have not agreed to indulge them here, this encourages us to believe there is still a great deal to be said about *The Good Woman of Bangkok*.

*Chris Berry,
Annette Hamilton
and Laleen Jayamanne*



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