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[9]

The Ethics of Intervention:

Dennis O'Rourke's

The Good Woman of Bangkok

Some time ago, I heard on National Public Radio of the death by suicide of Kevin Carter, a photographer whose photo of a starving African girl stalked by a vulture once won a Pulitzer Prize. After taking the photo Carter is said to have scared away the vulture, sat down under a tree, and cried.¹ Like many other stories of supposedly objective observers of human tragedy, this one poses the question of what we might call the ethics of intervention: in forms such as journalism, documentary photography, and documentary film, where value has traditionally been placed on a noninterventional, objective observation of reality, when should a journalist or documentarian cease to occupy the neutral position of observer to intervene in the lives of his or her subjects? Should Carter have frightened away the vulture—in which case his photo would not have been so likely to grab the attention that won him the Pulitzer? What is the ethically appropriate response of a documentarian faced with human misery? What is the documentarian's commitment to the truth of a situation as weighed against his or her subjective entanglement within it? What, indeed, is documentary truth?

I wish to pursue these and other difficult questions through a discussion of an even more complicated case: Dennis O'Rourke's 1991 documentary film, *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. I am interested in this film about a Thai prostitute hired by the filmmaker to be his lover and the subject of his film because its ethical dilemma both fascinates and provokes me. When I first saw the film at the Berlin Film Festival, I was sufficiently provoked to reproach O'Rourke in person with what appeared to be his gross abuse of his subject, smoothed over, so I thought, by his gift to her of a rice farm designed to "save" her from the sex trade. On further reflection, however, I have come to value the film's challenge to my too-quick and certain judgments. Clearly a man who makes a film about a prostitute by becoming her client makes himself vulnerable to feminist wrath, but I will argue that that

very vulnerability is also what makes this film so challenging to conventional documentary ethics. In the following I hope to pursue the question of the ethics of documentary intervention through an analysis of O'Rourke's film. But first, I want to explore more about what it means to intervene in the life of a film subject.

In *Representing Reality*, film critic Bill Nichols notes that the shift from a more conventional expository and observational mode of documentary to a "witness-centered voice of testimony" leads away from arguments about the world to arguments about the ethics of the filmmakers' interactions with witnesses: What do they disclose about the filmmaker and what do they disclose about his or her subject?² In an essay to which Nichols refers, Vivian Sobchack describes a range of possible reactions a film viewer might have toward the extreme instance of a real person in a film faced with danger or death. Building on Sobchack's notion of ethical reaction, Nichols has developed a taxonomy of what he calls documentary "gazes"—different implied ethical stances taken by the camera/filmmaker toward the events filmed. Sobchack and Nichols can be seen to distinguish six such types of "gazes," beginning with the least involvement with the film or video subject and proceeding to the most: (1) the *clinical or professional gaze*, committed to objective reportage and thus to refraining from any kind of intervention in the situation; (2) the *accidental gaze*, which just happens to catch an important action, as in Zapruder's home movie of the assassination of JFK, or George Holliday's videotape of the Rodney King beating; (3) the *helpless gaze*, registering an involuntary passivity, as when a filmmaker records a situation in which intervention is desirable but impossible; (4) the *endangered gaze*, showing the cameraperson's own personal risk, as in the famous moment in *The Battle of Chile* when a cameraman "shoots" a gunman who literally shoots him back, the very jostling of the camera registering the bullet's effect until the camera stops running and the screen goes black; (5) the *humane gaze* (Sobchack's term), when the film registers an extended subjective response to the moment or process of death; and finally (6) the *interventional gaze*, assumed when the film abandons the distance between filmmaker and subject, placing the filmmaker on the same plane of historical contingency as its subject. Nichols explains that this intervention is usually on behalf of someone who is more immediately endangered than the cameraperson, as when filmmakers take their place alongside struggling strikers in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* or *Medium Cool*.³

Though I do not propose to apply this taxonomy of gazes directly to the ethical questions raised by O'Rourke's film—it would be simplistic, for example, to say that the interventional gaze is the most ethical and the

clinical gaze the least—the terms introduced here may nevertheless prove useful. They may help us to consider, for example, the complex ethical questions raised by new forms of documentary practice that seem to have abandoned the traditional respect for objectivity and distance and call for greater degrees of intervention in the lives of subjects in contexts fraught with sexual, racial, and postcolonial dynamics of power.

Dennis O'Rourke's film observes Yaowalak Chonchanakun (called Aoi) as she shuttles back and forth between the bars where she attracts customers to the hotels where she sexually services those customers. It also follows her as she moves back and forth between the raucous, bustling night city of Bangkok, where she makes her money, to the slow, daytime country village where she spends that money on the support of her mother and young son. The story of Aoi's life is told through three markedly different forms of interview with film subjects, each of which can be seen to resemble one of Nichols and Sobchack's gazes.

The first way of filming corresponds more or less to Sobchack's notion of the clinical or professional gaze. It consists of respectfully distanced, objective interviews with Aoi's aunt, who is shown seated on the ground outdoors in the quiet Thai village that is Aoi's home. Although these country scenes offer a strong contrast to the raucous activity of Bangkok nightlife contained in other sections of the film, O'Rourke does not idealize the country over the city. What we see in the country is simply an entirely different set of life rhythms diametrically opposed, through the film's editing, to the constant bustle (and hustle) of Bangkok.

Seated on the ground, leisurely chewing something that looks like chewing tobacco, "Auntie" slowly tells how Aoi's husband left her when she was pregnant, how Aoi became saddled with a debt incurred by her father, how her family lost their land to pay the debt, and how she finally had no choice but to go work as a prostitute in Bangkok. Segments of O'Rourke's interviews with the aunt are interspersed throughout the film and constitute its most conventional, objective, and ethnographic thread.

In marked contrast to these objective, sustained interviews is a series of much more spontaneous interviews in raucous Bangkok bars with Anglo-American, Australian, and European men dancing and drinking with Thai prostitutes. In these male-dominated nocturnal bars, where the drunken customers must yell in order to be "heard" by the camera, we witness a display of unbridled misogyny rendered accessible to our gaze, we soon come to understand, by the filmmaker's own participation in it. Although we never see O'Rourke in the image, it becomes clear from the men's reactions to this camera's different gaze, that the filmmaker is received by them not as an objective, clinical observer, but as a fellow reveler

who happens to hold a camera; he enjoys the same white male privilege as the other men in the bars. This complicit gaze of “one of the boys” elicits a masculine braggadocio and misogyny that a more professional-clinical interview would preclude. One American boasts to O’Rourke’s camera that he has bought seven women in one day; another claims that, unlike American women, who are “fucking bitches,” these women are “the top of the line,” not only because their “bodies [are] the best” but because they “have the right attitude” — they will fold your clothes and give you “a shower, a massage and a blow job” all in one session.

Particularly revealing is a half-shouted interview in a noisy bar with a drunken group of O’Rourke’s fellow Australians. These men claim to feel sorry for the women and comfort themselves that the money they pay them will help the next generation of women to get an education and extricate themselves from a life of exploitation. Of course, such sympathy rings hollow, because we can plainly see that their pleasure depends upon the continued exploitation of these uneducated, subservient Thai women. This interview ends when the youngest and most embarrassed of the Australians lamely adds, “Hopefully the Thai women won’t have to do this for too long.”

Sobchack and Nichols have no precise category for this kind of “gaze,” although Nichols does note that “an ethic of irresponsibility,” in which a filmmaker participates in, rather than opposes, a morally deplorable act, is a possible flip side to the responsibility of intervention. The hypothetical case he cites is a camera gaze that actively sides with the agency of death, as in the filming of lethal medical experiments in Nazi concentration camps or even the filming of the hanged body of William Higgins, American hostage in Lebanon.⁴ Nichols seems to presume, then, that it is the nature of the interactive mode of documentary either to be activist and oppositional (that is, to intervene responsibly in potentially harmful events) or to be complicit (that is, to participate irresponsibly in situations and actions that should be opposed rather than recorded).

On the face of it, then, what we might call O’Rourke’s *complicit participation* with the drunken johns places the filmmaker on the same level as these morally suspect subjects. This “participatory gaze” makes no effort to prevent activities that abuse and objectify women—in fact, it encourages them, egging the men on. Compounding the offense to feminist sensibilities, the very next scene, continuing the film’s general depiction of the Bangkok bar scene, shows a Thai woman on a stage pulling a string of razor blades out of her vagina and another who writes a greeting to a Japanese customer, “Nice to see you Japan,” with a pen inserted into her vagina.

As if to emphasize his complicity with these First World male exploiters

of Third World sex workers, O'Rourke offers an explanatory scroll toward the beginning of the film in which he speaks of himself in the third person:

The filmmaker was 43 and his marriage had ended.

He was trying to understand how love could be so banal and also so profound.

He came to Bangkok the mecca for western men with fantasies of exotic sex and love without pain.

He would meet a Thai prostitute and make a film about that.

He seemed no different than the other 5,000 men who crowded the bars every night.

It was three in the morning when she finished dancing and sat with him.

She said her name was Aoi—that it meant sugar cane or sweet. . . .

The pimp came over and said: “only 500 baht or 20 dollars—keep her until the afternoon—do anything you like—OK?”

He paid and was her customer; she became the subject of his film.

They stayed at a cheap hotel in the red-light district.

Filming and video recording took place there.

Thus the making of O'Rourke's film hinges upon the literal procurement of its subject. This third-person “filmmaker” participates in the institution of prostitution in order to make the film. “He paid and was her customer; she became the subject of his film.” The interaction with a prostitute in her capacity *as prostitute* is thus crucial to the film. And it is this participation that raises a range of complex ethical issues that go to the heart of questions about the contemporary documentary's intervention in the realities it films. It asks, in effect, Can a First World filmmaker's inherently exploitative gaze at a Third World sex worker reveal anything of value, and of “truth,” about this subject? Can a filmmaker who freely portrays himself as a man who buys the sexual favors of a woman do anything “good” for this “good woman”? The answer depends partly on how we read the film's climactic moment of attempted intervention into Aoi's life.

The interviews with Aoi that eventually culminate in the filmmaker's gesture of intervention in her life constitute yet a third type of gaze at his subject. They take place in the the strange “intimacy” and isolation of a hotel room in a red-light district of Bangkok, where Aoi and O'Rourke lived together as prostitute and client. Unlike the clinical-professional interviews with the aunt, which keep a respectful distance, or the raucous slapdash participatory cinema verité of the interviews with the men in the bars, these interviews are self-consciously orchestrated and tightly framed. They frequently press too close to their subject, who is sensitive to the invasion. Aoi is often seated near a mirror, and frequently her image is doubled in its reflection. Her speech to the camera (and thus to O'Rourke, who operates both camera and sound throughout the film) alternates between extremely

factual accounts of the economics of her life, such as her efforts to pay her dead father's debts or her trips home each time she has saved two hundred dollars, and extremely emotional accounts of her hatred of men, beginning with the account of the husband who deserted her and continuing through her relations with clients and pimps who treat her badly. Speaking sometimes in Thai, sometimes in broken English, she painfully tells of how Thai men taunt her when they see her on the street with unattractive foreign customers. It becomes apparent that she feels a kind of sexual shame to be seen with Western men before fellow Thais. She clearly condemns the patriarchal system that holds her in such thrall, and she astutely includes her relationship with O'Rourke as part of that system.

Woven throughout the film, these segments of Aoi responding to O'Rourke's questions eventually build to a kind of crescendo of self-loathing, at the peak of which the filmmaker will finally intervene. Aoi suddenly speaks of love—a topic that has not been raised before. Seated before her reflection in a mirror—a mirror that pointedly does not reflect the filmmaker—Aoi says, "I don't know what love is. . . . No people can love me. I don't have anything good, only bad. Who can love me? They think they know me. I know me. I cannot give."

It is in response to this despairing statement that we hear O'Rourke's voice for the first time making his dramatic gesture of intervention. Speaking slowly and dispassionately, he says, "Okay. I'm going to buy this rice farm for you and I want you to stop working. It's time you started caring about yourself." When Aoi repeats that she doesn't care about herself, O'Rourke seems to set a condition for giving her the rice farm: "I will do this for you but only if you go home. . . . This life you are leading will kill you. It's not like before. Many women are dying of AIDS." Aoi then indicates that she *might* stop working, but O'Rourke insists that she promise. At this point Aoi balks: "If you want to help me that's fine. But don't expect anything from me. There are some things that I can't do. I'm sorry. Don't help me if you want something in return. I don't want to talk now."

At this point in the film O'Rourke seems to choose to intervene in his subject's life. He effectively attempts to end her career as a prostitute—the career that interested him in her in the first place—in order to "save" her from its occupational hazards. The promise of the rice farm is thus an extreme example of Nichols's (and Sobchack's) interventional mode. Seeing that AIDS poses a danger to her life, and wishing to effect a permanent change in that life, the filmmaker-john seems to do the "right" thing: he gives her the financial means to end her career as a prostitute. Yet in this same scene Aoi vehemently refuses to accept the condition that she cease to prostitute herself. A scroll at the end of the film informs us, in what may be

a crucial shift to the first person from the film's initial third-person reference to "the filmmaker":

I bought a rice farm for Aoi and I left Thailand.

A year later I came back but she was not there.

I found her working in Bangkok in a sleazy massage parlor called "The Happy House."

I asked her why and she said, "It is my fate."

In the end, despite the filmmaker's good intentions, the interventional gaze reverts to another one of Sobchack's and Nichols's gazes: the helpless involuntary passivity that can only register the facts of what it is powerless to change. Thus the grand gesture of documentary intervention fails: O'Rourke does not succeed, at least as far as the film lets us know, in altering Aoi's "fate." In a statement made earlier in the film, Aoi can be seen to explain this resistance, at least partially:

You say you understand me. But I don't quite believe you. You are the sky and I am the ground. I'm just rotten garbage. You pulled me out of the rubbish heap only because you wanted to make this film. I think everything you do and say to me is to manipulate me for your film. Even if you promised to buy me a rice farm it's not much compared to your film. I'm sure you'll get much more for your film.

Aoi seems to understand perfectly the nature of the bargain O'Rourke wants to strike with her. In this situation, just as in her profession, she performs for pay. Though her filmic performance is not of sex—in fact, it is a kind of antisex in its repeated expressions of a vehement hatred of men—she recognizes the parallel—that the film consists of a man buying some aspect of her behavior. As in the relation of prostitution, the power inequity between client and whore remains the same. But unlike the male fantasy of the whore waiting to be rescued from "the life," Aoi does not want to be rescued; she wants to be well paid. Indeed, she criticizes the arrogance of the participant-interventionist who would flatter himself that he can rescue her from "her fate."⁵

It is worth noting—though I admit I do not know how much prominence this note should receive—that although the offer of the rice farm was genuine (that is, O'Rourke really did make the offer and did in fact buy Aoi the farm), it is also a fictional construct. O'Rourke had already given Aoi the rice farm up front, at the beginning, before any substantive shooting had begun. Although the film's fiction is that O'Rourke uses the farm as an inducement to Aoi to quit prostitution, in fact, the payment had already been made. O'Rourke thus portrays himself as more of a stereotypical john than he actually was.⁶ In other words, the attempted intervention in Aoi's

life as a prostitute *is* true, but what is not true is the way it is represented in the film. Here, then, is a documentary “truth” that is highly scripted. Because of such manipulation of his subject matter, O’Rourke prefers to call his work “documentary fiction.”

I do not think, however, that such a designation should be construed as a nihilistic despair at the impossibility of attaining any truth in documentary. For if, as Errol Morris once put it, “truth isn’t guaranteed,” documentaries (even fictional ones) nevertheless seek some, highly relative, contingent, nonguaranteed, forms of truth, otherwise they would simply be fictions. In calling his film a documentary fiction, it would seem that O’Rourke attempts to overcome the simple dichotomization between truth and fiction, to suggest that there is no a priori, self-evident truth to be “captured” by the camera, but that there are multifaceted, receding horizons of “truth” that can be constructed within a multivocal (multigazing) form.⁷

It is through the combination of these very different observational, participatory, and interventional approaches to his subject that O’Rourke’s film gets at the “truth” of this Bangkok prostitute’s life—a truth that can be had only through these sticky relations. It is precisely because this truth is so compromised and so refracted through multiple points of view—including that of the johns—that it cuts through all previous conventions of the representation of prostitutes. One of these conventions is the well-known feminist representation of prostitution as an institution of pure female victimization. This knee-jerk feminist reaction was much in evidence in the reviews of O’Rourke’s film and, indeed, in my own initial response.⁸ However, I want to argue that because the filmmaker makes himself vulnerable to feminist condemnation, the film opens itself up to a level of ethical questioning that is quite exceptional in documentary film, and that such questioning should not be dismissed out of hand by feminist, or any other, viewers.

Take, for example, the line from the scroll that appears early in the film: “He seemed no different than the other 5,000 men who crowded the bars every night.” Is O’Rourke saying this only so that we will eventually see him as different when he offers Aoi the rice farm? Or does he mean for us to see that he is, basically, no different? Certainly he is no different in that he buys a woman; sexually and cinematographically he enjoys what he pays for. As if to prove his prurience, he even throws in a scene that portrays his camera’s gaze as sexually intrusive and that portrays Aoi’s resistance to this gaze. A half-naked Aoi lies on her stomach on the bed trying to sleep, ignoring the invasion of O’Rourke’s camera. She deftly uses her feet to pull the sheet up over the naked parts of her body, all the while facing away from the camera, never giving it the satisfaction of acknowledging its look

at her. Excruciating as this blatant male gaze is, the obvious feminist condemnation invited by such a scene misses the more complex ways in which the whole film explores the dynamics of power within an inherently unequal relationship, for at the same time O'Rourke's camera attempts to capture Aoi's naked vulnerability, it also captures (or precipitates, or directs?) her defiance of its intrusion. Had O'Rourke not risked the abuse of his power by staging its voyeuristic gaze—had he stuck, for example, to the respectfully distanced ethnographic interview—he would not also have elicited Aoi's verbal and visual resistance to his intrusion.

Perhaps the best way to characterize the ethics of O'Rourke's relation to his subject would be to say that, like the Brecht play to which his title alludes, this relation acknowledges that there can be no morally pure position, no truly "good" person. O'Rourke is *not* different from these other men even if he does, like the good woman of Setzuan, *try* to behave more ethically. Yet, at the same time, it is his very willingness to risk the kind of relation that is so vulnerable to feminist critique that makes this film such an exceptionally acute and honest exploration of the prostitute-john relationship rather than a pat condemnation.

In a fascinating survey of sociological studies of prostitution, Lynn Sharon Chancer shows the limits of the numerous sociological studies of the "pros" and "cons" of prostitution conducted by external observers. Despite a theoretical awareness that patriarchal culture continuously engages in historically variable forms of the "traffic in women"—whether this traffic is in wives or whores—Chancer argues that feminists have been very reluctant to study the specifics of prostitution. Moreover, most of the studies conducted have lacked any focus on the male customers who make the business possible. Chancer insists that prostitution needs to be defined, from the outset, as an interaction between two parties.⁹ Although O'Rourke is no sociologist, and certainly could not be described as a feminist, as an astute observer of the complexities of power in a postcolonial, postmodern era, he has produced a document about prostitution that goes to the relational heart of the roles played out within this institution. This is possible because, rather than standing outside looking in at the prostitute and her world, O'Rourke has taken up a partly real, partly fictionalized position internal to that relation. He recognizes that there is no neutral, objective view; he is implicated in truth *and* in fiction.

As feminists, some of us may not like the fact that the relations he engages in are not equal. But as long as there exists a male "traffic in women" in both legal and extralegal forms, there can be no easy ethics of the male sexual relation to women, whether as wives, lovers, or prostitutes. The only alternative to engaging in representations within such an "imperialist"

imbalance of power would be to avoid picturing the prostitute altogether, or, as one critic of O'Rourke puts it, to insist on the necessity of a "dialogical form of filmic representation" in which the prostitute presumably speaks on equal terms with the filmmaker-john.¹⁰ But such a solution presumes a relation of false equality. I would argue instead that O'Rourke's effort to be ethical within an unequal situation—which is, after all, the situation that most men and woman inhabit in the real world—poses the deeper and more important question of the ethical relation of filmmaker-john to client. This seems to me to be the real interest of his film. It is not that O'Rourke "saves" Aoi and shows himself a good documentarian, but that he does not and cannot "save" her, and yet in the process of trying he generates resistances by Aoi, both to his prurience and to his rescue, resistances that grant her more integrity and autonomy as a man-hating, self-supporting whore than she would have had as a "saved" good woman.

Consider, for example, the contrast with Bonnie Klein's 1982 documentary about the sex industry, *Not a Love Story*. Klein's film is made in a spirit of sisterly equality with its main "native informant"—a stripper named Linda Lee Tracy—who becomes a kind of collaborator in the making of the film. Like O'Rourke, the filmmaker attempts to intervene in and prevent the sale-of-sex career of the film's subject, who, after learning about the degradations of the sex industry, appears to quit the business. Unlike O'Rourke, Klein seems to succeed in her attempt to dissuade this sex worker from participation in "the life." In the course of the film, Tracy is educated by the filmmaker to see the ways women's bodies are exploited by the sex industry. She ultimately becomes almost as good an antiporn campaigner as she was a stripper. She even submits to a pornographic photography session in order to be able to reflect during the session on the degradation of being a sex object. This degradation then appears to provide the impetus for Tracy to renounce the life of a sex worker and to achieve a "happy" feminist ending in which she is freed from the need to perform sexually for men.¹¹

Klein's film would thus seem to be a successful intervention in the sex career of its subject, but I would submit that it is for this very reason a less honest and less ethical film than O'Rourke's. Whereas O'Rourke's purchase of his subject is made overt in his ongoing negotiation with her, Klein's purchase of Tracy is covert. Hidden under the pretense of a sisterly, "dialogic" equality that entirely ignores the class differences between the antipornography filmmaker and the antipornography feminists and the stripper is the fact that Tracy is still performing, still trying to please the customer, now a feminist instead of a john. Whether Tracy was ever paid for her role in the film I do not know. Presumably such remuneration would

not have been ethical in the eyes of the filmmaker, whose goal was to convince Tracy to stop selling her sexual performances. However, anyone who has seen this documentary will attest that the strength of the film lies in Tracy's sexual performances, whether as enthusiastic sex worker, reformed and hesitant pornographic model, or anti-sex work crusader. In becoming the star of the film, she is, in effect, remunerated by the possibility of pleasing a much bigger audience than she ever reached in the strip clubs.

Both films probe the sex industry—its women performers and its male customers. Each film intervenes to dissuade its representative sex worker/native informant from further pursuing her trade. Both films offer the substitute occupation of a new kind of performance in an anti-sex work drama of the films themselves. Thus Linda Lee Tracy, a very good stripper with a comic flair, transforms herself, under the interventional influence of on-camera director Bonnie Klein, into a beset female victim and antiporn campaigner. In contrast, Aoi, Bangkok prostitute and successful whore (having landed the client of a lifetime in O'Rourke), *refuses* to transform herself into a respectable rice farmer—at least during the course of the film.

Interestingly, both films' attempts to rescue their sex workers are also forms of seduction. Bonnie Klein seduces Linda Lee into a feminism that will presumably save her from the degradation of further selling her sexual performances to men; Dennis O'Rourke attempts to seduce Aoi into a more monogamous relationship with himself and a rice farm. The flaw in both seduction-rescues is that rather than freeing the sexual performers they seek to rescue, they only submit them to a different regime of performance: instead of the performance of pleasure, they now produce performances of degradation. Linda Lee as subject of Bonnie Klein's film submits herself to a pornographic photography session *in order to report on the degradation she feels*. Aoi submits herself to other male customers in the course of the film in order to confess later to O'Rourke's camera how she loathes the "old, ugly, filthy and obscene" men she must service.

I would argue, however, that the ethical superiority of O'Rourke's film, along with its greater richness as both document and fiction, lies in its recognition of the fantasy of rescue and its class, race, and gender bases. A film does not need to be a successful intervention in the lives of its subjects, the way say Errol Morris succeeds in *The Thin Blue Line*, to be ethically successful. Morris's film is a remarkable case of a successful intervention, actually clearing the film's primary subject of a murder charge. But a film does not have to be about an ethical person to have ethical value. Rather, O'Rourke's film illustrates that ethical acts are entirely compromised. Just as Bertolt Brecht shows in *The Good Woman of Setzuan* (1943—the play from which O'Rourke partly borrows his title) that acts of private charity

will never change a rotten system, so O'Rourke shows that his own acts of private charity are useless.¹² Yet just as Brecht's cynicism about moral goodness produces a highly ethical play about a prostitute who cannot transcend her ethical situation, so O'Rourke's cynicism produces a highly ethical documentary fiction about a prostitute who cannot transcend hers.

Thus, although there may be some reason to be morally suspicious of this filmmaker whose efforts to understand the profundity and banality of love lead him to hire a prostitute, it is this very entanglement with the power differential that informs all pursuits of heterosexual pleasure that makes *The Good Woman of Bangkok* such an ethically challenging film. Because O'Rourke is so incautious as to seek an impossible truth about "love" from a prostitute, because he sets himself up so grandly to fail, his film actually succeeds—not as a clear-cut intervention in the fate of his subject, but as a rich mix of clinical, participatory, interventional, and helpless gazes at the complexity of the relations between First and Third World, between female object and male customer.

There is no easy ethical position once a filmmaker decides to become entangled with the life circumstances of the subjects he or she portrays. If we come back, for example, to the dilemma of the photographer faced with the starving child and the vulture, we can now see that the issue is not simply whether to intervene, it is how to intervene without so radically altering the original situation that one is no longer true to it. Faced with the reality of a starving girl stalked by a vulture, photographer Kevin Carter settled on the imperfect solution of taking the picture, then shooing away the vulture, and then sitting down to cry. Whether he was crying over the suffering of the starving girl, his own impotence to change the basic conditions of her suffering, or the realization that he too was a kind of vulture feeding off her misfortune, his particular ethical dilemma presumed an either/or choice between intervening (and spoiling the truth of the girl's endangerment upon which the photograph is based) and not intervening (and thus becoming a kind of participant in her abuse).

O'Rourke's solution is to put his participation in the abuse of his subject up front *and* to intervene in it as well. He thus opens up a range of intermediate possibilities between Carter's don't-intervene-and-get-the-picture/intervene-and-don't-get-it dilemma. O'Rourke's purchase of the rice farm at the beginning of his relationship with Aoi and then acting out the fiction of proffering it in the end is one solution to what we might call the vulture problem. In effect, it allows him to depict Aoi's vulnerability to vultures without leaving her entirely their victim. And it allows him to acknowledge his own complicity with vultures without completely being one.

Documentary filmmakers, even fictional ones, have a responsibility to

the truth of the situations they represent. If vultures are part of that truth, then they need to be in the picture. In the end, neither O'Rourke's participation in the institution of prostitution nor his intervention in Aoi's practice of the profession represents the whole truth. There is no whole truth because there is no objective place to stand from which to see it. There is no perfect ethical solution to the question of documentary intervention, but *The Good Woman of Bangkok* suggests that once a more interventional mode of filmmaking is embraced, there are all sorts of messy relativities.

NOTES

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1. National Public Radio report by Scott Simon, July 23, 1994.
2. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 48, 44–45.
3. *Ibid.*, 86–87; Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 4 (1984): 283–300.
4. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 85–86.
5. In a special issue of *Social Text* on sex workers, a female escort named "Barbara" complains about this male fantasy of rescuing the prostitute: "The worst are the ones who want to rescue you. They are totally, totally, totally dangerous. They are the ones who are liable to flip. They see you as someone who needs saving. . . . And when you say you don't want to be rescued, that seems to trigger something in their brains: 'Right, I'll go for you then.' Their fantasy is that they're going to rescue you from your life of drudgery, and thereafter you'll be eternally grateful to them and will kiss their feet when they walk through the door." "Barbara," "It's a Pleasure Doing Business with You," *Social Text* 37 (winter 1993): 12–13.
6. According to O'Rourke, this bargain was formally struck between Aoi and O'Rourke in the presence of a nongovernment women's aid organization specializing in support for sex workers. Aoi did not give up prostitution, also according to O'Rourke, because her mother rightly perceived that if she had found one gullible foreigner to buy her a farm she could probably find another. Dennis O'Rourke, "A Rejoinder to 'Conceiving the Post-Colonial Everyday: An Interrogation of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*,'" *Visual Anthropology Review* 9, no. 2 (1993): 116. See also Dennis O'Rourke, "Afterword," in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*, ed. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power, 1997), 217.
7. In an article on Morris's film, I argue that the self-reflexive and interactive tendencies of what might be called the postmodern documentary need not be seen as a sign of nihilistic abandonment of a quest to represent truth. Rather, it seems to me that some of the more intrusive, interactive, and self-reflexive modes of documentary have sometimes, paradoxically, led to remarkably ethical interventions in the very reality that documentary records. Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is a case in point. Morris saved Randall Adams from death row through his manipulative explorations of the past leading to the near confession of David Harris, the man who committed the crime for which Adams had been convicted. In this essay I am interested in pursuing the ethical questions raised by a much less successful, and much less ethically clear, form of intervention, yet one that nonetheless does intervene. Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46 (spring 1993): 9–21.
8. See, for example, the reviews of the film collected in Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne, eds., *The Filmmaker and*

- the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Sydney: Power, 1997).
9. Lynn Sharon Chancer, "Prostitution, Feminist Theory, and Ambivalence: Notes from the Sociological Underground," *Social Text* 37 (winter 1993): 151.
 10. Martina Rieker, "Narrating the Post-colonial Everyday: An Interrogation of *The Good Woman of Bangkok*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 9, no. 1 (1993): 122.
 11. For more discussion of this film, see the excellent commentary by B. Ruby Rich, "AntiPorn: Soft Issue, Hard World," *Village Voice*, July 20, 1982, 1, 16–18, 30 (reprinted in *Films for Women*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon [London: British Film Institute, 1986]). See also E. Ann Kaplan, "Pornography and/as Representation," *Enclitic* 9 (1983): 8–19.
 12. When acts of private charity fail, Brecht's good woman creates a masculine alter ego, Shui Ta, who conducts her more ruthless business deals and who enables the good Shen Te to go on existing.