

The Constant Gardener



INTRODUCTION

Why Fernando Meirelles?

Fernando Meirelles' film is one of a recent batch of Hollywood films dealing with serious issues. In this case the film is a conspiracy thriller, which looks at the involvement of a large pharmaceutical company in testing drugs in Africa. That said, the film is much more, combining a love story, a quest for revenge and expressing real anger about the West's apparently unchecked exploitation of ordinary African people.

The Constant Gardener is an adaptation of a novel by the British writer John le Carré, best known for his tales of spies and Cold War intrigue. Fernando Meirelles seemed an odd choice for director, because of his Brazilian background and the seemingly huge difference between this film and his first feature, the explosive story of a Rio favela, City of God (2003).

Mike Newell was the first choice for director, but had already committed himself to the new Harry Potter film, but Meirelles was very interested in the project. He told *The Independent*, *'The chance to take on the pharmaceutical industry was one of the three elements that made me want to direct The Constant Gardener, as was the chance to shoot in Kenya. Also, it's a very original love story about a man who marries a much younger woman who is very different from him, and it's only after she dies that he truly falls in love with her.'*

Meirelles' Brazilian background gave him a source of empathy with the poverty in the Nairobi shantytown of Kibera, the largest slum in sub-Saharan Africa where some of the film was shot. Crucially his sense of distance from the British establishment of diplomats, gentleman's clubs and colonial attitudes gives a great deal of insight into the workings of the upper echelons of big business and government power.

The director's visual style is also very apparent in *The Constant Gardener*. As seen in his first film Meirelles uses saturated colours to symbolise the differences between settings. He also favours a kinetic editing style which structures the narrative in a fragmented fashion. The camera often swoops in to areas that the audience might not expect it to go, using real life locations to give it pace and energy.

TASKS

- This film has been called an angry film. How much of this do you feel comes from the director?
- Do you feel that Meirelles' own Brazilian background helped with the film?
- Compare this film with his earlier film *City of God*. What thematic and stylistic links can you make?

NARRATIVE

How does the story work?

The film is largely told in a non-linear fashion. This means that it does not follow chronologically as in most films. It also moves between a number of settings, Kenya, London, Berlin and Southern Sudan, and interweaves a complex plot regarding the testing of a drug for tuberculosis called Dypraxa, high level corruption between government officials and multinational companies and the central love story between British diplomat Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) and his activist wife Tessa (Rachel Weisz).

The film takes place in the present. It starts rather uncharacteristically with the murder of one of the central characters, Tessa, who with her friend, Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Kounde) is traveling to the north of Kenya. Justin discovers this, and the plot starts to unravel in flashback. We see how he and Tessa first met in London. They are quickly cast as

opposites: Justin, the quiet, mild-mannered civil servant and Tessa the fiery, dedicated political activist. Their decision to get married and to travel together to Africa, where Justin has been posted as a diplomat for the Foreign Office is also shown as is Tessa's pregnancy and her work doing medical outreach in Kibera with Arnold.

This is intercut with Justin and his colleague Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston) identifying Tessa's corpse and creates an interesting contrast between the past and the present in the film's timeframe. As the narrative and further flashbacks continue, it becomes clear that there is more between Sandy and Tessa than was first thought.

Tessa miscarries, and while at the hospital she befriends a girl who she becomes convinced is being murdered. She informs Sandy about this. On her release from hospital she starts to dig deeper into links between the testing of tuberculosis medication, the British High Commission and big multinational pharmaceutical companies. She writes a damning report and gives it to Sandy who passes it to his superior Sir Bernard Pellegrin (Bill Nighy). The response in the form of a letter from Sir Bernard becomes an important narrative motif. Tessa asks Sandy if she can read it and he agrees when she offers to sleep with him. However, she takes the letter without Sandy knowing. Justin, in the flashback, is oblivious to all this, but suspects that Tessa may have been having an affair with Arnold.

The film then re-emerges into the present with Tessa's funeral and we see Justin taking centre stage in the story. Kioko, the brother of the girl that Tessa believed was being murdered brings a card written on Dypraxa packaging. This starts Justin's own investigation into what Tessa and Arnold had been doing. His suspicions are further enhanced when the police raid his house and confiscate Tessa's files and computer. He does however find a secret box that contains Tessa's diary, and also a letter from Sandy declaring his love for her. It also crucially asks for an unspecified object back.

Justin starts to probe and begins to learn about the links that Tessa uncovered. He discovers that Arnold was gay and that Tessa's report had been buried. He is recalled to London by Sir Bernard. On arrival his passport is confiscated and he is advised over lunch by Pellegrin to take some sick leave and to stop asking questions. He has also started to receive threatening letters. He meets Tessa's cousin and solicitor Arthur Hammond (Richard McCabe) who gives Justin more information about the links that Tessa had made on the internet with fellow activists. He also arranges a false passport for him so that he can travel, firstly to Berlin to meet one of his wife's fellow activists to gain more information.

After gaining some information, Justin is beaten up and warned off. He returns to Kenya, where he confronts Sandy. He discovers that Tessa had no intention of keeping her promise to Sandy and it also emerges that Arnold has also been tortured and crucified. Justin is tipped off by one of the men that Tessa was investigating that the letter that she had stolen was now in the possession of a doctor who had formerly worked for the drugs company, Lorbeer (Pete Postlethwaite).

Justin travels to Sudan where he finds Lorbeer and gets the letter. He arranges this to be posted. He then ends his journey at Lake Turkana, where Tessa was raped and murdered, to await his own fate. At a memorial service in London, Pellegrin speaks regrettably of Justin's 'suicide' although this is intercut with men arriving at the lake to kill Quayle. The film finishes with Arthur Hammond publicly reading aloud Pellegrin's letter which strongly suggests that Justin and Tessa were murdered.

But the film is much more than just an investigative thriller. At each stage of his discoveries, Justin learns more and more about his wife and the film becomes a love story of sorts. The film offers a powerful condemnation of how the West colludes with those in power - in this case the Kenyan government - to take advantage of the poor and defenceless for financial gain.

TASKS

- Are you familiar with other non-linear narratives?
- How does *The Constant Gardener* compare to these films?
- To what extent did the non-linear aspect of the film enhance or detract from your enjoyment?
- What for you were the key conflicts in the film? How effective was the film in portraying these?
- Often Justin and Tess seem to be strangers in the film. How does this contradict notions of a traditional love story and how does the narrative show this?
- In what way is the narrative resolved at the end of the film?
- How did you feel about this. Was it effective?

CHARACTERS

The interplay between the characters is vital in any film. In this film it is enhanced in two interesting ways.

- (a) The major character relationship between Justin and Tessa seems to occur after her murder, as Justin discovers more about her and her investigation. In many ways this is when he gets to really know his wife and perhaps fall in love with her, only after her untimely demise. This is an interesting take on the conventional love story, as usually the development of the characters' relationship is paced carefully as they discover more about each other's personalities.

Justin and Tessa are in many ways polar opposites, he the quiet, unassuming diplomat whose main passion is tending to his plants - the 'constant gardener' of the film's title. She is the driven activist who rages against social and political injustice. But there is an instant attraction between them that leads quickly to a sexual encounter and subsequently to marriage and their move to Kenya. It does seem however that they become more distant from each other, as Tessa's work in Kibera grows. Her miscarriage on the surface seems to be another way that her investigation is furthered. Her dealings with Sandy suggest that she might be prepared to do anything to get to the truth and the hints that she might have had a relationship with Arnold are dispelled with the revelation that he is a homosexual, but these suggestions do create a problematic image of her early in the film.

It is only Justin's investigation that gives us a clearer picture of Tessa and her actions. Justin's character change is fundamental in the film's narrative. He starts to stand up to his superiors and takes it upon himself to finish the work that Tessa started. In doing so he shows that perhaps he and his late wife were not as different as at first they appear.

(b) Justin's search for the truth regarding Tessa's death and the apparent collusion between his employers, the police and the big drug co-operations creates interesting interplays in the story. Sandy Woodrow appears at first to be Justin's friend. It is he who breaks the news to Justin about Tessa's death. His reaction at the morgue when he vomits seems much more powerful than Qualye's. His initial, quite flirtatious relationship with Tessa at first seems harmless. But as he stresses later on that he is in love with her, it becomes more sinister. It could be argued that when Tessa offers to sleep with Sandy in order to read Pellegrin's reaction to her report, she is playing with his affection for her. However, it could also be argued that he may well be doing the same thing with her. He had after all been asked to keep an eye on her activities. The discovery of the letter in which he declared his love for her, by Justin, effectively ends their friendship. Once again it raises fascinating issues about Tessa and her character, which are only really concluded at the end of the film.

Justin's meeting with Sir Bernard Pellegrin provides one of the set-pieces of the film. The London gentleman's club where they meet, sums up Pellegrin's power and status. He is very much in control, ordering the food and warning Justin about the consequences of his actions, but in a subtle, understated fashion. He very much represents the establishment and is later exposed in the narrative as the catalyst between the government agencies and the multinational companies. He certainly becomes a key figure at the end of the film, when his letter is read aloud at the Qualyes' memorial service.

The Kenyan government officials involved in the conspiracy are only seen briefly. Justin's relationships with ordinary Kenyans seem at first only to be with the people who work for him. However as he is drawn into the investigation, he starts to learn more about the country in which he is working. We see him in a shantytown searching for Kioko and consequently being taken in by the police for questioning. The ordinary people are portrayed as impoverished and contrasts are drawn between the diplomatic life and the ordinary Kenyans in a stark way. Justin's understanding of the tribulations of Africans grows throughout the film and is perhaps at its sharpest in the Sudan sequence towards the end of the film. In his quest to find Dr Lorbeer, we see the settlement where Lorbeer is working attacked by tribesmen. Justin, Lorbeer and other aid workers are flown out of the area, but they have to leave a young girl behind. As Justin is told by the pilot that he can't take her and that there are too many children to save, he and we become only too aware of the reality of the plight of the Third World.

TASKS

- How interesting is it that Tessa appears to take the active role in the early part of the film? How does this subvert how women are often portrayed, especially in Hollywood films?
- How believable was the relationship between Justin and Tessa?
- What five words best describe Tessa in the early part of the film? By the end of the narrative have some of these changed? Why?
- Which two key scenes which show how Justin has changed? Is the transformation that he undergoes realistic or not?
- How is the relationship between Justin and Tessa given resolution at the end of the film? How effective is this?
- What are your thoughts on the actions of Sandy Woodrow? Can any of his actions be justified?
- What do you think is meant by the description of Sir Bernard Pellegrin as representing 'the establishment'? Is this a valid portrayal?
- What are your opinions on how the ordinary Africans are shown in this film? How do you respond to the accusation that they are largely shown as passive?

STYLE AND REPRESENTATION OF SETTING

A vital part in constructing setting is how the director and the chief cinematographer choose to show a place. This involves the careful construction of the *mise-en-scène*, that is, everything that is in the frame, to provide meaning for the audience. This covers issues such as the use of colour, props, costume, and the position of actors. In this film there are a number of key comparisons between different places. Perhaps the most fascinating one is between Kibera and London.

Kibera is shown as bright, vibrant, colourful place. It is a bustling setting with crowded streets and lots of noise. The costumes are a collection of vivid hues and are extremely striking. There is a real energy in the way that Meirelles chooses to shoot this part of the film even in his use of the camera, which swoops in and out to give a real sense of pace to the sequence.

London in contrast is shot in a muted way. Greys and darker colours dominate. The weather is cloudy. The place feels like one where all of Justin's movements are being carefully watched. This is shown by the use of CCTV cameras at the airport and the station where he meets Arthur. It creates that feeling of conspiracy which is central to the film. The club sequence with Sir Bernard, Meirelles shot through a green filter to give a pallid, washed out feel. The scenes in Tessa's old flat are shot in long takes. The darkness of Justin's situation after Tessa's death is made clear by the *mise-en-scène*.

TASKS

- Look at the stills showing Kibera and London. What impression of each place do you get?
- How much did you notice the use of colour in the film?
- What impression did you get of Africa by the film's *mise-en-scène*?
- How would you describe the use of *mise-en-scène* in the Berlin and the Sudan sequences of the film?
- How did Meirelles present perhaps a different view of Britain to the one that you are familiar with in the *mise-en-scène*?

CONTEXTS AND COMPARISONS

The film raises issues regarding how the large multinational drug companies or 'Big Pharma', as they are known in the market, test and sell drugs in the Third World. The film is a fictional account, but the audience may well ask themselves how much of the events depicted in *The Constant Gardener* may well be happening in countries such as Kenya.

- Type 'Big Pharma' into your search engine. What sorts of information does it throw up?
- The German website (which is apt given the film) **bukopharma.de** is a good introduction to some of the issues raised in the film. This is in English. Take a look at the website. How similar are the issues it highlights to those raised in the film?
- Oxfam ran a 'Cut the Cost' campaign in 2001 regarding drugs in Africa, especially medication to treat HIV. Find out what you can about this campaign. Have any of the other aid agencies (i.e. ActionAid, CAFOD, World Vision) run anything similar?

- Look at the websites of some of the world's major pharmaceutical companies such as Bayer, Merck or SmithKline Beecham. Is there any information regarding testing or ethical issues here?
- Download Christina Odone's article 'Le Carré's propaganda overdose' from Times online. This article offers an interesting critique regarding the representation of the drug companies offered in the film. To what extent do you agree/disagree with her points?

The Constant Gardener does also bear some comparisons with other recent films depicting Africa: Hotel Rwanda (George, 2004), Shooting Dogs (Caton Jones, 2006) and Tsotsi (Hood, 2006). Try to see one of these films and look at the following issues:

- How does the funding differ? The Constant Gardener was produced by Focus Film, a specialist division of Universal which makes films, largely aimed at the more adult market, such as Brokeback Mountain (Lee, 2005) and Broken Flowers (Jarmusch, 2005). It cost between 25 and 35 million dollars which is very much below the average Hollywood budget. It also had some lottery funding and the support of the UK Film Council. Look at **imdb.com** for this comparative information.
- What differences exist in the representation of Africa?
- How does the narrative style compare between the films?
- To what extent is the visual style different?
- How fundamental do you feel the star performances in this film are in comparison with the other film that you have chosen?

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