

Film review

THE CONSTANT GARDNER DIRECTED BY FERNANDO MEIRELLES

Remember John Le Carré? He is the writer who brought us those memorably seamy novels, many of them later turned into successful films, on the moral ambiguities of the Cold War, when agents who looked nothing at all like Sean Connery gradually lost any sense of what they were fighting for, which side they were on, and even what might constitute a meaningful act. Perhaps their most attractive trait was their ability, even while engaging in blackmail, extortion and other kinds of nastiness, to recognise in their opposite number a brother-in-arms. Playing the game was the thing. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, an outcome for which the real-life equivalent of Smiley and the sorry band of trilbies in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974) can take little credit, Le Carré has had to look elsewhere for murk.

Perhaps it isn't entirely surprising that his new source of inspiration should be the multinationals and their ability to extend their activities across national borders seemingly at will. *The Constant Gardener* (2001), the most popular of his post-Cold War novels, has just been released in a film version directed by Fernando Meirelles, best known for his supercharged film about the favelas of Brazil (*Cidade de Deus*). Meirelles opts for the same jittery style in his new film, not always for the viewer's benefit. Ralph Fiennes stars as Justin Quayle, the horticulturist of the title, a minor diplomat in the British High Commission in Nairobi whose wife Tessa (Rachel Weisz) has been investigating shady goings-on in Kibera, a shanty-town of a million people. A pharmaceutical corporation ThreeBees has been testing its latest phase II product Dypraxa, a potential treatment for tuberculosis, on the locals. The locals are desperately poor, AIDS-stricken and deprived of anything resembling a health service. Dypraxa seems to be killing them off rather than curing them, and

ThreeBees is covering up the real state of affairs.

Tessa is murdered along with a colleague just as they are about to expose the whole sorry business to the press. Justin retraces his wife's steps, retracing their marriage (which has been handily recorded on a digital camera) and unravelling the true extent of his wife's idealism: the whole story is told in flashback. Before long he finds himself pursued by the same dark forces, but manages to amass enough evidence to nail his Mr Kurtz (Pete Postlethwaite). Or at least we hope he does, since he sends the crucial evidence off by old-fashioned post. Let's hope nobody thinks of hijacking the envelope for its stamps.

Dypraxa's adverse effect profile isn't good at all, but just how many people die as a result of the drug — which has been so costly to develop it can't be sent back to the lab for new safety modifications — isn't clear. There is a rather obvious logical flaw in the storyline: if the product is lethal how does the company intend to market it in the developed world as a panacea? What about the all-knowing market? And along with the attempt to flatten out the rather complex moral issues involved in having a branch of Big Pharma trying out its products in poor Africa (which is obviously a more morally ambiguous transaction, say, than an army manufacturer selling guns to the government of the same country), *The Constant Gardener* suffers from a lack of depth in its main characters: Justin Quayle is the stiff upper lip under maximum duress in a displaced colonial upper-crust society than seems merely ripe for caricature, and his wife a rather smug and self-righteous character (rather than the spontaneous, generous and principled soul she is meant to be). Her main idea of going undercover is putting on very brightly coloured scarves in the bush. All the neo-colonials in the film are corrupt, except for our two heroes; all the Africans good, except for a couple of drongs with machetes who are so bad as to seem forces of nature.

The Constant Gardener is a magnificent missed opportunity for an intelligent film about the temptations for drug companies, ever since the FDA agreed to accept research from foreign countries in 1980, to take advantage of lax standards or do things on the cheap — unless of course you do like your moral lessons served on a plate. The primary responsibility of pharmaceutical companies, like that of any business, is to maximise profits for their shareholders: they don't seek to cure patients any more than Smiley and Co. wanted to end the Cold War. It just so happens that what the industry produces is rather more immediately beneficial for many of us than what the spymasters used to get up to. If you do want to see an impressive film about the New World Order and how the rich exploit the poverty of Africans I would recommend Hubert Sauper's sobering documentary *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), shot on location with a handheld camera on the shores of Lake Victoria. Billed as a study of the Nile perch, a voracious giant predator fish introduced into the lake 40 years ago, the film, which focuses not on the lacustrine ecosystem but on the ordinary lives of the people around the airport at Mwanza (some of whom die in the course of the film), tells of moral oblivion in what is reputed to be humankind's birthplace. While enormous Russian planes roar in to transport tons of fresh fish daily to the European markets, Tanzania itself struggles to avoid a famine. Local people are grateful for the industry because of the employment it provides, but it causes them terrible domestic problems. And the cruellest irony of all is that the fish business is just a bagatelle; what these big-bellied planes freight into the continent remains a mystery that nobody speaks about until a solitary pilot admits near the end of the film that the real money lies on the import side: in arms and military hardware.

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