

Reviews

Africa on film: We invited education practitioners to review recently released films on Africa to assess their value in an educational context and approach to issues currently impacting on the continent.

The Constant Gardener

Reviewed by Alan Britton

Based on John le Carré's novel of the same name, *The Constant Gardener*, set in Kenya, seeks to expose the dubious ethical practices of 'Big Pharma' in Africa. The fictional plot about a corrupt drug company touting a supposed cure for tuberculosis (TB) anticipates the recent lawsuit brought by the Nigerian Government against Pfizer alleging that an experimental antibiotic to treat meningitis led to death and disability in a group of children ('Nigeria sues Pfizer for \$7bn over drug tests', 2007).

In the real world, the pharmaceutical giant denied any wrongdoing. However, in a classic case of unintended consequences, the controversy over the trial increased the general mistrust of vaccination programmes in Nigeria, seized upon by Islamic state authorities, which in turn inhibited long term polio vaccination programmes in the region.

In *The Constant Gardener* we are introduced (in flashback) to the passionate and wilful activist Tessa (played by Rachel Weisz), who embarks on research that leads to her being silenced in a brutal fashion. Her husband Justin (Ralph Fiennes), who hitherto has been more preoccupied with tending plants, gradually picks up the baton of her crusade after her death, as much to discover whether she betrayed him in life as to explore the corruption and malpractice (both commercial and political) behind the drug trial.

There is a familiarity in this notion of the naïve character embarking on a reluctant voyage through Africa revealing the darkness of the human soul, like Marlowe's journey in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Through Justin's eyes we witness the corruption of the pharmaceutical industry, as well as the complicity of the UK Government, represented by both High Commission staff and the shadowy reaches of the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office. Any notion of an ‘ethical foreign policy’ is replaced by a cynical pragmatism that makes a calculus of British jobs versus African lives. These African lives are, with one or two exceptions, depicted as passive, voiceless, and dependent on the agency of other, white characters. This may be a conscious and deliberate decision on the part of the director, although it would be worthy of exploration in the classroom.

Justin’s investigation reveals his wife’s ‘innocence’ of personal betrayal, whereas the evidence of corporate and political culpability becomes overwhelming. Justin finally arrives at an understanding that he could have shared with his wife as he retraces and re-enacts her ultimate fate. Justin’s crucial, concluding insight is that individual lives matter, and that action has to take the place of introverted passivity, exemplified by his previous horticultural obsession. Departing from the ambiguous ending of the book, the film allows some form of justice and comeuppance to be visited upon the senior UK government official implicated in Tessa and Justin’s investigation.

The film is visually engaging: full of impressionistic bursts of colour and scenes of contemporary Kenyan life; of sumptuous landscapes, modern cityscapes and rural poverty, and the quirks of post-colonial life; cricket matches and a lush golf course a stone’s throw from a sprawling shanty town. There is a particularly heartbreaking glimpse of a feeding station in remote and war-riven territory. It also notes implicitly that while there is low level political corruption in Kenya, the apparatus of state security in the UK (through closed-circuit television, or CCTV) is a much more sophisticated tool for control and potential corruption in its own right.

Benjamin Barber notes that films such as *The Constant Gardener* ‘hint at a wish to honour the standards Hollywood boasts about but rarely lives up to’. He further suggests that the film itself is ‘political and original (if also predictable and formulaic)’ (Barber, 2007). Despite these partial misgivings, the issues it raises have clear relevance for development education in the upper secondary classroom, and are unusual in a mainstream cinematic release. The experienced practitioner will no doubt consider whether it is appropriate to show in its entirety (running at just over two hours) or in several sittings. Some pupils, used to standard Hollywood storytelling, may struggle with the complexity of the plot and narrative structure, as well as the relatively downbeat conclusion and underlying sense of powerlessness. Teachers should be aware of some nudity, strong language and violent and harrowing scenes (the BBFC rating is ‘15’).

The Constant Gardener provides a compelling and emotionally challenging starting point from which older pupils might begin to consider a number of global development and justice issues, as well as depictions of

Africa and associated media stereotypes. If it is to be used in this way, additional resources are available on the website established by the film's Production Company. The company also provided for the establishment of a trust to support practical development in lieu of location fees, which will go towards building new schools and water and waste infrastructure in Kenya. See: <http://www.constantgardenertrust.org/>

Bibliography

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