

Synecdoche and Allegory in the Filmic Record of the Memory of African Genocide in John le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*

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Summary

This article shows that the filmic depiction of the death of Tessa Quayle, a social activist portrayed by Rachel Weisz, is a memorialised historical allegory of genocide caused by deliberate and lethal clinical trials of drugs conducted throughout Africa. Although the film is set in Kenya, it tells the real story of the clinical genocide committed in Nigeria. The authors of this article do not delve into the academically naïve question of whether or not the film (released in 2005) is a faithful representation of the 2001 novel, for the discrepancies – whether glaringly obvious or tastefully subtle – follow Fernando Mireilles's style and interpretative variorum as a director who is capable of signature adjustments to the face of death. In this case, the death of one white woman (Tessa Quayle) is a synecdoche of the multitudinous African deaths caused by genocide. It is in this sense that the setting (Kenya and not Nigeria) lends credence to the paradoxical representation of the silent genocide in other parts of Africa, beyond Nigeria, through allegorical memorialisation. The authors conclude that the discovery of Tessa Quayle's death is, therefore, a discovery of continental genocide revealed through allegorical representation.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel toon dat die rolprentuitbeelding van die dood van Tessa Quayle, 'n sosiale aktivis, vertolk deur Rachel Weisz, 'n herdenkte historiese allegorie is van menseslagting wat voortspruit uit die doelbewuste en dodelike kliniese toetsing van medisyne regdeur Afrika. Alhoewel die rolprent in Kenia afspeel, vertel dit die ware verhaal van die kliniese menseslagting wat in Nigerië gepleeg word. Die outeurs van hierdie artikel delf nie in die akademiese naïewe vraag of die rolprent (wat in 2005 vrygestel is) 'n getroue weergawe is van die 2001-roman nie, want die teenstrydighede – hetsy so duidelik soos daglig of artistiek subtiel – volg Fernando Mireilles se styl en interpretatiewe variorum as 'n rolprentregisseur wat in staat is om kenmerkende aanpassings aan die aangesig van die dood aan te bring. In hierdie geval is die dood van een wit vrou (Tessa Quayle) 'n sinekdogee van die talryke sterftes in Afrika as gevolg van menseslagting. Dit is in hierdie sin dat die ruimte waar dit afspeel (Kenia en nie Nigerië nie) deur middel van allegoriese herdenking geloofwaardigheid gee aan die paradoksale uitbeelding van die stille menseslagting

in ander dele van Afrika – buite Nigerië. Die outeurs kom tot die gevolgtrekking dat die ontdekking van Tessa Quayle se dood dus 'n ontdekking is van menseslagting op die kontinent wat aan die hand van allegoriese uitbeelding aan die lig gebring word.

The representation of national destinies through an encoded storytelling process is a recurrent fact in film history.

(Miller & Stam 2008)

Whilst it is now an axiomatic fact that the real story that the screenplay of Le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* (2005) retells is about the actual events surrounding the unethical "trialling" of lethal drugs by a pharmaceutical company in Nigeria, allegory in this film makes us see the resultant deaths as part of continental genocide by the same clinical or allied means. Allegory, according to Valentin Mudimbe, is best understood through the lens of Walter Benjamin, that is "in the sense of a cultural attitude (*Anschauung*) and as a manner of visualising something (*Anschauungsweise*)" with a clear intention of posing signifiers and questions such that in the end we have "allegories that bring us in dialogue or separate us in confrontation" (2013: 28-29). Visualisation is very important and, in the context of the *Constant Gardener* (2005), demands dialogue and confrontation about the nature of death in general and African genocide in particular. A point of departure in the process of allegorical visualisation is Lorbeer's comment in the *Constant Gardener*: "Big pharmaceuticals are right up there with the arms dealers" (*The Constant Gardener*, <<http://imdb.com>> (28 August 2013)).

Inasmuch as internecine wars are ravaging Africa, there is an obverse side to the genocide. According to Lizelle Bischoff, "African films deal with various historical subjects, including reconstructions of the pre-colonial past, slavery, imperialism, colonialism, liberation struggles and anti-colonialism, post-colonialism, neo-colonialism, civil war and inter-ethnic conflicts" (2013: 67). That history is brought to view through allegory in the film version of *The Constant Gardener* (2005), particularly with genocide involving pharmaceutical companies. A revelatory study by Jeffrey Bale, "South Africa's Project Coast: 'Death Squads', Covert State Sponsored Poisonings, and the Dangers of CBW Proliferation" (2006), disturbingly records that not only was there in the town Plumtree in Zimbabwe a deliberate infection of the local population with anthrax bacteria dropped by the Rhodesian Special Air Services (SAS) aircraft, but also that women who were infected with the HIV virus were provided with placebos rather than antiretroviral treatment as part of a "trial".

Indexed in *The Constant Gardener* as "ZimbaMed of Harare" by Arthur Hammond (*The Constant Gardener*, <<http://imdb.com>> (28 August 2013)), the intentions of the fictional pharmaceutical company are not too distant from the truths of historical facts, thus rendering the film that hinges on

historical allegory and memorialisation of genocidal events with life and death especially as synecdoche that gives a frame to genocide. For the purposes of this article, we prefer the elegantly simple definition of synecdoche, that is, “the part stands for the whole”, and/or “the individual stands for a class” (Neufeldt 1991: 1356). That is to say, Tessa in the *Constant Gardener* (2005) dies because of the shady dealings of pharmaceutical companies such as KDH in a manner that reflects pharmaceutical-cum-clinical genocide throughout Africa. Though white and married to a British diplomat, Tessa is a victim like all African victims.

However, this African victimhood is hardly recognised or comprehensively given attention whenever inextricably bound with the salience of race and profiling as Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* (1952) shows, as well as recent studies by Michelle Alexander (2010)¹ and Michael Kgomotso Masemola and Phil Mpho Chaka (2011).² Read as deploying the ironic use of whiteness within the synecdoche, the screenplay attains visibility for the victims who, had they not been white and married to a white British diplomat John Quayle, would not have been a convincing or “worthy” cause. Merle Williams has recently stressed the import of the conditions of such visibility and its attendant possibilities of “in-between” black and white representations as she takes theoretical recourse in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s postulation in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) that

in general a visible ... is not a chunk of hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could only be total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and *makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation*, an ephemeral modulation of this world – less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being and visibility.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 32, quoted in Williams 2013: 26; our italics)

Read in the fashion of Williams’s extrapolation of Merleau-Ponty’s registers of differentiation in the “ephemeral modulation” of this “visible and colored world” into a “personal-impersonal tale” (Williams 2013: 27), the

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1. Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) outlines how the criminal justice system operates on the basis of a racial caste system and, in this film, the black Dr Bluhm becomes a murder suspect *because* of his black colour and *despite* his being gay.
 2. In “T/Races of Terrorism”, M.K. Masemola and P.M. Chaka (2011: 178-192) elucidate how “the abstract territorial machine is made concrete the moment it invisibly territorialises and racially objectifies the body as visible in an ideologically configured space”.

synecdoche of the in-between of white (women's) and black (victims') interior private lives and exterior public destinies is amenable to our interpretation of Fernando Mireilles's repertoire of visual signature as director. This also applies with equal force to Kenya as a nation. This country stands for many others, from Nigeria to Namibia, and Somalia to South Africa. That expresses the degree to which *The Constant Gardener* (2005) reconfigures the discourse that shapes the tragic history of what seems clearly to us to be Africa's biochemical Armageddon. Historical allegory is here understood in the fashion of Miller and Stam's edition of *A Companion to Film Theory* (2008) where "the reference to national experience results from the intentional process of encoding", particularly where such coding "requires the ability to perceive homologues, and national allegories require the understanding of private lives as representative of public destinies" (2008: 335).

With the intention to map the deliberate augmentation of the Mireilles visual metaphor of synecdoche in the qualified context of private lives representing public destinies, we amalgamate here a concept of inversion and abnegation of the "depersonalization" of private lives brilliantly used by Sope Maithufi in a different story context, especially where he identifies "plot refinements, variations and defamiliarizations" (2013: 5) of voices in what he ultimately characterises as "ironic distancing" (p. 10). The use of Maithufi's concept of ironic distancing here not only conveniently clears up the question of a white Tessa Quayle being the epicentre of the synecdoche of black African deaths; it also explains why the setting is in Kenya instead of Nigeria and, most important, it facilitates focusing our analysis more on what Rita Barnard in line with Twidle's "cross-readings" identifies as "*cross-writing*" (2012: 2). In the screenplay of the novel there are clear signs of such cross-writing in Fernando Mireilles's signature; for in the *Constant Gardener* we find that the screenplay does consciously foster methods of "cross-reading" (and also, if you will, cross-writing): scholarly approaches that "play across different genres and modes of address rather than remaining trapped within those protocols of symbolic exchange that thrive on an endless series of tired oppositions: 'the novel' versus 'history'; 'aesthetics' versus 'raw experience'; 'committed' versus 'formalist'" (Barnard 2012: 2).

Cross-writing – the distinct character of strategic straddling of genres and undermining of boundaries – as is the case with *The Constant Gardener* (2005) in our analysis, deems it unnecessary to binarise the original Le Carré textual metaphors in relation to the Mireilles silhouettes on celluloid as far as the visual metaphors are stretched: there is no opposition between fiction and history. Using the signal case set in the one African nation of Kenya, on one level *The Constant Gardener* encodes genocidal deaths in other African nations owing to deleterious clinical interventions and experiments. On one level the deaths of women in Zimbabwe are no different from the "trialling"

around which the mystery of Tessa Quayle's death arises in Kenya, where, as the plot unravels, the dark secrets of KDH Pharmaceuticals, the pharmaceutical firm that unethically administers lethal trials unfold. Pronounced homophonally as the BBB acronym or KDH – and Tessa and her friends Dr Arnold Blum and Sandy often do – it has a familiar ring that euphemistically calls to mind another deadly virus, viz., HIV that is responsible for the fatality rate of genocidal proportions in Africa.

Tessa's death, then, constitutes a paradigmatic case of the death of one white woman as a synecdoche of the multitudinous African genocidal deaths, to the extent that her life, as Miller and Stam's Jamesonian (2008: 335-336) slant suggests – as per tragic obverse side – and her death are inextricably intertwined with the public health destinies of all African nations in which pharmaceutical companies maintain a sinister presence. At another level, there is a memorable moment in *The Constant Gardener* (2005) that exposes the transnational and especially complex nature of African clinical genocide in Africa where Arthur Hammond (played by Richard McCabe) urges the wisdom of resignation to the powerful disorder of things across Africa, mentioning Zimbabwe, too:

Arthur Hammond: So, who has got away with murder? Not, of course the British government. They merely covered up, as one does, the offensive corpses. Though not literally. That was done a by person or persons unknown. So who has committed murder? Not, of course, the respectable firm of KDH Pharmaceuticals, which has enjoyed record profits this quarter, and has now licensed ZimbaMed of Harare, to continue testing Dypraxa in Africa. No, there are no murders in Africa. Only regrettable deaths. And from those deaths we derive the benefits of civilization, benefits we can afford so easily ... because those lives were bought so cheaply.

(*The Constant Gardener*, <<http://Imdb.com>> (28 August 2013))

In the above passage, the character of Arthur Hammond brings to view the continental or transnational scale of deliberate "trialling", euphemistically calling genocide "murder" and not "mass murder" or "genocide". The euphemism deployed here serves not to trivialise genocide. Rather, as he cautiously says above "though not literally", he does not mean things literally. Of course, in the manner of irony, the British government is somewhat liable for allowing its powerful companies to unethically decimate populations throughout Africa in the name of profitable foreign trade. What Hammond suggests is that there is an official record, on the one hand, and the authentic record of genocidal events in Africa, on the other. He cites or deliberately mimics, in the same breath, the official record: "That was done by a person or persons unknown" (*The Constant Gardener*, <<http://Imdb.com>> (28 August 2013)).

In his ironic tone, Hammond makes bold to mention that the benefits of civilisation come at the expense of genocide. Someone has to pay the price

and, as it happens, it is the African guinea pig whose life is cheap in the minds and schemes of caretakers of the beneficiaries of “civilisation”. Thus, here there is a questioning of the glaring inconsistency between civilisation and genocide, eruditely captured through querying reasons behind the death of Tessa as a form of synecdoche, where her death as a white, female, privileged British subject living as an expatriate in Kenya has a direct link with the genocidal deaths throughout Africa due to the actions of “respectable” pharmaceutical companies driven more by profits than ethics, all in the name of advancing “civilisation” and affordability for its non-African beneficiaries.

This calls to mind a dimension in which *The Constant Gardener* confirms Lola Young’s earlier analysis of films that justify the “imperialist vision” of “civilisation” which she deems as arising out of both the “British archetype” of jingoistic xenophobia and the “aggressive objectification of black African subjects, marking them as an ignorant, ‘primitive’ undifferentiated mass” (Young 1996: 55). Such labelling derives its provenance from a “rigorous subconscious logic” that regulates the discourse of racial difference which, according to Abdul JanMohamed,

[d]efines the relations between overt and covert policies and between the material and discursive practices of colonialism. The ideological functions of colonialist fiction ... must be understood in terms of the exigencies of domestic – that is, European and colonialist – politics and culture; and the function of racial difference, of the fixation on and fetishization of native savagery and evil, must be mapped in terms of these exigencies and ideological imperatives.

(JanMohamed 1985: 62-63, quoted in Young 1996: 59)

Whilst at face value Arthur Hammond’s stance on the disinterested role of the British government may seem to uphold this imperialist vision in *The Constant Gardener*, he ironically proves the film’s proclivity to demonstrate the impossibility of justifying genocide in the name of “civilisation” as a taken-for-granted yet contested notion. By implicating the British government as complicit in the genocidal activities of a British pharmaceutical company, and by also invoking the official discourse that attends the clinical deaths in Kenya and beyond, Hammond’s character paradoxically proves that *The Constant Gardener* (2005) subtly embosses the memory of similar or worse genocidal crimes throughout Africa when he mentions the establishment and licensing of a similar company, ZimbaMed, which will continue genocidal clinical practices that can be explained using the official record fashioned on the anvil of “civilisation”.

Interestingly, both “the official record” and the rigorous trail of investigation into her death by her husband Justin Quayle are often simplistically chalked down to infidelities primarily, plus the suspicion that her death is a result of a crime of passion involving Dr Arnold Bluhm – a black doctor and

friend who, as it turns out, is known to be gay, which fact redeems him as the chief suspect in the mysterious murder. Such suspicions, according to Michelle Alexander, are a sign of the times and the profile of the crime: “The fate of millions of people – indeed the future of the black community itself – may depend on the willingness of those who care about racial justice to re-examine their basic assumptions about the role of the criminal justice system in our society” (Alexander 2010: 16). A racialised valorisation is at work, and the dialogue below between Justin Quayle and Sir Bernard is suggestive:

Justine Quayle: Arnold Bluhm is gay, Bernard. Gay men don’t rape their women friends.

Sir Bernard Pellegrin: [bemused] Well, I’ve known one or two savage queens in my time.

Pellegrin is still harping on the possibility of a heterosexual encounter arising from the rumour of infidelity, albeit that the suspect is clearly gay, thus obviating the need to investigate KDH, the pharmaceutical company conducting genocidal trials and resorting to ridicule instead. The cloud of suspicion about Tessa’s infidelities lends itself to the possible conclusion that her death is due to promiscuity, and has nothing to do with what pharmaceutical trialling companies do: clinically endorsed genocide. Promiscuity, by way of Tessa’s imputed cause of death being a matter of synecdoche of African genocidal death, has come to be accepted as the cause of death by HIV/Aids. In the logic of the British imperial vision, and the patriarchal discourse that regulates and qualifies sexual behaviour, there is an insidious morality that latches on to a kind of clinical discourse that equates infidelity with promiscuity.

Infidelity, in accepted public-domain discourse, is responsible for the spread of genocidal dread diseases such as HIV/Aids rather than its *cause* by what Hammond in the *Constant Gardener* calls “persons unknown” (*The Constant Gardener*, <[http://: Imdb.com](http://Imdb.com)> (28 August 2013)) in the earlier conversation about her cause of death. It is important here to note that though purporting to act independently to intervene and save Kenyan victims all the way up north in the Loki village, she expects her diplomat husband to provide her with all the logistic support and powerful, secret knowledge of the diplomatic service. Making no speedy or substantive progress in saving villagers, Tessa is almost in a mea culpa moment as she gets neither answers nor solutions:

Tessa Quayle: I thought you spies knew everything.

Tim Donohue: Only God knows everything. He works for Mossad.

Deep secrets about pharmaceutical companies evade even the most connected diplomats and spies and, to follow the logic of Donohue’s

sarcasm, are only known to God, who serves the Israeli secret service known as Mossad. The religious reference is not only indexing the transnational collaborations between Israel and South Africa in the proliferation of Chemical and Biological Weapons (CBWs) that Bale (2006) exposes; that reference alludes to the Biblical chosen few highly favoured because of their fidelity to God. The character of Tessa Quayle is mired in rumours of infidelity, which is deemed the cause of her death in the first instance. According to Lola Young, Tessa's assumed infidelity, the price of which sin is her death, there is an explanation of her dependence on her British diplomat husband John Quayle, inasmuch as African nations depend on former colonial powers:

White women – both middle class and working class – and black people are both implicated here as both were dependent on others, and as being defined only through their oppositional relationship to white middle class men. Although during the nineteenth century black and working class women were expected to carry out arduous physical labour, *white middle class women were assigned a position of physical delicacy and fragility and were placed on a pedestal of sexual unattainability*. The idealization of white female sexual purity and the valorization of “masculine” attributes such as courage, autonomous action and independence served to privilege the celebration of essentialized characteristics of masculinity and femininity.

(Young 1996: 61; our italics)

The moral authority of the arguments against infidelity is overwhelming as to cover up the deaths of Tessa Quayle and many others at the hands of “respectable” companies like KDH in *The Constant Gardener* (2005). That is to make a ridiculous statement that suggests the hypothesis that if among a two-million-strong population whose serostatus is HIV-negative, promiscuity in the same population would suddenly produce HIV-positive results. Both logic and historical allegory as represented in the film say that any suchlike virus would have to be introduced to part of that population, at which stage the question of who introduced it to the population in the first place would be muted, or to use Hammond's phrase “covered up” through the attribution to what Hammond calls “persons unknown”. Sexual promiscuity (allegorically captured in *The Constant Gardener* as Tessa's infidelities) would be deemed the cause rather than the effect of introduced pathogens or viruses.

“Trialling”, as we see in the film, is a lethal and unethical practice for profit. Elsewhere it is politically motivated genocide. Consider the following recent research findings on “trialling” as Bale describes at length as a time

when the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) apparently asked doctors and chemists from the University of Rhodesia to identify and test a range of chemical and biological agents that could be used as a “fear factor” in the war against nationalist guerrillas. Professor Robert Symington,

head of the clinical program in the university's Anatomy Department, then recruited several colleagues and students to carry out this research. According to former Officer Commanding Counter Terrorist Operations Michael J. McGuinness, the most senior Special Branch officer seconded to the CIO and the man who oversaw the CW program and other covert operations launched from the Selous Scouts fort at Bindura, 25-gallon drums of foul-smelling liquid were delivered to the base a dozen or so times in 1977. The chemicals were then poured into large sheets of tin and dried in the sun. When the liquid had dried, the leftover flakes were scooped up and pounded in a mortar with a pestle. The resulting powder was then brushed onto stocks of denim clothing favored by the guerrillas, mixed into processed meat such as bully beef before being repacked in new cans, or injected into bottles of alcohol with a micro-needle. Moreover, several prisoners were forcibly brought to the fort and allegedly used as "human guinea pigs" to test the effects of the poisons, after which their bodies were secretly disposed of.

(Bale 2006: 31)

The use of African subjects as human guinea pigs, then, is a genocidal presence in the form of allegory often denied, except in what has come to be understood as new, filmic reimagined "alternatives to alternatives to official history" (Masemola 2013: 70) such as we find in the *Constant Gardener* (2005). The latter film's visual representation is replete with metaphors that ascribe primacy to the visualisation of what Valentin Mudimbe has consistently allied to dialogue and confrontation at the centre of African genocide, viz., trauma and health:

The concept [of allegory], unexpectedly, may sometimes transmute itself into that of τρήμα (trêma), the substantive for perforation. Its English equivalent (trauma) denotes shock, initiating a lasting psychological damage that can lead to a neurosis. One would say, therefore, from the simplicity of the semantics of a line, there is not much worry about a rendering of such a procession. In effect, does not its signification belong to the banality of our daily existence, precisely the management of our activity and the stress it produces when correlated to health alignments?

(Mudimbe 2013: 29)

Conclusion

In light of the allegorisation inherent in visualisation of health issues and the trauma inflicted by "trialling" as a fundamental but rarely acknowledged part of African genocide committed by pharmaceutical companies, it is apt to conclude here the importance of visibility, as suggested by Merle Williams (2013), in the understanding of Mireilles's use of synecdoche in film, by which its modulating "in-between logic" is set in motion through Maithufi's (2013) notion of ironic self-distancing that allows for an exemplary distancing of a private cause of death and transmogrifies it into a

public issue of genocide in *The Constant Gardener*. We have therefore paid attention to and given an amenable theoretical account of the memorialisation of the trauma of visualisation in *The Constant Gardener* by drawing eclectically from linguistic and literary domains of critical audience in our focus on the sophisticated use of synecdoche and allegory as tools best suited for Fernando Mireilles's visual metaphors.

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