

The Temporality of the Real: The Path to Politics in *The Constant Gardener*

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One of the most profound ideas in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* is the implicit link that he forges there between our relationship to time and our relationship to ideology. We tend to think of ideology as a set of presuppositions that forestalls the subject's doubts and questions concerning the structure of the social order and concerning the subject's own identity within that order. But this understanding does not go nearly far enough. As Heidegger makes clear, ideology (what he calls the They) extends beyond justifying a certain spatial arrangement of society and the subject; it also allows the subject to evade the strictures of temporality itself. The subject is its temporality, but ideology, with its 'vulgar interpretation of time,' produces a world in which time becomes a force external to the subject.¹ As he describes it, 'What is characteristic of the "time" accessible to the vulgar understanding consists, among other things, precisely in the fact that it is a pure succession of nows, without beginning and without end, in which the ecstatic character of primordial temporality is levelled down' (Heidegger 1996, 302). Through ideology's transformative power, time ceases to be constitutive and irreducible—the fundamental horizon that defines our being—and becomes a series of infinite frozen moments through which we pass.

Though Heidegger doesn't explore the political implications of this ideological victory—his concern is the individual's loss of an authentic being-towards-death, not politics—we can nonetheless clearly make out the ramifications of his critique on the terrain of politics: ideology blurs our primordial temporality not just in order to make existence

¹ Heidegger even rejects the term 'subject' because it suggests an externality to time that *Dasein*, his preferred term for the concrete individual thrown into temporality, does not.

easier for us, to facilitate the flight from our own death, but also in order to render us apolitical beings. Ideology has an interest in effecting a change in our relationship to temporality because the subject who grasps its authentic temporality exists with an urgency to act that the ideological subject does not. The subject for whom time is just 'a pure succession of nows' never experiences the fleetingness of a situation. As Heidegger puts it, 'Up to the end "it always has more time"' (1996, 389). As a result, the ideological vulgar interpretation of time succeeds in producing docility. As subjects with an external relationship to time who see time as a series of nows, we can leave the field of the political to itself; its claims never truly touch us because nothing, not even the political, is exigent. But as subjects of authentic temporality, we recognize the need to intervene in our situation without delay; we become fully politicised beings.

Though the film does not have as its goal reestablishing authentic temporality as Heidegger understands it, Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005) nonetheless takes Heidegger's exploration of the link between ideology and temporality as its point of departure. The film depicts the politicisation of Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) through a narrative structure that breaks from an everyday or ideological conception of time. Politicisation occurs, the film implies, through an encounter with feminine enjoyment, an encounter that transforms the subject's relationship to time and facilitates the subject's entrance into a non-ideological temporality or what one might call a temporality of the real. Justin's romance with Tessa (Rachel Weisz) entails navigating her enjoyment, and the process of doing so alters his sense of time (just as it alters the narrative structure of the film itself) and transforms him into a political being. This is the transformation that the film, through its temporal structure and narrative form, attempts to effect on the spectator as well. Romance thus becomes the vehicle for political awakening rather than the path, as we see in its traditional cinematic deployment, to an apolitical retreat.

The use of romance to stifle political awareness has a long history in the cinema. From Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) to Taylor Hackford's *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) to Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998), romance emerges as a way of diluting class antagonism. In each film, a romantic union that crosses class barriers reinforces the ideological proposition that class as such doesn't exist in a determinative fashion. For subjects in capitalist

society, we can, according to the fiction that these films propagate, rise above all class barriers. By turning to romance, these films transform interactions fraught with political tension into idealized and wholly apolitical relationships. In *You've Got Mail*, for instance, Joe Fox (Tom Hanks) is a predatory owner of a large bookselling chain that drives the small bookshop of Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) out of business. The romantic union between them that concludes the film has the effect of retroactively erasing this starkly politicised conflict. But this gesture is not unique to these films: romance—the creation of the complementary couple—is the primary ideological weapon of Hollywood cinema, and its function is almost always that of depoliticising the spectator.²

The radicality of *The Constant Gardener* begins (but does not end) with its reversal of the paradigmatic role of romance in the cinema. The film enacts a politicisation of both Justin and the spectator through Justin's romantic concerns with Tessa. Justin begins the investigation into Tessa's death that transforms him into a politicised subject for romantic rather than political reasons. The idea that she has been having an affair with her colleague Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Koundé) disturbs and motivates Justin. The hints concerning this affair begin with the film's first scene and continue until the point at which Justin becomes a politicised subject.³

The film opens with dialogue between Justin and Tessa that has no accompanying visual image. We hear the first part of their conversation while seeing the film's credits begin to appear on a black screen. The initial blackness and subsequent backlit dimness of the exchange that we see between Justin and Tessa offer the film's first suggestion of the nebulous status of their relationship, at least in Justin's mind. As the scene plays out, it confirms the impression that the lighting gives. When Tessa and Arnold walk to their plane, we see Arnold take Tessa's bag for her. This gesture hints at a bond between Arnold and Tessa that might supersede the bond between Justin and Tessa. As they approach the plane, the image of

² For more on the ideological role that romance plays in Hollywood cinema, see Bellour (2000) and Neroni (2005).

³ After Tessa's death, Justin learns the truth of her fidelity in two waves. In a conversation with Tessa's friend Ghita Pearson (Archie Panjabi), he discovers that Arnold was gay and thus not Tessa's lover. Later, while searching Tessa's computer files with her cousin and lawyer Arthur 'Ham' Hammond (Richard McCabe) and his son Guido (Rupert Simonian), he finally uncovers the groundlessness of all his suspicions.

Tessa and Arnold loses focus and fades to white, which further indicates the divide separating her from Justin.

The timing of the film's opening anchors its central problem in Justin's romantic feelings for Tessa rather than the political circumstances of her death. Rather than just beginning with her death, Meirelles opens the film with her departure for a trip to Loki, Kenya. This brief scene—the last time that Justin sees Tessa alive—shows Tessa getting on a plane with another man and illustrates her independence from Justin. As she departs, she tells him, 'Oh, sweetheart, don't bother to see us off. It could be ages.' Even if the film does not suggest at this point (as it will later) that she and Arnold are having an affair, it does point toward Justin's marginal status in her world. His investigation into her death (which leads to his politicisation) begins from the sense of his own marginality and his desire to learn the truth of Tessa's desire. By initially grounding the origin of Justin's political commitment in his sexual jealousy, the film not only reverses the usual cinematic role that romance plays relative to politics, but it also reveals the pathological stain at the source of all politicisation. One first becomes a politicised subject not out of some neutral concern for larger political questions or some universal desire to eliminate injustice but because of singular desire that bears only on one's own subjectivity.

The film furthers the spectator's suspicions about Tessa in the first scene after her arrival in Africa with Justin (which occurs, in the nonlinear narrative structure of the film, after we see Tessa's death and Justin's identification of her body). While watching the local outdoor theater, she is visibly pregnant and interacting with Arnold rather than Justin. They walk through a village in a series of traveling shots with festive music playing in the background. Arnold expresses concern about Tessa's pregnancy and then tells her, 'If you were my wife, I'd tie you to the bed.' This prompts a flirtatious turn by Tessa, who asks suggestively, 'And then what would you, doctor?' as she tugs lightly on his shirt pocket. Tessa's actions in this scene and Arnold's familiarity with her begin to build a sense of their romantic involvement. But beneath this hint of romance, Meirelles offers in this scene the first suggestion of the film's political engagement. As they walk from the theater, Arnold and Tessa walk over an oil-filled stream and provide drugs for a woman infected with HIV because the government clinic had none for her. In this scene, the relationship between Arnold and Tessa overshadows the image of the oil

and the neglected woman, but nonetheless the romance here serves as the vehicle through which the film politicises us as spectators.

The next scene furthers our sense of Tessa's lack of fidelity and inaugurates Justin's jealousy. As she takes a bath, he comes to the computer and sees an e-mail that has arrived for her that says, 'What were you and Arnold Bluhm doing in the Nairobi Hilton Sunday night? Does Justin know?' The film emphasizes Justin's sense of his exclusion from Tessa and her enjoyment as Meirelles cuts from a close-up of the message to a reserve shot of Justin's shocked face and then back to an extreme close-up of the line, 'Does Justin know?' Later in this scene, as Justin and Tessa are discussing possible baby names, she suggests 'Arnold' as a possibility, to which Justin responds, 'Perhaps it will be a girl.' Even though she evinces affection for him throughout the scene, Tessa does nothing to completely assuage Justin's sense that she may be having an affair with Arnold.

At this point, the film turns from the relationship between Justin and Tessa to the politics of drugs in Kenya. Justin and Tessa attend a party with British officials, Kenyan leaders, and drug company executives. While others engage in small talk, Tessa confronts Dr. Ngaba (John Sibi-Okumu) about the lack of sterilizing equipment in the clinic he opened and about HIV medication being shorted in order to purchase his limousine. The disruptive effects of these statements becomes clear as Sir Bernard Pellegrin (Bill Nighy) quickly ushers Dr. Ngaba to a tour of the garden and Sandy Woodrow (Danny Huston) tells Justin to control Tessa more effectively. Though Sir Bernard, Dr. Ngaba, and Sandy all occupy much more powerful positions than Tessa, her intervention nonetheless throws them into disarray. But even this scene concludes with a long shot of Justin looking at Arnold and Tessa standing together and a close-up of them looking knowingly at each other. By punctuating the scene with Justin's exclusion and the visible bond between Arnold and Tessa, Meirelles takes spectators out of the political drama and reinserts them into the romance.

This alternating between the political and the romantic continues throughout the first part of the film. It occurs most pointedly in the sequence that concludes with Tessa in the hospital. The hospital scene begins with a brief low-angle tracking shot of an indistinguishable Sandy walking down a corridor carrying a fruit basket and then cuts to a close-up of an infant sucking on a woman's breast. The subsequent long shot orients us in the scene, as we see Tessa

lying in a hospital bed with an infant at her breast and Arnold sitting by her side. The presence of Arnold and the absence of Justin in this shot add to our suspicion that Arnold, not Justin, is the father of the baby, a suspicion established when we see a black baby in Tessa's arms. A shot/reverse-shot sequence between Tessa and Justin reveals a look of sadness on his face, which furthers this impression. Not only does Justin appear upset, but he does not share the frame with Tessa as Arnold does. It is only with Sandy's arrival and expression of sympathy that the truth of Tessa's stillborn infant becomes evident. The infant she is nursing turns out to be the son of a fifteen year-old Kenyan girl who is dying as a result of drug testing by a British pharmaceutical company. The film misleads the spectator here in order to locate us within the romance narrative and then reveal how the question of Tessa's fidelity merely obscures the political problem of Western capital's exploitation of Africa as a territory for experimental and dangerous drug testing. The indirect presentation of a political content, in effect, performs a romantic seduction of the spectator into a politicised subjectivity. The wager of *The Constant Gardener* is that politics demands this indirection: we only become politicised subjects when some pathological motivation drives us onto the terrain of the political.

The infant that Tessa holds in her arms acts as an objective correlative for two different—and even opposed—responses. At first, the infant represents Justin and the spectator's fear that Tessa has betrayed him and that her romantic desires are directed elsewhere. A few moments later, however, the infant becomes the embodiment of Western capital's injustice. This transformation of the baby boy marks a fundamental transformation for the filmic spectator as well. The tradition of Hollywood films set in Africa almost always uses the continent to tell a white and Western story. From Compton Bennett and Andrew Marton's *King Solomon's Mines* (1950) to Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985) to Hugh Hudson's *Dreamed of Africa* (2000), just to name a few, Africa functions as a catalyst for the development of a Western individual or couple. Each of these films begins to some extent with an interest in Africa as such, but as the narrative unfolds, all concern with Africa recedes in the face of the Western individual's story.⁴ *The Constant Gardener* reverses this trajectory, as the signification

⁴ Africa is not the sole, or even the favoured, location for this type of film. Central America and East Asia are the privileged spots for Western individuals to find their true selves through a region's political turmoil. See, for instance, Peter Weir's *Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), Roger Spottiswoode's *Under Fire* (1983), Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), and John Boorman's *Beyond Rangoon* (1995).
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of the infant evinces. He begins the scene as the indication of a white woman's desire and ends it as the embodiment of Africa's role as a testing ground for Western pharmaceutical giants. What starts as a question concerning the relationship between Tessa and Justin concludes as an indictment of the expropriation of Africa itself.⁵

Despite the reversal of their narrative trajectory, *The Constant Gardener*, like *King Solomon's Mines*, *Out of Africa*, and *I Dreamed of Africa*, is fundamentally a white story, not a black one, and this would seem, in the end, to set it up for the same indictment on the level of its racial politics. It even plays on the white fear of black sexual potency through the depiction of Justin's jealousy surrounding Tessa and Arnold's relationship. The film goes so far as to encourage this feeling in the spectator. But it does so only in order to reveal the groundlessness of the fear and to show that the real danger lies in capitalist power and the British state, both of which are shown as thoroughly white. In contrast with other films centering on white European or American characters, *The Constant Gardener* presents a politicised Africa, in which American and European violence is visible, rather than an exotic Africa. The film does not, as other Western films about Africa tend to do, depict personal or private development in an exotic milieu but a development out of the personal into the political. As the film reveals itself as a drama of political awakening within the form of a romance, it becomes an implicit critique of films that exoticise Africa.

The turn from a romance story to a political one involves a change in temporality, which is why *The Constant Gardener* must have the narrative structure that it does. The kind of political commitment that Tessa evinces stems from an authentic relationship to time. In both life and death, Tessa pulls Justin and the spectator out of an everyday or ideological relationship to time and into a temporality of the real, a temporality immersed in the continual return of the real rather than the narrative of symbolic progress. This temporality, unlike everyday time, is rooted in what does not advance or go forward, in what blocks our progress. It is time without a future or a past. Submission to this authentic temporality

⁵ The retroactive transformation of an apparent romantic signification into a political one also occurs when Justin overhears Tessa complain to Arnold, 'It's almost as if it's a marriage of convenience, and all it's going to produce is dead offspring.' Hearing this just after their death of their baby, Justin assumes—as does the spectator—that she is referring to their relationship. But after her death, a conversation with Ham reveals to Justin that Tessa used the phrase 'marriage of convenience' to refer to the relationship between two companies, KDH (which makes the Tuberculosis drug Dypraxa) and Three Bees (which tests it).

politicises the subject's existence because it highlights the urgency of every moment.⁶ Within the temporality of the real, one lives a constant state of emergency where no better future awaits and where the necessity of the political act becomes exigent.⁷

The authentic temporality of the real with which Tessa infects Justin stems from the specifically feminine subjectivity that she takes up. This mode of subjectivity also informs her political engagement. Feminine subjectivity is inherently political because it is attuned to the incomplete nature of the signifying structure. It emerges out of the real blockage on which every symbolic order runs aground. Unlike man who is defined through an exceptional signifier (the phallus) that creates a closed set of men, woman has no signifier of exception, which means that the set of women is a set without a limit, an infinite set, what Lacan calls not-whole or not-all.⁸ Ideology works on the basis of a masculine logic of exception because it must create the illusion of a whole—a whole society and whole identities—in order to provide a sense of social stability.

The difference between a masculine logic of the whole constituted through the exception and the feminine logic of the not-all becomes visible in the film when Tessa leaves the hospital after losing her baby. As Justin drives her home, they pass Wanza Kiluhu (Jacqueline Maribe) and Kioko Kiluhu (Donald Apiyo), the mother of the boy Tessa nursed and her younger brother, with the newborn. Knowing that they must walk forty kilometers to their

⁶ In *No Future* (2004), Lee Edelman equates politics with the reign of the symbolic and the avoidance of the real. When we politicise ourselves, according to Edelman, we opt for symbolic possibilities—we invest ourselves in the hope for a distinctly symbolic future—rather than acceding to the constitutive negativity on which they inevitably run aground. He says, 'we might rather, figuratively, cast our vote for 'none of the above,' for the primacy of a constant *no* in response to the law of the symbolic, which would echo that law's foundational act, its self-constituting negation. The structuring optimism of politics to which the order of meaning commits us, installing as it does the perpetual hope of reaching meaning through signification, is always, I would argue, a negation of this primal, constitutive, and negative act' (5). While one might agree entirely with Edelman's claim here as an indictment of politics as it is typically practiced, it misses the existence of a politics of the impossible, a politics of the real oriented around the act for which the symbolic cannot account. Such an act involves the repetition of the 'self-constituting negation' that founds the symbolic and has a political status precisely because it goes beyond all symbolic accounting. (I am indebted to Valerie Rohy to pointing out this contrast to me.)

⁷ In 'On the Concept of History,' Walter Benjamin (2003) distinguishes between a real state of emergency and a 'state of emergency'—a declaration made by symbolic authorities in order to contain the possible eruption of the real state of emergency. The real state of emergency, for Benjamin, disallows the possibility of measuring history in terms of progress.

⁸ Kenneth Reinhard explains the difference between masculine and feminine subjectivity in this way: 'Unlike the case of men, for whom there *is* a unified category, 'all men,' that they are identified as being members of, women are *radically singular*, not examples of a class or members of a closed set, but *each one an exception*' (2005, 58).

village, Tessa asks Justin to stop the car and offer them a ride. He rightly points out that helping three people among millions would not make a significant difference and, if it set a precedent, would lead to an impossible burden. He tells Tessa, 'Be reasonable. There are millions of people. They all need help. That's what the agencies are here for.' She responds, 'Yeah, but these are three people that we can help.' For Tessa, as for the feminine logic of the not-all, we need not think of the whole that we can't help but only the exceptions that we can. According to this logic, there is no whole, only exceptions. The only possible justice works exception by exception without consideration of the illusory whole that it cannot alter.

Tessa's logic avoids the dynamic of inside and outside that determines Justin's thinking. Meirelles indicates the exclusionary nature of Justin's logic through the very way that he films this scene. As Justin and Tessa debate the idea of offering a ride to Wanza, Kioko, and the baby, Meirelles shoots them from within their SUV. The shots are all in soft focus, so that the world outside the SUV remains blurry. The doors of the vehicle and Justin's logic serve to keep the external world outside. The only exception to the blurriness of the external world occurs when Tessa looks through her mirror and sees Wanza and Kioko walking toward them carrying the baby. Looking over Tessa's shoulder, we can see from the inside to the outside in a way that is impossible for our normal look (which is controlled by Justin's masculine logic). For Tessa, there is no barrier between outside and inside not because there are no exceptions but because there is no rule or barrier constituting an inside.

By treating each case as an exception, the logic of the not-all forces the subject to treat each case as urgent. Looking at the big picture, the masculine logic of the whole can afford to be patient and to wait for gradual progress. But when everyone waits, progress never comes. A focus on changing the whole world ensures that the whole world will remain the same. The logic of the not-all, the logic that treats every case as exceptional and works without regard for the whole, is the logic of political change and authentic temporality.⁹ The point isn't that Tessa sees the 'real human beings' where Justin sees only abstractions but that she operates according to the temporality of the real in Lacan's sense of the term. Though Justin

⁹ Despite what one might imagine, the logic of the not-all, while rejecting the possibility of the whole, is correlative to universalising. Universalising permits the singular—the series of exceptions that constitute the not-all—to emerge. In order to arrive at universality (in contrast to generality, which does follow a masculine logic of the whole), one must introduce what doesn't fit—the absolutely singular. For more on the distinction between universality and generality, see Karatani (2003).

wins this argument and drives away without helping Wanza and Kioko, he later converts to Tessa's logic and locates himself in the feminine position. Occupying the point of ideology's own necessary incompleteness, feminine subjectivity—a subjectivity founded in the logic of the not-all—presents a challenge to ideology's functioning.¹⁰

The challenge becomes apparent in the very onset of Tessa and Justin's relationship. She sits in the audience as Justin delivers a lecture in absentia for Sir Bernard Pellegrin. After he concludes the lecture and the crowd begins to disperse, Tessa stands and interjects a question that disrupts the dull and orderly proceedings. While everyone else attending the lecture politely applauds despite the thoroughly ideological—and thus spiritless—nature of the talk, Tessa questions, and she persists in her questioning even after the other attendees file out while she is talking. The film registers the disruption she causes through Justin's behavior—his stammering and his inability to respond without contradicting himself. Later, she invites Justin into her home and has sex with him. Just as at the lecture, here Justin's response indicates the disruption that she causes. He awkwardly thanks her for the 'gift' of the sexual encounter, and she mockingly says, 'How very generous of me.' Her interventions in the political and the sexual arena share a disruptiveness relative to the ideological presuppositions inhering in each.

When Tessa confronts Justin and asks that he take her to Africa on his diplomatic mission, her adverse relationship to the symbolic structure again comes into view. This becomes apparent even before any words are spoken. Meirelles juxtaposes Justin's gardening with Tessa's intrusion through a deep focus shot that includes Justin's hands holding a small plant in the left foreground and Tessa in the background on the right of the image. In this one shot, the film lays out the fundamental choice that confronts Justin: he can continue to garden (that is, to play the role of ideological spokesperson), or he can become a politicised subject. Just as the spectator cannot look at Justin's hands and Tessa at the same time—one must shift one's focus from one to the other—so Justin must choose between apolitical gardening and the political commitment of Tessa.¹¹ And opting for political commitment here occurs

¹⁰ Of course, not all (and not only) women take up the subjectivity of the not-all, but in the figure of Tessa, we glimpse the possibility of doing so.

¹¹ The relationship between symbolic identity and politicised subjectivity presents us with an either/or choice along the lines of that offered by the relationship between the visible field and the gaze. As Lacan's analysis of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* reveals, one can either see the entirety of McGowan, Todd (2007) 'The Temporality of the Real: The Path to Politics in *The Constant Gardener*', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp.52–73. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/mcgowan.pdf>>
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through the choice for romance. Just as Justin allows Tessa to go for romantic reasons, the spectator is positioned to find her appealing because she offers an exciting romantic possibility for Justin.

By asking to go to Africa, Tessa disrupts the orderliness of Justin's life. It is clear that he enjoys her and that he wants her to come with her, but it is also clear that he feels apprehension. After he sees her and expresses his surprise, Justin asks, 'How'd you get in?' Rather than respond with an answer or some other introductory niceties, Tessa simply begins with her request: 'Take me to Africa with you.' The baldness of the request adds to its shock, and in an attempt to mediate the shock, Justin tries to joke about the possibility, though he can't hide his own awkwardness. Finally, he begins a standard type of response, 'Well, I'm flattered that you ...' that Tessa interrupts by saying, 'No, Justin, please don't say that.' As he speaks this sentence, a reserve shot of Tessa furrowing her brow indicates her dissatisfaction. Justin says this in order to give himself more time, to delay the moment of decision. But while Tessa is willing to accept rejection, she refuses to accept delay. For her, the moment is urgent, and she wants Justin to adopt the urgency that she feels. She tells him, 'Just yes or no.' By confronting Justin directly and disallowing the customary reaction, Tessa works to free Justin from his position as an ideological spokesperson and to break the hold of an ideological relationship to time.

Though Tessa does not strictly obey the symbolic categories that govern interaction, she does not operate outside them. She raises her hand to ask a question at Justin's lecture, and she addresses him politely when she asserts her desire to go to Africa with him. But her relationship to the symbolic set of rules that govern our behavior is much more fraught than Justin's or than that of most subjects. Because Tessa exists in an authentic temporality of the real, she remains focused on what the symbolic rules exclude, and she uses the symbolic structure to point to these exclusions, to what can't be said. Symbolic restrictions exist for her as the necessary obstacles that she navigates in order to touch the real, not as ends in themselves, as they are for Justin.

the visible field minus the gaze (the two world travelers in the painting and their many belongings), or one can see the gaze (the skull at their feet that becomes only visible as a skull when one looks at it from the top and left). Because the gaze requires us to look at an extreme angle, we lose sight of the rest of the visual field. Likewise, politicised subjectivity requires that we regard the ideological field as nothing.

Tessa's alienation from symbolic identity manifests itself in the activity she engages in throughout the film. Though she insists to Justin that he leave her absolutely free to pursue her 'work,' at no point does the film associate her with an occupation or other symbolic identity. Whereas her colleague Arnold is identified as a medical doctor, we never learn anything about Tessa's college education or professional status. She is dedicated to her work—and she does file a report with Sandy and the British Commission on drug testing in Kenya—but she has no official position (that we know of) from which she does this work. The film omits this information not simply because it is unnecessary for the story but because the omission itself signifies. It highlights Tessa's refusal to submit to symbolic restrictions, even those that inhere in identity itself. This refusal contrasts with Justin's willing submission to these restrictions, a submission that his gardening serves to render palatable.

Justin's gardening functions as his mode of avoiding political engagement and adjusting himself to symbolic restrictions. It is a private activity that provides an outlet for the desire that might otherwise manifest itself publicly as a political act. This is why, after Tessa's death, public officials such as Sandy and Sir Bernard encourage Justin to find refuge in his garden. To do so would be a way of avoiding the political act of inquiring into Tessa's death. To be a constant gardener, in the sense that the film proposes, is to align oneself with the symbolic law and its restrictions. Gardening allows the subject private pleasure as a compensation adhering to these restrictions. The gardener works to sustain life, just as Justin works to prop up the British regime. He protects both his plants and the British power structure from possible disruptions.¹²

Gardening, as the film presents it, requires patient tending to the needs of one's plants. As a gardener, Justin works for a future toward which his plants slowly progress. He doesn't experience the irruption of the real that would highlight the necessity of acting. He doesn't experience a state of emergency. Every moment for him as a gardener is part of a symbolic web pointing toward the future. Justin's gardening is thus opposed to the authentic

¹² Despite the film's generally negative characterisation of gardening, there is another side to the treatment of Justin's hobby. It is Justin's constant gardening that renders him amenable to the transition that Tessa effects on him. The care and constancy that gardening demands separates Justin from other figures in the film like Sandy and Sir Bernard, who are hopelessly removed from any possible politicisation. Despite Sandy's attraction to Tessa, he is not at all taken in by her political drive but just wants her silenced. To be a 'constant gardener' like Justin is to succumb to an ideological relation to time, but it is also to be on the verge of breaking from it.

temporality that Tessa introduces. This temporality foregrounds the trauma that the logic of feminine subjectivity poses to the symbolic structure, and Meirelles attempts to submit the spectator to this temporality through the narrative form of the film.¹³

Like other contemporary films that break from a linear narrative form, the narrative of *The Constant Gardener* is constructed around a central traumatic event that the film continually encircles without ever straightforwardly depicting.¹⁴ The trauma of Tessa's murder functions as the absent cause that triggers all the filmic signification but which that signification fails to represent. Not only do we not see the murder itself, but the film also denies us the image of her murdered body. When Justin goes to the morgue with Sandy to identify the body, Meirelles restricts the perspective to a reaction shot of Justin and Sandy as the body is exposed. The murder has the status of a real event within the terms of the film: it clearly happens, and yet the film's symbolic structure can only indirectly refer to it. Within any symbolic system, the real is what cannot be signified. According to Lacan, 'the real is the impossible. Not on account of a simple stumbling block against which we bang our heads, but because of the logical stumbling block of what announces itself as impossible in the symbolic. It is from there that the real arises' (1991, 143, my translation). The real is a symbolic stumbling block that both retroactively gives rise to the act of symbolization and functions as a barrier to the symbolic structure achieving completion. It is simultaneously what the symbolic is trying to symbolize and its failure to symbolize adequately.

Meirelles centres the narrative of *The Constant Gardener* around the traumatic real in order to indicate Justin's immersion in the drive and to force the spectator into this position as well. Most films—especially most films depicting a romance—employ a narrative that follows the path of desire. Desire moves forward in a metonymic fashion from object to object until it reaches an arbitrary end point, which is usually, at least in typical Hollywood films, the image of the successful romantic couple. The problem with the path of desire and the narrative that

¹³ Another variation on the equation of gardening with the submission to symbolic restrictions and official ideology occurs in Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979). In this film, Chance the Gardener (Peter Sellers) utters mindless bromides about gardening that the public perceives as genuine philosophical insights precisely because the requirements of gardening fit so well with the structure of ideology.

¹⁴ Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (1998) is perhaps the most celebrated of the films with a non-linear narration structured around a traumatic event, but this form is also developed effectively in films such as Gaspar Noë's *Irreversible* (2002) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003).

follows this path lies in its relationship to time and ideology. Desire operates according to an ideological conception of time: it always has more time to find its—perpetually missing—object. Insofar as the cinema places spectators on the path of desire, it encourages them to wait rather than to act, and this is perhaps its chief ideological function.

Meirelles doesn't just confound linear narrative for the sake of doing so or for the sake of creating an alienation effect in the spectator. Whereas a linear narrative can correspond to the metonymy of desire (seeking a new object after obtaining the desired object and finding it dissatisfying), such a form violates the structure of the drive. As Lacan puts it in his analysis of Freud's text 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,' 'The first thing Freud says about the drive is, if I may put it this way, that it has no day or night, no spring or autumn, no rise and fall. It is a constant force' (1978, 165). The path of the drive, in contrast to that of desire, does not advance toward a goal or toward completing its circuit. As Adrian Johnston puts it, 'drives come to enjoy the very failure to reach the impossible goal, whereas desire is permanently dissatisfied with the inaccessibility of its goal' (2004, 372). In this sense, the drive is consonant with the feminine logic of the not-all, while desire adheres to the masculine logic of the whole constituted through the individual exception. Justin begins the film—and his investigation into Tessa—as a desiring subject: he seeks the secret of her desire, what is in her more than her, her *objet petit a*. But the investigation pushes him off the path of desire and onto the terrain of the drive. As a result of what he uncovers, Justin gives up his belief in Tessa's secret desire that he might access and embraces the unrelenting drive of her political mission. In the second half of the film, he abandons the path of desire and, like Tessa, becomes a politicised subject of the drive. No amount of intimidation by the British government or by the KDH pharmaceutical company deters Justin from his commitment to exposing the ideological fiction that they have perpetuated.

Even when the narrative of *The Constant Gardener* appears to advance in a traditional linear fashion, it follows the logic of the real rather than that of the symbolic. The scenes that Meirelles includes do not so much advance the story as register the moments at which the real returns. In the first part of the film, these moments are almost always the result of Tessa's insistence on exposing what the symbolic structure needs to keep hidden. The final scene of the film—Justin's death at the hands of a pharmaceutical company's hired guns—does not

represent so much the conclusion of his investigation into Tessa and her activities but a repetition of her death. Justin goes to the place where Tessa was murdered because he obeys the compulsion of the drive. Through the depiction of this final scene, the film repeats her murder for a third time. We experience the event differently each time according to how our knowledge of her changes, but the event returns incessantly as the real that we cannot overcome no matter how much symbolic mediation we employ. The death of Tessa marks the point at which the romantic and political narrative lines both come together and diverge. It initially signifies Tessa's distance from Justin as a romantic partner, but it later represents the starting point for Justin's politicisation.

Tessa's murder occupies the center of the film's narrative drive because it repeats the founding act of the civilization itself. In *Totem and Taboo* (1955), Freud identifies the beginning of civilisation with murder—the murder of the primal father. Civilisation commences at the moment at which the sons in a primal horde unite in sexual jealousy to kill their father and thereby access the women of the horde that the father had previously guarded for himself. The result of this murder, according to Freud, is not unrestrained enjoyment of women but further restriction on enjoyment—the incest prohibition that founds the social order as such. Freud notes,

Though the brothers had banded together in order to overcome their father, they were all one another's rivals in regard to the women. Each of them would have wished, like his father, to have all the women to himself. The new organisation would have collapsed in a struggle of all against all, for none of them was of such overmastering strength as to be able to take on his father's part with success. Thus the brothers had no alternative, if they were to live together, but ... to institute the law against incest, by which they all alike renounced the women whom they desired and who had been their chief motive for dispatching their father. (1955, 144).

Society begins when the sons agree to a pact founded on the prohibition of women that requires exogamy. The murder of the father, in Freud's account, plays a crucial role in the founding of civilisation insofar as it paves the way for this prohibition. In Lacan's account, however, the name of the dead father, the master signifier, perpetuates another kind of murder.

For Lacan, the onset of civilisation involves an act of signification. A master signifier emerges in order to symbolise what resists symbolisation and thereby acts as a barrier to the construction of the social order. This master signifier or S_1 'is the signifier for which there is no signified, and which, with respect to meaning, symbolises the failure thereof' (1998, 80). Through this act of symbolising the unsymbolisable, the symbolic structure includes its obstacle but at the same time radically transforms this obstacle. The failure of symbolisation becomes a mark of its success as it is represented by the master signifier. According to Lacan's conception, this act, not the murder of the primal father, founds society. Though it appears less violent than the murder of the primal father, signification itself, in Lacan's view, is a form of murder. The signifier does not just represent but actually replaces what it signifies; it becomes more important than its referent and comes to decide the fate of that referent. These competing ways of understanding the genesis of the social order both involve violence, but in each case the violence has a different target.

According to Freud, the murder of the primal father results in the exclusion of the woman as an enjoyable object: one can enjoy women but not *the* woman. Here, the violence concerns women only indirectly. But for Lacan the situation is quite different. By signifying the failure of symbolisation, the master signifier—and by extension the social order itself—perpetuates direct violence toward women. It constitutes the social order through the elimination of the space for feminine subjectivity, a subjectivity located at the point where signification fails. Lacan notes, 'A woman can but be excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words' (1998, 73). This foundational exclusion establishes the semblance of order and substantiality within society. Words and identities appear to have stable meanings; society seems to have a sense grounded in the very nature of the universe. But the problem is that the symbolisation of the failure of the signifying structure doesn't eliminate that failure, just as the symbolisation of feminine subjectivity cannot entirely keep it at bay.¹⁵ Though its exclusion creates the social order, feminine subjectivity returns as the real that no civilization

¹⁵ The enjoyment associated with the feminine position is what the master signifier can't finally contain. As Colette Soler points out, 'there is a jouissance that is impossible to reach, but also a jouissance that is impossible to reduce' (2006, 112). The master signifier's attempt to symbolise feminine enjoyment necessarily fails to approximate it because the signifier cannot escape the limitations of sense itself.

can finally overcome. As a result, the act of symbolising or destroying feminine subjectivity must be incessantly repeated in a process that includes Tessa's murder.

There are, of course, empirical reasons within the filmic narrative for Tessa's death: she threatens to expose the murderous drug-testing practices of the pharmaceutical company KDH and the British government's links to these practices. But as the film makes clear, it is Tessa's insistence on refusing ideological explanations and consolations—the infinite nature of her subjectivity—that actually precipitates her murder. The empirical conditions are themselves contingent, but Tessa's death is necessary because of the position she occupies. Her politicised subjectivity is incompatible with the smooth functioning of the symbolic power structure as it is currently constituted. Her very existence stands as a challenge to that structure, as a demand for a changed relation to the real that it represses. She indicts not just the symbolic institutions that perpetuate murder but also the subjects who invest themselves in these institutions. Through her, the possibility of a politicised subjectivity becomes visible and even exigent.

As his investigation concludes, Justin follows Tessa and takes the leap into a politicised subjectivity. This occurs definitively during his visit to Dr. Lorbeer (Pete Postlethwaite) in the Sudan. Justin and Lorbeer flee an attack on the local village by climbing aboard a United Nations plane delivering aid. Justin brings a young girl from the village along with him, but the pilot rejects the extra passenger, claiming, 'We're only allowed to evacuate aid workers.... There are thousands out there. I can't make an exception for this one child.' Almost repeating verbatim Tessa's plea to him to save Wanza and Kioko earlier in the film, Justin responds, 'This is one we can help. Here.' At this point, the young girl jumps from the plane and runs away, rendering argument moot. Though Justin's gesture doesn't save the girl, the scene depicts his conversion to Tessa's logic of the not-all. While the pilot argues in terms of the whole and the ineffectiveness of helping a singular individual, Justin sees nothing but singular individuals, nothing but exceptions to the rule. Following Tessa's example, he has become a fully politicised subject, as he grasps the urgency of singularity itself.

The contrast between Justin's speech at the beginning of the film and the funeral oration delivered by Tessa's cousin Ham at the conclusion provides a symmetry to the film that illustrates what politicisation entails. The former speech involves Justin reading Sir Bernard's

speech justifying British foreign policy to a bored audience. Fernando Meirelles films the end of the talk with alternating long shots of Justin reading the text at a podium in a darkened room and reaction shots of antsy audience members (one shot of a woman scratching her head, another shot of people quickly gathering up their belongings in order to leave). In this scene, Justin is literally the mouthpiece of official ideology, which is why the lecture is so tedious. Ideology here speaks through Justin, even though, as his exchange after the talk with Tessa reveals, he doesn't fully agree with it on a personal level. The problem is that Justin's personal views remain at this time merely private and thus do not have a political effect.

When Tessa reproaches Justin for British involvement in the Iraq War, he deviates from Sir Bernard's position and expresses his philosophical sympathy with her position. In response to the groans that Tessa's statement induces among the remaining audience members, he defends her and claims, 'I think that the questioner is making a valid point and that a nation's foreign policy should not be dictated by narrow commercial interests.' Rather than appreciate this gesture of sympathy in response to her critique, Tessa becomes even more agitated. She says, 'That's bullshit. That's bullshit. You have to take responsibility. You are being paid to apologize for this pathetic country Britain.' As Tessa recognizes, Justin's personal distance from what he read makes no real difference. In this scene, he is nothing but an ideological puppet.

Throughout this scene, not only does Justin mouth the official position of the British government, but Meirelles uses the *mise-en-scène* to identify him with ideology. The performance of Ralph Fiennes highlights the fact that Justin is speaking words that belong to someone else. He reads the speech competently but with enough hesitation to indicate that these are not the words he would choose. Even more importantly, after he concludes the speech, the window shades (which completely keep out external light) rise and sunlight streams into the room. The darkness provides an appropriate setting for the dissemination of ideology, and Tessa's challenge to the proffered ideological explanations seems to be the force that brings in the light. The rising of the shades occurs just after Tessa begins her question concerning British involvement in the war. External light can only penetrate the dark aseptic lecture hall after the speech because the delivery of the speech is self-justifying and not open to questioning.

Like Justin at the beginning of the film, Ham reads a text from Sir Bernard at the end of the film. But the ideological valence of these two events differs dramatically. Whereas Justin's reading places him in the position of an ideological spokesperson, Ham's reading exposes the underside of that ideology. When Ham reads Sir Bernard's self-incriminating letter to Sandy at Justin's funeral, his speech, though it employs signifiers, touches the real. It does so because it publicly speaks what cannot be spoken within the ruling ideological framework.

The encounter with the real dislodges symbolic power. At the moment Sir Bernard recognizes that Ham is reading his letter to Sandy and revealing the secret involvement of the British government in murderous African drug testing, he gets up to leave. Whereas the tedium of the earlier lecture sends the public streaming from the room, this reading has this effect on the figure of symbolic power. The public reading of the letter drives Sir Bernard from the funeral, hounded by television and newspaper reporters, because his position of symbolic power depends on sustaining a certain ideological fiction. Because Justin attains a position where the strings of symbolic power no longer hold him, he is able, through Ham, to attack Sir Bernard from the real itself.

The final scene of the film—Justin's return to the site of Tessa's murder and his acceptance of his own murder there—seems to reassert the primacy of the romance between Justin and Tessa over the emergence of his politicised subjectivity. But his act here coincides with Ham's public rendering of Bernard's letter: his funeral provides the forum at which Ham can read the letter, even though the film depicts Ham reading the letter prior to Justin's death. The romantic undertones of Justin's final act obscure its thoroughgoing political nature. Justin can accept death in the way that he does only because he becomes a politicised subject.

Justin makes no effort to hide from the henchmen of KDH seeking to kill him, and when they arrive at the spot where Tessa was killed, he shows no resistance at all and almost welcomes them, even though he knows precisely what their arrival portends for him. It is difficult not to see Justin's actions at the end of the film as suicidal. He patiently waits for death and almost seems to hope for it. But this would be a misreading. Justin neither tries to die nor tries to survive at the end of the film. He exists here in the *jouissance* of the drive, and, as Lacan notes, '*jouissance* implies precisely the acceptance of death' (1992, 189). Because Justin

attains an authentic temporality at the end of the film, he can die without panic. He no longer exists in an everyday relationship to time where he can expect a future and recall a past.

Justin's actions at the end of the film make clear that opposite of the political passivity implicit in the ideological conception of time is not, as we might imagine, full activity. The political acts that both Tessa and Justin accomplish—and that the film enacts on the spectator through its narrative strategy—derive from another kind of passivity, a non-ideological passivity. To enact the politicisation that the film hopes to enact, spectators must submit themselves, as Tessa and Justin do, to the path of the drive. One acts through this submission, not in spite of it or outside of it.¹⁶

Though both *The Constant Gardener* and *Being and Time* critique the ideological relationship to time that conceives time as an infinite series of nows, the alternatives that they propose differ radically. For Heidegger, authentic temporality involves accepting one's constitutive finitude and being-towards-death. In this position, one constantly experiences the limit that time represents and comes to grasp the productivity of that limit. Existence itself becomes identical—and reduced to—the limits of finitude. In contrast, *The Constant Gardener* sees the embrace of finitude as yet another version of the ideological relationship to time (or a failed attempt to escape it). By fully acceding to the limit of its finitude, the subject fails to see the possibility of transcending limits. The embrace of finitude misses, in other words, the infinite nature of subjectivity itself, which is the origin of the subject's political drive.

Ironically, authentic temporality, as Fernando Meirelles conceives it in *The Constant Gardener*, involves submitting to the timelessness of the drive. This does not mean that the subject evades death or the variegations of finitude by attaining eternal life. But it does lift the subject from the concerns of bare life or survival. The subject of the drive experiences the urgency of the moment not, as would be the case for Heidegger, because time is running out, but because such a subject cannot wait. Every moment provides an occasion for sustaining the path of the drive. The subject who adheres to this path immunizes itself to the ideological seductions that the Other presents. The drive is not seeking satisfaction but has already found

¹⁶ I am indebted to Anna Kornbluh for this point and others throughout the essay. McGowan, Todd (2007) 'The Temporality of the Real: The Path to Politics in *The Constant Gardener*', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 3: pp.52–73. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n3/mcgowan.pdf>> ISSN: 1466-4615 online

it (through the repetition of a missed encounter), and this self-satisfaction permits a break from the Other.

The final images of Justin in the film do not include his killers. We see an extreme close-up of his eyes as he acknowledges their arrival, and then we see a close-up of his face as he turns and closes his eyes, bracing for the gunshots. Meirelles excludes the killers from the end of this scene in order to underline the status of Justin's subjectivity at this point. He has entered into the repetition of the drive, attained a politicised subjectivity, and achieved a position of indifference relative to the Other. His is the extreme freedom that *The Constant Gardener* calls us to experience.

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