

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH FERNANDO MEIRELLES AND RACHEL WEISZ

*The Constant Gardener*, a political thriller and romantic melodrama about a British diplomat investigating his wife's murder in Kenya, was one of the biggest arthouse hits of 2005. As in his breakthrough film *City of God*, Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles combines a vibrant visual style, a fluid narrative structure, and acting that has the spontaneous feeling of *cinéma vérité*. Rachel Weisz won an Academy Award for her radiant, impassioned performance as Tessa, a young activist who speaks out against pharmaceutical companies. Meirelles and Weisz discuss the film's production and the place of socially relevant films in today's cultural climate.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue with Fernando Meirelles and Rachel Weisz, following a screening of *The Constant Gardener*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 29, 2005):**

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Fernando Meirelles. (Applause) Please welcome Rachel Weisz. (Applause) To start off, Fernando: this project, I guess there was originally a different director assigned to it.

MEIRELLES: Yes, Mike Newell, yeah... But then he was invited to do *Harry Potter*, and so... (Laughter) they invited me.

SCHWARTZ: And could you tell us your first response and interest in the project? What attracted you to this, to either the novel or the film?

MEIRELLES: I think the first thing was the possibility of shooting in Africa. I had been to Kenya right after getting the script. I mean, actually, I was coming from Kenya to London to do something else, and I was given the script. So I think to shoot in Kenya was the main reason. And then, I mean, it was a story—very interesting story dealing with the pharmaceutical industry, which is a big issue in Brazil. Our government is fighting with the pharmaceutical industry for the last five years, and I've been reading about it on the front pages. And also because Ralph Fiennes was already attached to the project, and I thought it would be great to work with a solid actor—for

once in my lifetime, at least. (Laughter) So this was, I mean, a good reason as well.

SCHWARTZ: What did you feel that you wanted to do to the book that was maybe different than what Mike Newell would've done, or—in terms of your adaptation. I think one of the things that is great about the film is the texture that it has, and its authenticity in terms of its depiction of African life.

MEIRELLES: Yeah. Well of course, when I got involved, I wanted to change things in the script, and I've done it. I think what I've changed from the first version to this version is that the first version was much more about this British class system, you know? So the relation between all the characters was based on, who was working class, who was upper class; it was all based on that. And I really don't understand that much. (Laughter) So instead of trying to understand, I just took it out of the film. (Laughter) I also tried to include Kenya more than it was in the first script. So there were a lot of scenes that were supposed to happen inside offices and I tried to bring them to the streets or to real places, like markets or a slum... So I think in this film, we show more of Kenya than in the first version.

SCHWARTZ: And you actually were able to film in Kenya. I guess it was not originally assumed that the film would be shot there. It's a film that's critical of, at least, the Kenya[n] government of the past.

**MEIRELLES:** The first idea was to shoot in South Africa. But I really—as I was saying, my motivation to do the film was to shoot in Kenya. And Kenya is very different from South Africa. South Africa really looks like Los Angeles. It's a bit different, but it's the same kind of—I don't know who has been there—but it looks a bit like Los Angeles. It was almost a condition for me to shoot in Kenya, and production agreed, and we went to Kenya.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay. Now, I'll put you on the spot in front of Rachel, and ask you how you came to cast her. I guess I had read earlier accounts that said that you were interested in first casting a very young teenager, and then there was this sort of flap in the press about Nicole Kidman. But if you could talk maybe about the casting...

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah, actually, Rachel was the first actress who I met. When I went to Kenya—sorry, to London—to start preproduction, I think you had the day off or something, and we met. And I wasn't talking to actresses yet, because I was involved in other things. But Rachel came, and we spoke, and I had a very strong impression. I even thought that that actress had something to do with Tessa. At that point, she knew much more about Tessa than I did, because I was involved in everything, with location and finding crew and everything. And she was thinking about Tessa. So she taught me a lot about the character, and I was very impressed. And then I decided to go for a very young Tessa, like an eighteen-year-old girl, so I spoke to very young actresses. Then reading some lines, I realized that it wouldn't work, because nobody would believe in a girl, like, an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old who died for a cause. A very young Tessa would just look like a teenager behaving badly, you know? (Laughter) And so in the end, I spoke to a lot of actresses, but I came back to Rachel, because the impression—the first impression—was *really* strong. That's true...

**SCHWARTZ:** So what were some of the things that you were saying early on about the character? How did you see the character from the beginning?

**WEISZ:** Well, obviously someone who's very, very passionate. I think I was—I've always been—fascinated by people who devote, as people do—

not many of us—who devote their lives to causes, and will put their life in harm's way to do what they believe is right. I've always been fascinated by those people. What is it that makes them tick? What is it that makes them like that? And so for me, that's what I was really drawn to. Obviously, I'm very different. I'm an actress. I'm a storyteller, not an activist. But it was the idea of getting into the skin of someone who is that driven, that passionate, and that focused.

**SCHWARTZ:** At the end of the film, there's a credit to a real-life activist [Yvette Pierpaoli]—towards the very end of the credits...

**WEISZ:** Yeah, she was the person that John le Carré was really writing about. It was kind of an homage to her... He said, "she was somebody who lived and died giving a damn."

**SCHWARTZ:** The love story is so essential to the film. First of all, obviously, your character has such an enormous importance to the film, in terms of making it believable and making Ralph Fiennes's transformation believable. Could you talk a bit about how you made the love story work, the fact that these were two—in a way—such opposite characters, yet you have this line early on about you telling him that he makes you feel safe.

**WEISZ:** "I feel safe with you." I think it's often true in life that opposites attract. I think that she's unruly, wild, a little unstable, and he is calm, reserved, extremely stable, and very centered. I think he provides her with a kind of—he's her rock, if you like. And I think that she—maybe I'm being presumptuous, but I think she—provides a little passion and spirit in a life that would maybe be otherwise a little bit arid. So I think they give each other ingredients that the other is in need of. And how we did it in actuality as actors, do you...?

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, that's also—yeah, I'm interested in that too, because I think...

**WEISZ:** We drank a special love potion. (Laughter) You can buy it at... Yeah. I don't know, I think it's to do with—chemistry happens. I don't think you can control it or make it happen. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that—the way in which Fernando likes to work. He likes to improvise. And

very luckily, both Ralph and I love to work in that way—some actors don't like to, which is completely fair enough. So Fernando really encouraged us not to be *too* respectful of the script at all times. Sometimes we had to be, obviously, in the more kind of classical thriller sequences, but in the love sequences between husband and wife at home, we really were improvising. So I think it was that freedom and that liberation, which is all a credit to the way Fernando works, that created a kind of... He was my husband. (Laughs)

**SCHWARTZ:** So there were scenes, like the scene where you're talking about what to name the baby, for example—was that...?

**WEISZ:** There was a shape to the script, which, kind of we covered, but we were weaving in and out of the script. So pieces are improvised and pieces are part of the script, yeah. Would you agree?

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah. It's like jazz; you have the melody, and you just go around, and, yeah.

**WEISZ:** Yeah. It's very jazz, with Fernando. Yeah, yeah. (Laughter) No, it is. In the best...

**SCHWARTZ:** In terms of camerawork, for example, is there sort of a documentary style to how you're shooting? And it seems like some of the interactions with the sort of crowd scenes and street scenes seemed to be...

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah, well, to shoot the street scenes and... Instead of going in with a lot of equipment and crew and trucks, we did it the other way around. We went with a very small crew, little small camera, four or five people shooting, so we could really shoot in the middle of real people, in real life, and nobody would notice that we were doing a movie. So we've done that a couple of times and...

**WEISZ:** Little camera.

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah. So we were using this 16mm. It's a camera called Aaton, A-Minima from Aaton. It's really this big. 16. So nobody really sees that you're shooting a movie. Otherwise—because if you use big equipment and big crew and

everything, you really stop the life. I mean, when you go to a place with hundreds of people and trucks and—everybody will stop to look at you. So we were trying to be as discreet as we could. You know, very discreet. Some parts of the film feel like a documentary, because we really were shooting in real places with real people.

**SCHWARTZ:** In terms of the political impact of the film, by explicitly bringing Iraq into the dialogue and into that scene early on, could you just talk a bit about that, about what... A lot of the film is sort of general; that's very specific.

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah, well, that was one of the changes to the script. Because in the first version, the discussion in that lecture hall was about diplomacy—what was the purpose of diplomacy—and it was a very specific subject that nobody would be really interested in, and so... (Laughter) It's true, it's true. And then we thought that talking about Iraq would be great, because it would set up the time; you would know when that story was beginning. And everybody has an opinion on that, so... It's easier to set up the story, I thought.

**WEISZ:** Little did we know it would still be current.

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah.

**WEISZ:** I didn't think it would be, anyway.

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah. And again, she was—Tessa was saying that you're going into war just because of oil. It's, again, corporation controlling government; that's what the film's about: government and corporations working together and running our lives. So it's almost the same subject.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay. Let's open it up to the audience, if people have questions... (Repeats audience question) The question is that this seems to share so many of the concerns, and it seems such a natural choice for you, that he's surprised to hear that you weren't the first choice [to direct the film].

**MEIRELLES:** Oh, really? You know what... (Laughter) Actually, Simon [Channing Williams], the producer, said he thought about me because

it was a British story by a British writer, with British actors, and he thought it was too British. (Laughter) He needed somebody from outside to tell the story. Well, actually, for me it was just by coincidence, because I was in London. I was presented to Simon by chance, and he just got the script from the shelf and said, "Take a look, if you want to." It was pure accident for me. But he said he had thought about my name before... But I don't believe that. (Laughter) I thought it was a chance. I mean, he needed—he lost his director; Mike Newell had gone. So he needed somebody, I was in front of him; why not? Just read it, you know?

**SCHWARTZ:** But after *City of God*, which was such an enormous worldwide success and got you an Academy Award nomination, you had many offers to make different things.

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah, yeah, I had a lot of offers, especially from American studios. But I was not thinking about doing a film in English. But then, because of the conditions—and this was not a studio movie; it was an independent project, and I felt that I would have some control. That's why I decided to do it.

**SCHWARTZ:** And I would guess *City of God* attracted you to wanting to make this.

**WEISZ:** Wildly, yeah, yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** I'm imagining it must've been very liberating to play a character like this, who is unruly and speaks her mind, says things she's not supposed to say.

**WEISZ:** Definitely. (Laughs) Very much so.

**SCHWARTZ:** There's also an enigmatic side to the character. There are things that we don't know about her, and sort of mysteries about her. I'm just wondering how much you sort of had in mind, in terms of answering those questions.

**WEISZ:** I think everything gets pretty much answered by the end. I think this is what's brilliant about the narrative structure, is that it sets her off in a way that she seems to be something that she's not. She seems to be—there's a whole list of things—unfaithful. What else? (Laughs) I can't

think of all the things. But it's manipulative, in that you see her in a certain way, and then, slowly but surely, you realize that she isn't who you thought she was. So I didn't have to act mysteriously. The structure kind of did that for me. Yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** And you originally were not going to have the murder revealed in the beginning of the film? Is that true?

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah. We tried, I think, six different ways to begin the film, to start the film. We first had it in a linear way, just to understand the whole thing. But the film really didn't work when the story was told in a linear—you know, from the beginning to—it was very boring, actually. (Laughter) And so we tried several different ways to start. And we finally came to this last version in the cutting room. I think this film was really—we really found the film in the cutting room. We worked for—me and Claire Simpson, the editor—for three months, just to put the scenes together, and then we spent another three months trying to find a different structure to make the story more interesting and sometimes more mysterious, or sometimes more... And I think it's really a film shaped in the cutting room.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay. In terms of visual style, do you have any particular influences, whether it's—either filmmakers or anything?

**MEIRELLES:** No, in the visual style, I don't think so. I mean, the visuals of my films are really... The credits are for César Charlone, the DOP with whom I work with, you know? Of course, I have influences from other directors, but I don't think that visually... It's really much more César, the DOP. I think he's—this is his area. And our films, sometimes they look a bit different because of the way we shoot. We don't prepare the scene for the camera, for a certain camera position. We just do, like, a flat light. Then we usually perform the scene from the beginning to the end. We never break the scenes. The actors just perform the whole thing, and the camera just tries to catch it, to get it like a documentary.

We just perform the scene on set, and then we take a look. "Well, let's cover from here, let's cover from here; now let's give a bit more of

him..." And always shooting the scene from the top to the end, never breaking scenes, and I'm always telling him, "Now give me the close-up; in the moment, go to—I mean, to the actor's close-up, because I need a tight shot of that." Or, "Give me a wide shot; we're missing..." Usually, I'm watching what we're doing, and editing at the same time in my head, of course. And, yeah. And so we're—each time we do the scene, I ask him to give me a bit of that, a bit of that, and it's an interesting process. But we've been working together for fifteen years, so we really—we know each other very well.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay. In terms of the editing, if there were different challenges in this film, which has a very different style to him than *City of God*?

**MEIRELLES:** Yeah. Yeah, my first idea was to work with the same editor, with Danny [Daniel Rezende] again. But this was supposed to be a British film, so we couldn't have a foreign crew. It was only me and the DOP, so I couldn't have Danny. So I first had a British editor. And he started working, and it didn't work much. I mean, he's a very good editor. In all the sequences that he'd done, the rhythm, it was very, very well put together. But his vision of acting was very different from mine. Every time, he was choosing the wrong takes—not the wrong takes, but the takes that I wouldn't use, you know? So after one month, I decided to change the editor. And I found Claire Simpson, which—she's brilliant, because she understands a lot about the structure, and she really helped me to find the film again. And she also is very sensitive for actors. She really... Because when you're shooting a film, sometimes there are—in some takes—specific moments or little things that actors do, that you need to see. If the editor doesn't see it, you lose it. Almost all the moments that I would remember that were good on set, were on her cut. She was fantastic, so...

**SCHWARTZ:** And what was your response, in terms of seeing how the film was edited, seeing it through the different steps of that process?

**WEISZ:** I didn't really see it at many steps, apart from the last one. Extraordinary. I mean, the film that I had in my head was very dull (Laughter) in

comparison to the poetry that Fernando and Claire came up with. It was... It was as revelatory to me as it would've been for you, even though you weren't in it, (Laughs) and you hadn't been in Africa, and you hadn't been there, because it was completely... You know, it's a work of art, the way he and Claire put the pieces of film together and changed the structure. The structure was changed a lot in the edit room from the script that I'd read and been performing from. So my arc or throughline, or the order, or whatever you want to call it, was completely different in the final film. So it was... My hair was standing on end when I saw it; it was extraordinary.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay. In terms of the music, is it Kenyan music? Could you talk a bit about...?

**MEIRELLES:** No, the musician is Alberto Iglesias. He usually does all the soundtracks for [Pedro] Almodóvar. And no, he's using an orchestra, and some African instruments, but a lot of orchestra. And we have also a Kenyan singer called Ayub Ogada. This last song is from Ayub. There's, like, three songs from him. This guy, after we finished—the soundtrack, I mean—we recorded all the music, we called Ayub, and he plays an instrument called nyatiti, which is a typical instrument from Kenya. So in each—almost every—track from the soundtrack, he would play the nyatiti over the orchestra. If you pay attention, there's this nyatiti from the beginning to the end. Sometimes we barely hear it, but there's this Kenyan sound from the beginning to the end.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) And what was the experience for you? And also, being sort of—spending all this time in Kenya, and seeing what you were exposed to, what the conditions were? Okay, yeah, I guess if both of you could answer that.

**MEIRELLES:** It was very smooth shooting. We didn't have any big problems, only normal problems that you have during shooting. This was the first time that I was only directing a film; usually, I produce whatever I direct. So for me—I know it was very complicated sometimes for the production, but for me—it was very easy. I mean, it was the most relaxing experience of directing that I've ever had. It's really, really... I mean,

everything I asked was there and provided; it was really... It was easy, from my point of view. (Laughter) What about you?

**WEISZ:** Well, I've been to Kenya before, as a tourist. But obviously, I saw—making this film—a completely different Kenya. We were filming in real locations, so the maternity hospital is a real working maternity hospital. Kibera, the slum—obviously, as you realize, it wasn't a film set, they weren't film extras. We were filming in a community of—it's close to a million people living there. In fact, if you look at the map of Nairobi, it's not there. It's just green. It's as if there's nobody there. And it's a shanty town, where there's no running water, no electricity, no sanitation. I mean, it's poverty on a level that I've never remotely experienced or seen. It was shocking, and it is tragic and shameful that such poverty's allowed to exist. But after spending a few days there, in the slum, for instance, it was—it's very difficult to explain, but the people who live there, the life there, the spirit, the nobility, the dignity of these people, and the lust for life that they have, and their little cinemas and little pubs and barbershops, and the choir—like, the choir who sings at my funeral is a real choir from the community... It's a vibrant life there. And very soon, I felt completely relaxed and welcomed. These people's hospitality was just extraordinary. So, rather like Fernando was saying, for me there were no problems. There was shock, initially. But

it was—it became—it was where my character was most relaxed, with these people, working in this place, and it's where I became most relaxed.

And then when we went out of Nairobi and were filming in remoter parts, where there were no hotels or anything, we were living in tents. So we were living in these—a tented city, literally. It was like a row of tents, hundreds of tents, and everyone had their own tent that they were zipped up into at night. And I've never been camping, so (Laughs) it was the greatest adventure. (Laughter) But I didn't have to fly in all the tents—that was the location manager. And they had to fly in water and tents, and dig the holes for the toilets. It was, like, a lot of work had to be done. But we just arrived there and had a nice tent, so it was... (Laughter) It was really—it was an incredible adventure, and a real privilege to get to see parts of a country and meet people that, as a tourist, you just would never, never meet.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, we'll try to get Rachel to come back when we show *The Fountain*. And we would love to see...

**MEIRELLES:** I'm starting to shoot something in July, let's see.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, and we'll see you back here with that film... So thanks a lot. (Applause)

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.

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PAGE 6