

The Gentle Art of On-Screen Murder: Investigating the Screen Adaptations of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction

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Agatha Christie – the highest selling author ever, outselling even the Bible and Shakespeare - has long been heralded variously as the Queen of Crime, a Publishing Phenomenon and the First Lady of Crime (Keating, 1977). The sales of her books have escalated from a mere 10,000 (hardback) prints for each new book in the 1930s to an estimated 2 to 4 billion (wikipedia.org) at present.

Moreover, her popularity is not restricted to the English-speaking world. An August 1961 report by the UNESCO showed that Agatha Christie has been translated into over 103 foreign languages. “Her works show up in the bush of Nigeria, the alleys of Hong Kong, the beaches of Acapulco, as well as the coffee tables of Mayfair and Fifth Avenue.” (Riley & MacAllister, 1986).

What is also quite unexpected is that Agatha Christie's incredible sales success does not owe anything to tie-ups with television or films (Barnard, 1990). A comparison may be made here with J K Rowling, another very popular British author, whose Harry Potter series of books and film adaptations formed a harmonious network of literary and cinematic discourses that have symbiotically and simultaneously fuelled each other's sales and demand. In fact, Rowling's Harry Potter series is also different in that both the books and the films have been extra-ordinarily successful, with the series-ending film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows – Part-II*, breaking box-office records as the highest-grossing film till date. In contrast, films based on Agatha Christie's books have been, with a few exceptions, ‘very bad’ (Barnard, 1986).

A look at the figures would be sufficient proof. Agatha Christie's book sales are estimated between 2-4 billion, J K Rowling's between 350 to

450 million (wikipedia.org). But, while the highest-grossing *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows–Part-II* has grossed USD 1,265,901,000 and counting, for Agatha Christie that figure would be USD 35,733,807 for the 1975 film *Murder on the Orient Express*.

The over 80 books that Agatha Christie wrote have spawned a mere 20 or so feature films. Leslie Halliwell in *The Filmgoer's Companion* mentions Christie as the “Best-selling British mystery-novelist and playwright whose innumerable puzzle-plots have been strangely neglected by film-makers.” (Riley & MacAllister, 1986). And Hercule Poirot, Christie's celebrated series-detective and most-filmed creation, has never acquired the filmic stature of Philip Marlowe, the detective-anti-hero of Christie's contemporary, the American thriller-writer Raymond Chandler. Or even James Bond, the British hero of Ian Fleming's books, whose popular films franchise has long overtaken the print sales.

Why the popularity of Christie's films have never been able to match that of her books is a mystery as initially baffling as one of Christie's own formulaic whodunits. To solve the mystery, we have to search for clues in a chronological way. Also, we have to analyse the psychology, both of the creator and of the reader/viewer. Finally, we have to be careful of misleading generalizations.

To begin at the beginning, let us briefly look at the earlier film adaptations of Christie.

The first film based on a Christie novel was the 1928 German film, *Die Abenteuer GmbH* (Adventures Inc), adapted from the Tommy and Tuppence Beresford adventure, *The Secret Adversary*. Of this, and of the next four features, no copies remain. These early films were conventional British quota fillers, and they were often stage-bound (*Black Coffee*), or talk-bound, and had extraneous ‘silly-ass’ characters (like John Deverell in *Alibi*) inserted as comic relief. The dialogue-heavy, stage-restricted, claustrophobic screenplay and the interpolation of scenes with unnecessary invented characters diminished the suspense and pace of the plot, which has always been Agatha Christie's strength. It is opined

that “it is doubtful if the early plays and films based on her books significantly affected her sales,” which increased manifold only with the coming of paperbacks during the late 1930s. (Walter, 2001)

Across the Atlantic, Christie’s contemporaries of the hard-boiled American school were better represented in the film noir genre of cinema, not least because the casting for the lead role was spot-on. Humphrey Bogart starred as the iconic, tough-talking professional gumshoe Sam Spade in Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and as Philip Marlowe in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1946).

Casting is very important in films adapted from books, because the audience already has a strong and set notion as to what the characters should look like. The early Hercule Poirot movies suffered from miscasting. Austin Trevor played the role of Poirot (*Alibi* and *Black Coffee* in 1931, and *Lord Edgeware Dies* in 1934). He was young and clean-shaven, with no trace of the famous waxed pointy black moustache that is the visual motif of the elderly Hercule Poirot in many print editions, one which Christie described in great detail in book after book, and one that she insisted should be put on the cover jackets.

According to many Christie fans, a similar problem of miscasting is seen in the four Miss Marple films made by MGM’s British unit in the 1960s, starring Margaret Rutherford. She was large-built with “bulging eyes and indignant, wobbling chins”, and, as she herself says, Agatha Christie “was not at all keen on me playing Miss Marple...I didn’t look at all like her idea of the detective. She saw her as a kind of fragile, pink-and-white lady, not physically like me at all.” (Haining, 1990).

Although Rutherford put in entertaining, scene-stealing performances that made her “the first actress to create a lasting impression as Miss Marple with the general public” (Haining, 1990), these films were some of the most unfaithful adaptations of Christie’s mysteries. At Margaret Rutherford’s insistence, an entirely new character was created to accommodate her husband, Stringer Davis, who played the role of Miss Marple’s librarian assistant.

There were numerous divergences from text to screen, which increased as the series progressed. In the 1961 *Murder She Said* (adapted from *4.50 from Paddington*), Miss Marple's character becomes the eye-witness of the first murder (instead of her friend, Elspeth MacGillicuddy), and she also takes over the role of Lucy Eylesbarrow to pose as a maid on the estate where she believes the body is hidden. As Christie herself complained, "there was no kind of suspense, no feeling of things happening....it was a bad script. I could have made it more exciting." (Morgan, 1984).

The second and third films, *Murder at the Gallop* (1963) and *Murder Most Foul* (1964), which the script-writer duo David Pursall and Jack Seddon based inexplicably on Hercule Poirot mysteries (*Funerals are Fatal* and *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*, respectively), had Miss Marple joining riding academies and riding horses, and then becoming a thespian to track down a murderer. The fourth film, *Murder Ahoy* (1964), had an original screenplay by Pursall and Sedon, which followed the same formula of a murder attracting Miss Marple's attention and bringing her into contact with some juveniles and name character comics, followed by more murders, till she lays an ingenious trap to catch the murderer (Jenkinson, 1977).

Murder Ahoy had the improbable finale where Miss Marple fights a fencing duel with the murderer on board a ship. The film was a critical and commercial failure, none too soon for Agatha Christie, "who was horrified at what had been done with her characters" and "upset by the travesties that had been visited upon her stories by the scriptwriters." Her "strong objection" was overruled by MGM because of the press and public acclaim of the first three films (Haining, 1990). These films are not only misadaptations of Christie's novels, they are also exploitations of the popular Christie character, Miss Marple. This entire period may be seen as a losing struggle for Christie to establish and/or reclaim her authorial voice, which got lost in the polyphony of film-making.

Agatha Christie clearly disapproved of the loss of control that took place when the texts she had authored were re-interpreted by various

scriptwriters for the screen and the stage. In fact, when she witnessed the interpolation of a bedroom scene for Hercule Poirot in the MGM-produced and Seth Holt-directed adaptation of *The ABC Murders*, she put her foot down and the production was abandoned (Jenkinson, 1977). As an author, she preferred to be in control of the complete process from writing to publication. Popular fiction is often regarded as a commodity rather than high literature (Pawling, 2000), and Agatha Christie showed her early and innate awareness of this when she “had a slight row” with her publisher, The Bodley Head, over the jacket cover design of *Murder on the Links* (1923), which was just her second novel.

Belonging to a time and a place where the theatre was a more potent influence than films, Christie decided that “in future no one was going to adapt my books except myself: I would choose what books should be adapted, and only those books that were suitable for adapting.” (Christie, 1977). But she was talking here of adaptation for the stage, specifically of the 1945 stage version of *Ten Little Niggers* where she herself changed the ending and made two characters innocent and surviving at the end to suit the needs of the theatre. Becoming a versatile “playwright as well as a writer of books”, and encouraged by the success of her print-to-stage adaptations, she soon decided to “write a play as a play” and that was the genesis of *The Mousetrap* (1951), the longest-running play in the history of theatre (Christie, 1977).

However, Christie never collaborated actively on film adaptations, stating “I have been spared a good deal by keeping aloof from films” (Morgan, 1984). This may be a reason for their limited success. In contrast, J K Rowling has actively assisted Steve Kloves in trans-creating her novels to screenplays. Kloves was the scriptwriter for almost all the Harry Potter films, except *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, which was written by Michael Goldenberg. Rowling had overall approval on the scripts, and she maintained creative control by serving as a producer on the final two-part installment.

When an author enjoys lasting popularity through a book-series or a series-detective, her devoted readership forms a strong attachment to

her characters and style. They form certain expectations regarding the look and attitude of the characters, and the way in which the narrative should progress. Under such circumstances, any derivative adaptation of her work into different media should convey the integral meaning and vision of the source text. Which is why the best and most successful Christie films have been those which have been faithful to the source material in plot and/or characterization.

In the first version of *And Then There Were None* (1945) [adapted from the controversially-titled *Ten Little Niggers*, Agatha Christie's 'best-known and most popular novel' (Osborne, 1999)], director Rene Claire gets the atmospherics and the casting right. Ten strangers are assembled on an island, and are accused by the unseen host of murder. They are killed one by one as in the children's rhyme, which recurs as the plot-summary and leitmotif. The use of "through-the-keyhole sequences where the wary survivors watch one another" (Jenkinson, 1977), and the clever use of darkness in scenes depicting power failures and match-lit confrontations heighten the sense of impending nameless peril.

The subsequent film versions of *And Then There Were None* tampered with the locale (Hotel in the Alps in 1965; Hotel in the Iranian desert in 1975), changed the modus operandi of many of the murders, added sex and violence, songs and what not. No wonder they were rejected by audiences and critics alike.

Another way of adapting Christie successfully on-screen can be seen in the taut two-hour *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957). Director Billy Wilder was here adapting an adaptation, because the highly successful 1953 stage version of *Witness for the Prosecution* was adapted by Christie herself from her own short story. The London streets and Old Bailey courtrooms were faithfully replicated in great detail at MGM Studio's Stage Four. Although having Marlene Dietrich play Christine Vole meant that she got to flash her famous leg in a flashback scene, Wilder extracted a powerfully controlled performance from her and the rest of the cast. By removing any exact depiction of time and place

and by emphasizing the theatrical effect, Wilder made this “the most remarkable film to be made from Agatha Christie material” (Jenkinson, 1977). The film was also publicized effectively, with the sensational poster of Marlene Dietrich in bed with Tyrone Power, a scene that was not there in the film at all. And there was the highly publicized “Secrecy Pledge” that the cast, crew and visitors to the set signed so as not to reveal the ending of the film. This made the plot the hero of the film, and set the stage for the suspense of the final verdict and the quadruple twist at the end.

Similarly effective publicity also played a big role in drawing audiences to the 1974 film version of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Richard Amsel’s art deco-style poster of an oriental dagger surrounded by the big-name star cast “perfectly captured the combination of mystery and glamour” ((Riley & MacAllister, 1986). Paul Dehn’s screenplay did not attempt to update the material with humorous interpolations. Director Sidney Lumet focused on the style, making a film a nostalgic tribute to a leisurely aristocratic British way of life in the 1930s. The steam-driven locomotive becomes a character as well as a recurring visual motif, and the film is built up as another great train melodrama. EMI-Paramount produced lavishly, with lush period studio work alternating with authentic snowscape locations. Apart from the near-perfect Albert Finney as Poirot, who played the role with great attention to detail, all the other roles were played by internationally known stars like Sean Connery, Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman and John Gielgud. *Murder on the Orient Express* “went on to become the most successful wholly British-financed film ever” (Riley & Mac Allister, 1986).

EMI-Paramount repeated this same formula of an all-star cast and murder set in exotic location in *Death on the Nile* (1977). John Guillerman directed faithfully, and Peter Ustinov played a less perfectly-groomed Poirot in this successful venture. These highly-publicised 1970s films became a marketing opportunity for increasing book-sales, with specially designed book-jackets made for re-issuing the related books. This also was the time when ‘A Christie for Christmas’ was the marketing spiel for the annual new Christie book-release by her publisher, Collins.

The success of the formula dipped with *The Mirror Crack'd* (1980) and *Evil Under the Sun* (1982), where even big names like Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and Maggie Smith could not rescue the slow-moving plot and direction. As has been seen before, attempts to dilute or update Christie do not succeed on screen.

But maybe there is a deeper reason for the limited success of Christie big-screen movies after 1980. The cinematic medium and the widescreen visual experience is better suited for epic subjects than armchair whodunits. With the improvement in special effects, there is no doubt that Harry Potter and the spectacular Hogwarts world, or the fantasy world of J R R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series provide grander scope and greater visual satisfaction on-screen than the best of Christie's films. Even the adventure-chase world of American hardboiled detective fiction offers a faster pace of action and more visual variety.

Christie's cosy fictional world is the world of Mayhem Parva, where murder is a game or a puzzle that offers both relaxation and reassurance (Keating, 1977). Much like Su-Do-Ku or crosswords, it is world of escape for armchair detectives, and is perhaps better accessed from the comforts of one's home. Which is why many of her admirers "maintain that radio has come closer than any other medium of entertainment to presenting her work as she intended" (Haining, 1990).

Although Agatha Christie "did not care much for television" (Riley & Mac Allister, 1986), in recent decades television has been the medium for a Christie revival and re-creation. In the 1980s, Warner Brothers Television produced a series of two-hour television movies, *The Agatha Christie Mystery Theatre*, and successfully attracted younger American audiences to vintage Christie. Other producers followed and, in the UK, the BBC started multi-episode versions of Christie stories starring David Suchet as the 'definitive' Hercule Poirot and Joan Hickson as the 'definitive' Miss Marple. These faithful and detailed television adaptations have introduced her mysteries to new generations of readers worldwide. In Christie, the English detective story removes to places which are "to a lesser or greater degree, remote, enclosed, uncomplicated

by the disruptions and distractions of the greater world” (Barnard, 1980). And in television, viewers often seek solace and escape of the very same kind. So the Agatha Christie plot, with its variety of strategies of deception, has often found its ideal media partner in the small screen. And her popularity over time remains unabated across countries and cultures.

Some Agatha Christie storylines have become templates for standard crime film plots. *Gumnam* (1965) in Hindi, for instance was one of the many versions of *Ten Little Niggers*. Here, in spite of the traditional Bollywood interpolations of songs (the standard Helen cabaret-number, and the Mehmood comedy-track “Hum Kaale Hain to Kya Hua”), the director Raja Nawathe was able to recreate the suspense-driven plot successfully. Although many changes were made, the number of characters stranded on the remote island – and who are murdered for past crimes one after the other – was brought down from 10 to 7, and the ending was changed to a happy union between Manoj Kumar and Nanda. But, the film retains the core Christean plot-element of increasing suspense. In fact, in Lata Mangeshkar’s “Gunmaan Hai Koi”, the film uses the indigenous playback-song device to heighten the fear and suspense. Agatha Christie’s plots have archival value – they have been ‘circulated’ through various dramatic and film versions that have renewed and intensified the relationship between text, representation and spectatorship.

Christie was not just the master of the intricate plot, “it is her characterization that gives Agatha Christie greater universality than all her rivals” (Barnard, 1990). Sometimes the skeletal characters can be fleshed out in other cultures equally well, as in Rituparno Ghosh’s Bengali film *Shubho Mahurat* (2003), which trans-creates the Miss Marple novel *The Mirror Crack’d*. Miss Marple is transformed into the gently inquisitive and very intelligent spinster aunt, Ranga Pishima, (played by Rakhee Gulzar) and the fading diva is played by Sharmila Tagore.

Here there is displacement – the original text is relocated in a different space time and geographical context (Casetti, 2004). The narrative discourse reappears in another cultural space and through another

medium of expression. Here, because of the double distancing, the 'fidelity' of film to the book becomes less important than the 'fidelity' of the film to its new cultural moorings. Unlike the novel set in Miss Marple's village of St. Mary Mead, Ghosh uses an urban Kolkata-based setting and a story-within-a-story framework, where the main plot is filtered through the vision of a young journalist (Nandita Das), the niece of Ranga Pishima. The film goes beyond the investigation of crime to explore issues like the work-life imbalance of working women, the precarious nature of on-screen fame, and various aspects of the Kolkata way of life. The cultural hybridization and contemporization work because Christie's characters are often "pure stereotypes...obviously drawn from stock" (Barnard,1990), and are, thus, easily identifiable in any culture. They depend more on intrinsic universal human qualities rather than culturally-rooted idiosyncrasies (seen in Dorothy L. Sayers' series-detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, for instance).

So we may deduce that translations of her texts, whether in cinema, stage or television, which have remained faithful to the Christean mode of characterization and plot, have succeeded. The others, regrettably, have not. Future cross-media translators – and now Christie texts are also getting re-visualised as graphic novels and computer games – would do well to keep this caveat in mind.

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