Reflection of Changing Times in Adaptors' Approaches to the Integrity and Originality of Source Literary Texts

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Abstract

The topic of 'culture in crisis' is one of those which at first look may evoke a false impression that it is easy to deal with. Even though we are now confronted with the serious issue of the world pandemic which has affected culture in the broadest sense really hard, culture seems to have been in crisis for longer time than anyone would have noticed before the pandemic. The way all the areas of culture operate nowadays may evoke in many people the feeling that artists and other people involved in all kinds of creative processes are lost for ideas (and means). I decided to opt for one area that is closest to mass 'consumers' of what we like to refer to as popular culture – film adaptations of some of the most traditional literary texts still alive – detective fiction. For my research and subsequent analysis, comparison and a bit of confrontation with criticism, I selected a few novels by Agatha Christie featuring Miss Marple as one of her most popular sleuths and their adaptations. Before getting to the adaptations themselves, however, I also tried to offer a critical look at theatre as one of the branches of performing arts closely related to TV production through creative teams composed largely of people of similar professions, thus facing similar problems.

Keywords: *society; culture; crisis; detective fiction; film adaptation; alterations; additions.*

1. Introduction

For over a year mankind has been stricken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The damage caused by it is gigantic and no area of human life has been left unaffected. One of the most stricken spheres of public

life is culture, which had in many countries virtually ceased to exist at least for several months. What seems to have escaped the attention of people, not only those directly involved in cultural activities, is that the current state of affairs has made one undeniable fact more visible – that culture has been in global and overall crisis long before the corona pandemic struck.

If we want to contemplate over the reasons for the crisis in culture, it can be quite surprising to see their variety. Firstly, there are huge masses of people who claim that for their comfortable and satisfying life, culture related issues are unnecessary. The literally dangerous point about such views is that they are actually generally held even by a lot of top political representatives from whom one would expect quite the opposite. Culture is often perceived as a 'pass time activity' not inevitable for one's well-being. For this kind of people, artists represent a specific group of beings not exactly fitting in, wasting time, energy and (often other people's) money to create something no one (from their point of view) cares about. Secondly, there is a large group of people who may live surrounded by cultural venues abounding in offers of cultural events but when deciding about going out or staying in they will stay at home. They will most probably be tempted to leave the comfort of their homes e.g. by a theatrical performance maximum once in a season to see actors known to them from numerous and endless television series. In many such cases the performance is not important. These people, regardless of the degree of their formal education, are living in a city because of career and professional reasons and in this sense they can be defined as reversed snobs – they will go out (to the theatre) because it is expected and because their tickets have been cheap or even for free. Perhaps, they would go to the cinema more often but then the film must be complemented with refreshments – going to cinemas not providing this kind of services is out of the question which was evident last summer when Covid measures had been lifted and cinemas could open – people failed to come *en masse* as they had used to for two

major reasons – on the one hand, and quite understandably, they were still afraid of infection, while many of those who would have dared to come usually did not because the cinemas did open for the major reason of their existence – to show films, but were not allowed to sell refreshments. These are but two examples of the critical situation within the otherwise expansive phenomenon of culture which are easy to perceive by observant onlookers. However, not all the blame related to culture in crisis should be put on the pandemic. One other, equally serious reason for this is the economic one. "Cultural environment is getting strongly commercialized parallel with the rise of private television channels." (Zemančíková 2020: 187; *transl. KB*) Money rules the world, every single branch of human existence, education and culture inclusive. "In public rhetoric money is more and more used as the means of calculating, efficiency is the criterion, the idol of private ownership and enterprise is almost not doubted." (Zemančíková 2020: 154; *transl. KB*) When those at the top take the attitude described above, culture gets in danger, faces crisis and has to strive for its existence really hard. However, to not make this view seem too one-sided it is not only about politicians' and economists' hostility or at least indifference.

Members of artists' communities cause huge damage quite often too. The point is that recent developments prove the predominance of one trend – the break up with traditions, with traditional values, methods of creation, as if the very substance and purpose of culture in general were being turned upside down. One cannot help being tempted to say that these trends point at the lack of ideas rather than proving the justification of attempts to present artists' products or performances as those of art, thus stretching the limits. This critical lack of inspiration has been quite evident in recent years, even decades. In one of interviews (back in 1989) Tom Stoppard, as one of the most highly valued and outspoken contemporary British dramatists said: "Talent without imagination: wicker baskets. Imagination without talent: modern art." (Lee 2020: 648) Naturally, he caused a stir back then as there have always exited differences of

opinion. There are those who would openly agree with such a statement, then others who would secretly agree but keep their real view to themselves so that they would not be accused of being conservative or even reactionary, and then those who would accept anything that is presented to them as work of art regardless of its artistic value, often legitimized by being labelled as 'experimental' – for the same reasons. For culture, this is one of dangerous things corresponding closely with Stoppard's words quoted above. How far can experiments go? What is still an experiment and what is just the creator's (or creative team's) quandary? As Petr Osolsobě[1], former member of the Artistic Board of the Theatrical Faculty of Janáček Academy in Brno stated in an interview he gave to Slovak daily *Postoj*[2] on the state of contemporary art and society, "The best way how to cover up for one's artistic impotence, is to act as an artist breaking the taboos." (*Postoj*: 7/2/2021, *transl. KB*).[3] There is a parallel between what Stoppard said back in 1989 and what looks as confirmation of his words by Osolsobě. They are but two voices trying to define the hardships culture is facing globally. Stoppard refers to visual art, as well as to trends in theatre. Osolsobě's views refer particularly to theatre, but his ideas can easily be applied to any area of performing arts, e.g. film. And this is the sphere I would like to have a closer look at, more particularly the way current filmmakers approach and work with (classic) literary pieces. For this purpose, I decided to deal with the way Agatha Christie's works, as the best example of pop-culture, are treated.

[1]Petr Osolsobě (1962, Brno, Czechia) – a Czech university teacher, aesthetician and philosopher.

[2]*Postoj* – Conservative daily *Postoj* is a Slovak daily which was founded in 2015 and reflects political, economic, cultural, religious and social issues.

[3]Osolsobě abdicated from his post of the member of the Artistic Board of the Theatrical Faculty of Janáček Academy in Brno, Czechia due to controversy caused by the Croatian director Oliver Frljić's (1976) stage-play Our Violence and Your Violence staged in Brno, Czechia, in 2018.

2. Authors' and adaptors' dilemmas and approaches

One of Slovakia's modern writers, Ladislav Ballek,[4] when asked why he would not participate in adapting his novels into film, had claimed that:

> he was pretty aware of the fact that a literary work adapted for a film was not a 'mirror image' of the origin text, that it was not its absolute transcript and that screenwriters and directors must be given maximum freedom. (Hochel 2021, *transl. KB*)[5]

It is this 'maximum freedom' that I found challenging when considering the way the works of some well-established authors are treated. Ballek's view can be confronted with another expert opinion of Neil McCaw:

> Once adaptations are detached from their informing source(s) there is little left that marks them out as adaptations at all. They can still be studied as cultural texts in and of themselves, but less convincingly as 'adaptations' or else the term risks becoming completely meaningless in its intertextual ubiquity. (McCaw 2012: 11)

When looking back at film productions for big screen or television, the tendency towards adapting the well-known books has always been quite prevalent regardless of their being the works of older, classic authors or the works of most popular or highly valued contemporary authors. There are some among them who could be seen as sharing the view held by Ballek, then there are those who sell the rights only to be sorry afterwards when they see how little has been left of their original text; and then there are those who can no longer

[4]Ladislav Ballek (1941-2014) – a Slovak writer, politician and diplomat.

[5] *film.sk* – a monthly published by Slovenský filmový ústav (The Slovak Film Institute), reflecting all the most important premieres, reviews and events related to film.

defend their works or at least express their opinion. If we were to remain within Britain, many classic authors' works remain the focus of adaptors' interest; the works of such authors as Jane Austen on the one hand and Agatha Christie on the other seem to be the ones screenwriters seem to be repeatedly and most often turning to, seeking new ways of approaching their works. Jane Austen has always been valued as one of the best English, even world, women writers. Agatha Christie's novels have always ranked among the so-called genre fiction and as such are often defined as escapist literature which it took a long time to get accepted by haughty lovers of 'high-brow literature'. Nevertheless, this kind of literature managed to win popularity with masses and generations of readers thus gaining its well-deserved place alongside the greatest literary names.

> Since the development of the detective story from Wilkie Collins to Arthur Conan Doyle it has become one of the most popular of all genres…. Some of [Christie's] works are considered classics: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) in particular. (Carter & McRae 2001: 368)

This statement provides an opportunity to contemplate the experience Tom Stoppard had with his attempt at adapting Ford Madox Ford's Modernist novel *Parade's End*. The novel belongs to the same group as the works of Conrad, Joyce or Woolf, i.e., the works generally ranked among those at the opposite end of the scale to that which normally holds the works of the likes of Agatha Christie and aptly compared with them by Carter and McRae:

> The novels of Buchan, Bennett, Christie, Galsworthy and Wells were more likely to be bestsellers than, for example, the novels of Joseph Conrad or Henry James. Innovative forms and

> concerns often have a less immediate appeal for readers. (Carter & McRae 2001: 368)

By its nature, Stoppard's experience corresponded with the idea quoted above, the experience with simultaneous broadcast of his adaptation of a literary work and *Downton Abbey* series originally written for television. In her biography of Stoppard, Lee claims that *Parade's End*

> … was something he passionately wanted to do... and … in the end he was amazed by how well it worked on screen. At every stage, he stood for the writer's integrity, for fidelity to the spirit of the book and for aesthetic values, against financial imperatives, corporate decisions and underrating the audience's intelligence. … in post-production … he had to defend his script against requests for it to be made simpler and more intelligible. (Lee 2020: 782)

A little further on, Lee adds that thanks to his integrity

> Stoppard's return to television … was celebrated, and *Parade's End* was a big critical success, generally acclaimed … but … [the viewing] figure dropped off during the course of the series[6] … Coincidentally, by the time it came out, *Downton Abbey* … was having its third series. … In terms of popular success, *Downton Abbey*, targeted at a mass audience … made mincemeat of *Parade's End.* But in terms of critical reputation, *Parade's End* left *Downton Abbey* nowhere. (Lee 2020: 783-4)

Parade's End is a quality adaptation of a quality novel. *Downton Abbey*, on the other side, is an original TV series. Lee observes that the

[6]Lee states that "the first episode had 3.5 million viewers", while Downton Abbey averaged 13.3 million viewers a week.

series was 'targeted at a mass audience' thus 'making mincemeat of Parade's End' while critical reputation was reverse. One undeniable truth about *Downton Abbey*, however, is that it is also based on historical background though partly of different kind and on larger scope while at the same time attempting to bring closer to mass viewers some social and legal notions and rules combined with a good dose of drama. If we were still to refer to the differences just mentioned it is appropriate to reflect on one great difference in purpose between 'serious' and 'mass' culture/literature: "We do not go to popular literature for fine writing, we go to it for relief from fine writing." (Barnard 1990: 117)

Thus, we are getting to the point of creators often turning to the well-established and safe practice of adapting literary works into feature films or TV series. The attempts of recent years show that they are getting quite close to what was mentioned in the early parts of this text – the final product, 'based on' the original text does not 'mirror' it very much. However, as has already been mentioned, this should not always be perceived as a shortcoming. In their publication *Adaptations. From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Cartmell and Whelehan claim that

> [Wagner identifies] three types of adaptation: transposition – a novel 'directly given on screen' (Wagner 1975: 222); commentary – 'where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect' id.: 233); and analogy (e.g. a film that shifts the action of the fiction forward in time or otherwise changes its essential context; analogy goes further than shifting a scene or playing with the end, and must transplant the whole scenario so that little of the original is identifiable. (Cartmell & Whelehan 2007: 8)

Yet, sometimes the adaptors resort to such alterations or innovations that it is quite hard for real devotees to accept what they see. Moreover, the authors seem to become subject to influence of current

trends in many aspects of social life – gender or racial issues being the most frequent ones. Based on this, I will have a look at some of Miss Marple stories, adapted for television by two different TV companies (BBC and ITV) within the scope of about twenty years while keeping on mind the fact that the number of Marple stories is so high that it would be simply impossible to mention all of them in this limited space. That is why I chose those which show the biggest differences between the source text and the adaptation: *The Body in the Library* (1942), *4:50 from Paddington* (1957), *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976).

3. Mass culture and political (over)correctness

The Body in the Library was first adapted by the BBC in 1984. Aldridge states that

> … this production… has been made with care, and an absolute desire to follow the source material as much as possible. … Changes from the original novel are so minor that they do not warrant discussion. (Aldridge 2016: 220)

In the origin story, as well as in the adaptation(s), Miss Marple forms alliance with her long-time friend Dolly Bantry, who may serve as a kind of comic relief, a counterpart to serious minded Miss Marple "born at the age of sixty-five or seventy…" (Christie 1978: 450). Most of the novel's characters have been transferred into the adaptation. To this point, this and the ITV adaptation of 2004 are quite alike. However, as far as the second adaptation is concerned, there are some considerable shifts when compared to the novel which brings us to the above-mentioned attempts at conforming to the trends towards over-correctness. There is one considerable difference between the ending of the novel and the denouement in the film. In the novel, Miss Marple's summary of the case goes as follows:

> … the most obvious thing in the world. …Marriage! It wasn't a question of only Mr. Gaskell or Mrs. Jefferson – there were the further possibilities of *marriage*. If either of those two was married, or even was *likely* to marry, *then the other party to the marriage contract was involved too*. … 'And that brings you straight to the one person who must be concerned. *Josie!* … Josie, who was shrewd, practical, hard as nails, and *all out for money*. … If Josie and Mark Gaskell were actually married – then the whole thing was clear. As we know now, Mark and Josie were married a year ago. They were keeping it dark until Mr. Jefferson died. (Christie 2016b: 210)

On the other hand, the adaptors opted for a more 'up-to-date' denouement. As Aldridge points out,

> … the story's resolution … created a divide in its viewers … since the adaptation's denouement changes the culprits from a heterosexual couple to two women in a secret relationship with each other. 'I think it was a mistake', admits Prichard.[7] … with the addition of a homosexual relationship as motivation for murder… we have a programme that has a rather juvenile sense of how to make itself relevant for a modern audience. (Aldridge 2016: 320)

One cannot help but agree with these words. This attempt at making the story more attractive for younger audiences 'may not be to the taste of many old-school Christie fans'. It does strike one as unnecessary and miscalculated. Though this text is primarily about Marple stories and their adaptations, it fits to mention a very similar device used by the adaptors of one of Poirot stories, *Five Little Pigs* and

[7]Mathew Prichard (1943) – Agatha Christie's grandson, a producer and former CEO of Agatha Christie Limited.

the character of Philip Blake. In the novel, he is "sexually attracted by [Caroline Crale] yet tormented by guilt feelings since she is the wife of his best friend…" (Barnard 1990: 80) In the film, Philip Blake is strongly attracted to Amyas, Caroline's husband (the murder victim). Had the creators of either series paid proper attention when creating the series, they would have found out that such a relationship had been more than hinted at in another Marple story, *A Murder is Announced* (1950). The novel was adapted as the last one of the first ITV series (2004). The characters of Murgatroyd and Hinchliffe, two women of whom one "is now simply stupid" (Aldridge 2016: 322) while the other one, Hinchliffe "wears a suit, in case anyone needed the implicit nature of the couple's relationship underlining" (Aldridge 2016: 322) are Christie's original creations who "apparently live together because of mutual affection" (Shaw & Vanacker 1991: 42) and as such were presented in the newer adaptation thus making the radical alterations in the above mentioned titles questionable. In his monograph, Barnard deals with this particular subject by pointing out the space given by Christie to "…the bored, glamorous young Julia, the public school leftie … [or] the elderly lesbian couple…" (Barnard 1990: 91) to which he added in a footnote that they are "Done sympathetically, but [are] one of very few examples of sexual aberration in Christie." (Barnard 1990: 91)

4. Cutting out the familiar and incorporating the new

Regarding the tendency towards such considerable changes as incorporating in adaptations characters not originally present in the source work, Aldridge points out that

> … perhaps there is a danger that such swinging changes do Christie a disservice, since casual audiences are not able to see the dividing line between the original work and any later (usually inferior) alterations. (Aldridge 2016: 323)

And this, actually, may be the trouble. How to accept the changes, how to decide which of them are still acceptable and which go simply too far? Some Marple stories in the later ITV series do not comprise only the 'original' Marple tales but the creators incorporated Miss Marple into the stories that originally had not featured her at all, e.g. *The Sittaford Mystery, Towards Zero* or *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*[8]. Generally, such attempts to insert Miss Marple in the stories in which she originally does not appear are quite acceptable. Similarly, one could come to terms with expanding the stories by adding e.g. some more murders, thus killing even the most sympathetic character(s) (Ordeal by Innocence). But there are more questionable alterations than the ones mentioned at the beginning of this part. What Aldridge notices about another adaptation included in the first series, *4:50 from Paddington*, is "…the irritating addition of Noël Coward to the cast of characters. This is just one example of a change that can only distract rather than entertain." (Aldridge 2016: 322) However, in the next sentence, Aldridge adds that "… the rest of the production is one of the stronger instalments of *Marple*…" (Aldridge 2016: 322) which, however, can be disputed, yet again.

The father and the sons of the family, who are central to the plot, are all crooks, each of them in his own particular way. Two of the sons get murdered in the course of both the novel and the film. However, the way the head of the family, old Mr. Crackenthorpe is depicted in the film deserves a little pondering because the adaptors worked in a reversed way in that the head of the family is presented in a more sympathetic way than his model in the novel where he can be briefly defined as an old, mean miser. In the novel, Mr. Crackenthorpe shows no sorrow over the death of his older son. He only states:

[8]*The Sittaford Mystery* features an 'amateur' detective, Emily Trefusis who solves the mystery in collaboration with the police; *Towards Zero* features Superintendent Battle; *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is originally a story from Tommy and Tuppence series.

> So Alfred's dead, is he? He won't sponge on me anymore, and he won't get any of the money either. They've all been waiting for me to die, you know – Alfred in particular. Now he's dead. I call that rather a good joke. (Christie 2016c: 223)

When reproofed for his unkindness, he only laughs and goes on: "'I'll outlive them all … You'll see if I don't my girl." (Christie 2016c: 223) The unflattering picture of the old man is brought to the fore by the old family doctor who, when asked by the Inspector why the father hates his sons so much defines Mr. Crackenthorpe:

> 'I'd just say that Luther has never felt very adequate as a man himself, and that he bitterly resents his financial position. He has possession of an income but no power of appointment of capital. If he had the power to disinherit his sons, he probably wouldn't dislike them as much. Being powerless in that respect gives him a feeling of humiliation.' (Christie 2016c: 226)

This aspect of Mr. Crackenthorpe reveals a lot about his psychology, there is no positive trait in his character, yet the creators of the film weakened this aspect and transferred some of the negative features on his other son, Harold. Harold is the only son who is married but

> [n]either Alice nor he had any illusions about the feeling they had for each other. Perhaps Alice was fond of him – he didn't know. … Alice was a great disappointment to him. He hadn't been in love with her … her family and connections had undoubtedly been useful…. In marrying Alice he had been considering the position of hypothetical children …[but] all that had remained had been he and Alice growing old together without much to say to each other and with no particular pleasure in each other's company. (Christie 2016c: 248).

The extract makes one see that under his thick skin of a cynic pondering that "… if his father had succumbed [to arsenic poisoning] – well, there wouldn't have been anything to worry about." (Christie 2016c: 247), there seem to dwell well-hidden worries of a man, both unlucky in his career and unhappy in his private life.

However, what viewers get is a particularly repulsive image of the man. Though married, Harold hates women which he himself confesses to the Inspector when the truth about the rape of his French ex-sister-in-law (not to be found in the novel) surfaces. In such cases one cannot help asking again about the necessity of such addition to the plot as the individual members of the family each carry their personal demons which offer adaptors quite enough material.

Another interesting point to ponder over about *4:50 from Paddington* is the way the serial murderer's identification is presented. In the novel, the train murderer is identified by Miss Marple's friend, Mrs. McGillicudy by just looking at his back as he is leaning over Miss Marple pretending she is choking on a fish bone. The incident takes place in the Crackenthorpe's house. In the latest adaptation she does actually the same, only the suspects are taken on a train trip to London. What is not explained to readers/viewers satisfactorily is "… the way Miss Marple arrives at the identity of the murderer" (Barnard 1990: 43).

5. When characters are not who they were intended to be

More significant alterations are found in *At Bertram's Hotel*, a novel first published in 1965. Before having a closer look at the adaptations (1987, 2007), let's have a look at how this late novel is perceived. McCaw points out that Bertram's hotel "… is … a symptom of a sick culture…. [d]iscomfort, alienation, unease and an overwhelming sense of doubt predominate. *Bertram's Hotel* is a sign of a national culture in crisis." (McCaw 2012: 50-1) Aldridge points out that "… [the] two-part 1987 adaptation cannot escape the fact that this is not a vintage Miss Marple story … it feels like this is an adaptation that struggles to do its

best with weaker than usual source material." (Aldridge 2016: 232) The origin text is populated with a sufficient number of characters that help to advance the story through their entanglements and interactions which are unveiled before the reader gradually.

> Miss Marple is an 'authentic' great-aunt whereas most of the other old-world characters are not what they seem. The detective plot involves the unmasking of these figures to reveal the robbers and cheats they actually are. … [W]hilst the double exposure unfolds, the reader is treated to a reminiscence, or a fantasy, of what a good hotel used to be like… (Shaw & Vanacker 1991: 54)

The attempts to keep the world of Bertram's Hotel unchanged and going exactly the way Miss Marple had experienced it as a young girl make it seem a paradise separated from the hostile, rapidly changing outer world only by the entrance door. However, "It passes the reader by (though it shouldn't) that what is being insisted upon is the unreality of the place – that it is a façade, a front." (Barnard 1990: 55-6) Superficially, the world the arriving guests encounter after entering the lounge is the world of old-time tranquillity, peace and relaxed pace. "However, there is a criminal undercurrent to events at the hotel, and it is one that leads to murder." (Aldridge 2016: 230) Everybody can be fooled but the experienced Miss Marple. To unveil what is going on under the surface, Agatha Christie's own creations as far as the characters are concerned sufficed. Yet, the 1986 BBC adaptation "feels like as much of a culture shock to the viewer as modern London had once been to Miss Marple – we are suddenly put into surroundings that seem far more contemporary, with rock music and Miss Marple visiting a coffee bar…" (Aldridge 2016: 231-2) The second adaptation (2007), however, made a confusing (and confused) 'mess' of the story by removing some episodic characters while adding several new (episodic) ones or changing the original ones to better fit in the film's plot. "… every attempt is made to render this potentially claustrophobic setting more interesting for the audience, although the

changes are not always to good effect." (Aldridge 2016: 324) Considering the fact that the novel was first published in 1965 with the main aim of creating the illusory atmosphere of the old world, it is at least surprising to find out that the novel's villain turns out to be the adaptation's Nazi hunter cooperating with an entirely new character of Mr. Mutti, a ridiculous 'milliner' striving to retrieve family possessions - the art work stolen from his family home by the Nazis; a murdered chambermaid who turns out to have been a blackmailer; twin-brother jewellery thieves, a jazz singer turning out to be involved in smuggling of the above mentioned art work; and Canon Pennyfather who is not Canon Pennyfather, etc. If Aldridge was critical about incorporating the character of Noël Coward in the adaptation of *4:50 from Paddington*, the same tool of introducing Louis Armstrong and his orchestra in *At Bertram's Hotel* causes astonishment too, enhanced by the impromptu gig with singer Amelia Walker thus disturbing the hotel's cosy atmosphere and its guests. "The adaptation … pushes the series even further towards farce and cliché, with a Nazi vicar and a tediously obvious sub-plot involving twins." (Aldridge 2016: 325) Hence, this particular adaptation seems to justify the question – why to cut out the original characters and why to create and introduce some new ones whose role in the film and the reasons of their ever being created are quite dubious? What is the point? Similar method was applied to another Marple story, *Sleeping Murder* (1976). Contrary to "Bertram's" this is not late Christie. Aldridge explains that

> … [the] novel had been posthumously published in late 1976 with the suffix 'Miss Marple's Last Case' since it was the final novel featuring the sleuth to make it to print. However, there was nothing particularly 'final' about the story, other than that it had been written by Christie decades earlier and reserved as a gift to her husband Max Mallowan to be published after her death… (Aldridge 2016: 230-1)

The 1986 BBC adaptation "script sticks faithfully to the novel"[9] (Aldridge 2016: 230), the approach which made some critics feel that "it had been a little slow". (Aldridge 2016: 230)

What makes the 2006 adaptation markedly different from its predecessor is the same creators' approach as the one used in *At Bertram's Hotel* – there were many invented plots and many new characters added.

> This adaptation … makes considerable changes to the narrative, the characters and their relationships. The result is an adaptation that differs so much from the original that it can really only be considered to be based on a part of the premise and a handful of the original characters. (Aldridge 2016: 323)

The truth is that we get confronted with yet another issue. The novel, *Sleeping Murder* became a target of criticism of some reviewers who claimed it as largely improbable that "… a young woman unconsciously buys a house in which she had lived many years earlier, which reawakens memories of a murder in the distant past." (Aldridge 2016: 231) and 'the sequence of events' that follows is deemed 'improbable' by them. However, as the story unravels before readers, one is tempted to accept the surfacing childhood memories associated with the murder almost no one had believed to have been committed. In this respect, when having a closer look at the ITV adaptation one must notice perhaps a more serious improbability. The retrospective opening scenes take viewers to India and they see a parting of a couple of whom so far nothing is known (never found in the novel). Their story unravels gradually as the film goes on up to the moment when the 'widower' Kelvin Halliday, carrying his little daughter Gwenda in his arms, meets a young singer in a touring company, soon falls in love with her and asks her to marry him. Astonishingly enough, the new Ms. Helen Halliday turns out to be the original Mrs. Claire Halliday

[9] The author of the script was Ken Taylor.

whom everyone but her brother, Dr Kennedy fails to recognize. Later it transpires that husband and wife had staged Claire's fatal car crash back in India so that Claire could escape justice (getting arrested for jewellery theft, never found in the novel). Such disputable points abound in this adaptation.

The novel opens with Gwenda arriving in England from New Zealand.

> This was England at last and here she was, Gwenda Reed, young married woman of twenty-one, on her travels. Giles' return to England was uncertain. He might follow her in a few weeks. It might be as long as six months. (Christie 2016a: 2)

In the adaptation, Gwenda arrives in England ahead of her fiancé of whom viewers hardly ever see more than a hand holding a telephone receiver and finding excuses for not joining Gwenda in England. Instead, she is put in care of a shy solicitor Hugh Hornbeam (new character), who inevitably falls in love with her and joins her and Miss Marple in the investigation. Unsurprisingly, they end up together. The events going on at present time alternate with many flashbacks - there is a group of new characters entirely invented by the adaptors – the 'Funny Bones' troupe of entertainers Claire/Helen is a member of. Their life stories and tangled relationships only add to confusion one must feel when attacked with so much information and so many different life stories shrouded in mystery. The confusion even increases with some of the character names that had been retained but given to entirely different characters. Perhaps the worst of the innovations is Miss Marple's phone call to Gwenda's fiancé in India. Even then we only see a blurred image of a man some years older than Gwenda being very annoyed by Miss Marple's waking him up at night, and making things worse by saying: "If this is anything less than Gwenda dropping dead… By the way I guess she hadn't." (Sleeping Murder, ITV, 2006)

When trying to compare these two particular Christie adaptations there is one noticeable fact – the 1986 BBC adaptors managed to use the source material to the full and did not need any (unnecessary) additions or omissions either of characters or the plot to meet the requirements of a 'full-time' feature film thus proving that the novel itself was satisfactory as the basis for transferring the literary piece to screen whereas, in their attempt at making the story more attractive, the adaptors of the twenty years younger ITV version went too far even though Aldridge acknowledges that

> … the programme has the courage of its convictions and is not really pretending to be true to the original text nor improve on it – instead this is a heavily reworked version of the story designed to be a bright and bold piece of entertainment for a general audience. (Aldridge 2016: 323)

What I find significant about this statement are two points – Aldridge claims (rightly) that "this is a heavily reworked version of the story" with which statement one can but agree. However, it is the statement that "the story [was] designed to be a bright and bold piece of entertainment for a general audience" I dare to disagree with. The point about my reservations is this – the more series of the latest Marple productions were made, the farther the creators deviated from the source texts. Another example of such alterations, so that we would not build our argument on two or three adaptations of a similar kind only can be that of *Why didn't They Ask Evans?* (series4/part4) Though it is one of the stories which do not have Miss Marple as the main sleuth, she had been incorporated in it, which is, as has already been pointed out, not an unwelcome act. But the almost thriller-like atmosphere, with poisonous frogs guarding the last will (to mention but one addition) is really questionable. As far as the second half of the statement about the "entertainment for the general audience" is concerned I cannot help but argue that Christie stories had never been intended for other than the 'general audience' (general reading public).

There arises one other point, though. The booming fashion of the so called 'northern' or 'northern-style' thrillers of recent years has provided the fan readers/audiences who love the suspense, the roughness and darkness and naturalist plots, with enough source material. Agatha Christie's 'cosy' mysteries in which "[m]uch of the 'cosiness' … is really a matter of *contrast* with the violence and death that is to intrude on this world …" (Barnard 1990: 28) may be too old-fashioned, too slow or too cosy for this kind of fans, but forty-five years after her death, they do have their fans and as such they should be treated with respect; "… she not only bridges national and generational gaps; she seems to appeal equally to all class and intelligence brackets." (Barnard 1990: 3) Among other things, her novels may serve as a good source material to those who want to learn more about what England used to be and try to compare the state of the country and its culture with current situation. McCaw rightly claims that "… it is Christie's quintessential Englishness that is central to her appeal…" (McCaw 2012: 41)

6. Inserting a romance

One specific point about the most current adaptations is that of their endings. The largely happy-ever-after solutions are added practically in most of the adaptations of recent period. Christie, however, "wrote of her dislike of romance in detective stories … as a distraction to be avoided wherever possible." (Barnard 1990: 85), while what viewers get after solving the murders e.g. in *4.50 from Paddington*, is Miss Marple sitting happily with Lucy Eylesbarrow and the Inspector who are holding hands in front of log fire while she half-secretly takes out of her handbag two balls of knitting wool – one pale blue and one pink. Contrary to this idyllic moment, the novel's ending is not that straightforward and final – in fact, as far as Lucy's future life is concerned it is only hinted at in the dialogue between the Inspector and Miss Marple: "'Which of 'em is she [Lucy] going to choose?' 'Don't you know?' … 'No, I don't….Do you?' 'Ooh, yes, I

think so,' said Miss Marple. And she twinkled at him." (Christie 2016c: 281)

As far as *Sleeping Murder* is concerned, there is even a greater difference. In the novel, readers encounter a happy newly-wed couple trying to settle in England while at the same time, as has been mentioned above, trying to solve a mystery of a 'sleeping' murder that (might have) happened in their newly acquired house many years ago. As has been mentioned, in the adaptation the husband has been replaced by a fiancé who stays behind in New Zealand evidently not showing any signs of intending to follow his betrothed and (quite predictably) we have Gwenda and Mr Hornbeam end up together in the beach scene worth the top of romantic stories. Yet, these romantic happy endings are in sharp contrast with generally known Christie's attitude to 'young lovers':

> … her young lovers are never angled to produce warm feelings in the reader. They are pieces on a chessboard, to be calmly considered along with all the other chessmen, their qualities, motives and opportunities weighed coldly. (Barnard 1990: 39)

However, Christie herself did show some compassion for those who had to undertake a dangerous journey of solving an old murder:

> She paused and said softly, 'Poor Helen … Poor lovely Helen, who died young … You know, Giles, she isn't there any more – in the house – in the hall. I could feel that yesterday before we left. There's just the house. And the house is fond of us. We can go back if we like…' (Christie 2016a: 247)

Barnard's definition of Christie's attitude sounds critical but this may be misleading. It could be approached from a different angle as a positive thing on the author's part as she protected herself from getting too involved with the most sympathetic of her creations, thus avoiding spoiling the game. Even more so when Barnard adds:

> She is writing a story where facts and incidents are of prime importance, and where characters must be tailored to suit them. She understood instinctively that the character interest of her stories had to be subordinated to her puzzles, must never be allowed to get out of hand. (Barnard 1990: 109)

Conclusions

In the opening passages of this text, I tried to point out the fact that world culture in general is in crisis. I briefly touched the tendencies that prevail particularly in the world of theatre. However, my main interest has lain in a different branch of culture, the branch that is most frequently defined as mass or popular culture. For this purpose, I chose some of Agatha Christie's novels and their adaptations from the 1980s and 2000s. The number of titles I worked with was quite limited by the space allowed for this text which required a really selective approach to the wealth of material provided. The choice was quite clear because the particular novels that were used and their different adaptations seemed to best demonstrate the main idea of the topic. Adaptors seem to resort very often to adapting literary pieces of every existing historical period or literary movement. Very often they return to and reuse the titles which had even become profaned. And this might be one of the reasons of their desire to be 'innovative' and to, sometimes literally, turn the source text upside down. This is a very sensitive issue. As it has been mentioned above, it is allowed, though perhaps not always acceptable or even understandable. One of the sources I worked with was Robert Barnard's text on Agatha Christie as the author which he fittingly titled *A Talent to Deceive*. Agatha Christie was so skilled an author that she really managed to build her stories in such a way that less experienced detective story readers might have got deceived by her cunningness. This verb, however, inspired me to ponder over the way (not only) her novels are treated by modern adaptors. After having a

closer look at some of the adaptations, mentioned also in this text, I realized that sometimes the adaptors' attempts at making the stories more attractive to viewers border on deceit. Yet, the meaning of the noun is not the same in these two different contexts. Barnard states that: "It is the wonderful simplicity of Agatha Christie's deceptions of the reader that keeps the stories of her classic period so fresh and readable" (Barnard 1990: 38). What I want to emphasize is that some of Christie's stories are quite complex in themselves as far as the number of different characters is concerned and viewers, largely those who know the source texts, do not need to be misled by juggling with names and characters. Such practices really tempt one to think that what is lacking here, is real inspiration. When the BBC had come with the commendable project of bringing the classic literature to "… people [who] have more problems finding the time and leisure to read a novel than they do to view one…." (Cartmell & Whelehan 2007: 18), they did it in a sensitive way so that they would make masses of viewers watch, understand, get acquainted with particular literary sources, and, hopefully, turn to reading (at least temporarily) without causing any damage to the literary legacy. The process of popularization may be useful on the one hand, while on the other, it really carries within some dangers and requires a sensible and careful approach.

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