Recycling the Classics: *The Witness for the Prosecution* (2016)

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1. Recycling the Classics

I have argued elsewhere (Hesse 2015) that the crime play has frequently enabled dramatists to experiment with innovative formats. However, at the present moment the quality of the crime play that most suitably lends itself to cultural diagnosis and critique is not its innovative potential but its retrospective attitude towards the canonized classics of the genre. This is remarkable insofar as it has generally been tacitly assumed that the effect of detective fiction rests largely on its central mystery and the final surprise revelation. The present abundance of rewritings of the classics, however, suggests the opposite: Golden Age detective fiction seems to be getting more attractive the more it is being repeated. A case in point is the new version of *Murder on the Orient Express* recently released by Kenneth Branagh. This is a remake not only of the 1974 film by Sidney Lumet but also of the feature-length episode of the recent "faithful" *Poirot* series that began in the 1980s and only recently terminated its run in 2013. This raises the question of how quickly a new version of a familiar classic can be inflicted on an audience and also what "surplus value" a viewer will get from yet another adaptation. One likely answer is that the film exploits the nostalgic value of Golden Age "cosy" crime fiction, but the equally recent and extremely successful TV series *Sherlock* suggests that it is not necessary for a rewrite to appeal to the sentiment of nostalgia. *Sherlock* consistently updates its material and the specific pleasure for the viewer is derived from seeing how this is accomplished; arguably, *Sherlock* is a programme more pleasant for viewers familiar with the original Conan Doyle stories than for novices. Interestingly,

this process of rewriting has also prompted fans of the series to indulge in further rewriting, as is in evidence in the abundance of fanfiction based on the series.

A similar effect is in evidence in the popular response to the stage version of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The 39 Steps*, which enjoyed an extensive run first on the fringe and later in the London West End. *The 39 Steps* was the pioneering example of a transfer from screen to stage, and a familiarity with the film version is an indispensable prerequisite to enjoying the show. I have discussed this play more fully elsewhere (Hesse 2009 and Hesse 2013); it may therefore suffice to point out that Patrick Barlow uses the techniques of Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" and appeals to the audience's imaginative participation when he recreates the film in its entirety with the help of only four actors and minimal technology. The challenge of how this will be managed creates the main suspense in the production. In spite of recreating the film literally scene by scene, Barlow does succeed in closing on a surprising twist, when the villain is eventually shot by a "stage hand" coming through the closed curtains while all four performers are already on stage. Hence, the killing of the villain, though part of the original film, is still unexpected for the audience.

The main test case and example for my subsequent analysis will be the 2016 TV dramatization of Agatha Christie's "The Witness for the Prosecution" (hereafter: "W"). The new TV version attempts to go back beyond the Wilder film and the stage adaptation to the short story, claiming to restore original authorial intention in a manner that suggests a marked hostility to Christie as a playwright or to the stage crime play in general.

2. Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*

Christie had adapted her 1925 short story for the stage herself in 1953 under the title of *Witness for the Prosecution*. (Hereafter: *W53*) The plot is already fairly well-known, yet a brief plot synopsis may be useful. Likeable but unstable Leonard Vole is accused of having murdered Emily French, a wealthy elderly lady of his acquaintance, who

left him all her money. His defence rests solely on the alibi his mysterious foreign wife Romaine can provide, but she seems to have an agenda of her own and appears at the trial as witness for the prosecution. A mysterious woman contacts Vole's solicitor (Mayherne in the short story, Mayhew in play, film and TV) and offers to sell him letters from Romaine Vole to her lover, which prove that she incriminated her husband out of spite. Thus, Romaine's evidence is broken down in court and Leonard leaves as a free man. It is not until later that the lawyer finds out that the mysterious "other woman" was Romaine Vole herself in disguise, who had figured out that the evidence of a loving wife in court carries very little weight and that she had to resort to other means to save her beloved husband from the gallows. In a second twist she informs him that Leonard was guilty after all.

In her stage adaptation, Christie turned this plot into a courtroom drama, a subgenre of the crime play rare in Britain, though popular in the US. British courtroom dramas were mainly written by members of the legal professions.[1] Christie herself had to read up on legal procedure and consult lawyers in order to get the technicalities right. Courtroom drama tends to revolve around the convention of the innocent suspect (another character, also present in the courtroom, turns out to be guilty instead) – hence the fact that Leonard is indeed guilty amounts to a violation of genre conventions. British courtroom dramas tend to be less interested in guilt and innocence than in questions of identity (as it also does in *W53*, where the question of who killed Emily French moves into the background as the reader/spectator tries to figure out the real intentions of Mrs Vole) and often end with a miscarriage of justice. *W53* reveals the inherent theatricality of the court trial: the generically built-in reversal of expectations manipulates the jury (= the audience) so effectively, that their judgment is impaired. Thus, the conclusion of the play amounts to an implicit criticism of the jury system.

While in the short story, written in the irresponsible 20s, the murderer goes scot-free, Christie introduced an ending of poetic justice in the stage version: Mrs Vole discovers that her husband is planning to leave her for another woman and kills him while still in the

courtroom.[2] The central plot device of disguise takes on a different significance on stage and screen, i.e., in mimetic genres, because while the reader has to take Christie's assurance that Romaine's disguise was largely impenetrable at face value, a viewer can judge for himself, whether he, too, would have been fooled.

W53 was a very successful play and had excellent reviews, *Plays and Players* praised Christie's ability to fill the theatre "without stars". The parts of the barrister Sir Wilfred Robarts (replacing the character of the solicitor Mayherne from the short story for the courtroom drama version) and of Mrs Vole were subsequently turned into star parts for Charles Laughton and Marlene Dietrich in Billy Wilder's screen version of 1957. Wilder largely adhered to the play, but added a heart condition for the barrister and scenes of comic banter between him and his nurse. He also added two significant flashbacks: Vole's first encounters with his wife and with Emily French. Vole first meets his later wife in Hamburg after the war. She is a singer in a nightclub and they engage in an immediate exchange of sex for consumer goods.[3] The meeting with Emily French is more playful and flirtatious than described in the play version; moreover, it shows us the victim while still alive – it becomes impossible to treat her murder in an entirely light-hearted manner. Concerning the device of disguise, it has been argued that every viewer is likely to recognize that the "other woman" is also Mrs Vole, and that the point is precisely Sir Wilfred's wilful blindness – he only sees what he wants to see. Arguably, the surprise revelation had already become too widely known (although the film still ends with an appeal to the audience to keep the secret). However, there may be yet another reason for revealing the identity of the other woman beforehand. As Alfred Hitchcock has pointed out, in film it is preferable to inform the audience and create suspense than to keep them in the dark and create surprise. The surprise revelation at the end of detective fiction (of the whodunit variety) thus does not work well in film or on stage.[4]

The subsequent TV version of 1982 was closer to the play, dispensing with the two flashbacks, but retaining the scenes between Robarts and his nurse. Since the nurse scenes are very prominent, the

overall impression is that the film version has superseded the play in the popular imagination. As the identity of Mrs Vole and the "other woman" had presumably become even better known, the disguise is but minimal and it is comparatively easy to recognize Diana Rigg.

In 2016, Ben Affleck announced his intention to film *Witness* once again, presumably also starring. Agatha Christie Ltd. seem to be selling the rights quite freely at present, but even so, this does not explain why audiences would want to watch yet another remake, or be expected to do so.

3. *Witness for the Prosecution* (2016) – Principles of Adaptation

The DVD of the 2016 TV version (hereafter: *W16*) contains ample bonus material which discusses the basic principles of the new adaptation in a section entitled "From Page to Screen". *W16* was a production that quickly followed the 2015 version of Christie's novel *And Then There Were None*, which Hilary Strong of Agatha Christie Ltd. calls "the definitive version", deliberately setting it off against Christie's own stage version and various film versions based on it, including one directed by René Clair. In the case of *And Then There Were None*, it makes sense to draw on the earlier narrative version rather than the play because it is a novel and hence provides far more material than the stage version. This, however, does not apply to "W", which is a very brief story indeed.

With respect to *W16*, Sarah Phelps defends the liberties she took in her very free adaptation of the text: "you pick up a detail and build a world around it", a procedure she calls "next level adaptation". As an example she mentions Mayhew's "little dry-as-dust cough" ("W": 1), which the screenplay develops into the after-effects of gas. In a further defence of a very free adaptation, Strong calls *W16* "inspired by Agatha Christie's work", using a metaphor of the "bones" (by Christie) and the "flesh" (by Phelps) and draws attention to the way Christie herself changed her narratives when adapting them for the stage.

As in *And Then There Were None*, Phelps decided to base her screenplay on the story rather than the play version, declaring "I didn't

really want to adapt the play". While this presumably means that she did know the stage version, she denies having seen the Billy Wilder film version, and recalls that Marlene Dietrich was starring in it before even mentioning Charles Laughton. These points made in the bonus material may be intended to prevent comparison between *W16* and a film that has after all become something of a modern classic. The bonus material also suggests that Christie, while admired as a novelist and short story writer, is considered something of an embarrassment as a dramatist. This is surprising since her writing has been praised not for the style of her descriptive passages but for her ability to write convincing dialogue. Julian Symons writes: "She was not a good writer, but she was supreme mistress in the construction of puzzles and had a skill in writing light, lively and readable dialogue that has been consistently underrated by critics" (Symons: 137). Symons' appreciation of Christie's skill in writing dialogue is obviously not shared by the production team of *W16*, since not a single line written by Christie herself survives in the final product. In a film or TV adaptation, of course, the original dialogue of the play will always be much more in evidence than the (perhaps equally embarrassing) style of the narrative texts. What this boils down to is that the production company would presumably prefer to keep nothing but the original plot intact and have the freedom to adapt or rewrite everything else (although criticism of Christie's style in her narrative texts is never so much as voiced).

Apart from a general distaste towards the stage crime play that may be inferred from the bonus material, courtroom drama in particular seems considered to be an outdated format. The producer points out that they wanted to offer 'more than the pure static courtroom of the play version'. Spatial confinement, which works well in the stage play, is now understood to be alien to the aesthetics of TV drama.

Again as in *And Then There Were None*, Phelps declares that this production is "subverting the expectations that people may have of Agatha Christie" in a further attempt to distance herself from the cosy, giving the examples of series like *Midsomer Murders*, but also the *Poirot* and *Marple* series. In a further variation of the surprise motif, she announces: "This isn't what people will expect". The "surprise" which

constitutes a generic convention of crime fiction is here transferred from the solution of the mystery to a breach of generic conventions.

4. Changes between the Short Story and the TV Version

One of the most conspicuous differences between *W53* and *W16* is a reorganisation of the action. While the play was mostly set in the courtroom, *W16* features a rather long pre-trial plot of almost 50 minutes as well as a long post-trial plot of about 30 minutes. The rather long expository action, however, is a characteristic that *W16* shares with the short story, which devotes 18 pages out of 24 to the phase before the trial. Like the Wilder film, *W16* extensively develops the defence lawyer's home life. While the short story merely tells us that Mayherne is married, the marriage of the Mayhews is depicted in detail in *W16*. Similarly, *W16* also develops the characters of Mrs [sic!] French and her housekeeper Janet, thus providing two fully fleshed-out character parts for two mature actresses.

The focus on these two characters is also related to the shift in the depiction of sexuality and gender relations from the 1950s to the 2010s. *W16* is much more sexually explicit than any of the earlier versions. While Mrs Vole in the play merely sarcastically remarks "What hypocrites you are in this country!" this charge may actually be levelled at the 20th-century versions themselves. Not even Billy Wilder, who had dealt with a similar topic in *Sunset Boulevard*, dared to state explicitly that Leonard Vole was Emily French's "kept man". Julian Jarrold, the director of *W16*, by contrast, mentions the "fizz and chemistry" between Vole and French. At the outset of the action, Emily French is shown picking up Leonard in a posh restaurant in which he is working as a waiter and bringing him to her flat where she proceeds to lecture him on the needs of a mature woman and offers him five pounds for sexual favours.

In the short story, the character of the housekeeper Janet is merely sketched in the following manner: "She was a faithful watchdog to her mistress, and she didn't like [Vole]. She was jealous and suspicious" ("W": 7). In *W16*, Janet is a closet lesbian, who loved her mistress "too

much" (as the dialogue later points out). Altogether, sexual motivations and relations are more strongly and conspicuously developed, for instance in a rather aggressive sex scene between the Mayhews, which, however, merely culminates in a fit of coughing.[5] In both the short story and the 2016 TV version, the trial deteriorates into a battle of the sexes rather than a mere conflict between the Crown and the Defence. In the short story, Romaine comments in passing: "How stupid men are! Stupid – stupid – stupid" ("W": 13), while Mayherne, in free indirect discourse, meditates "Women were the devil when they got their knife into you" ("W": 15). This idea is even more strongly developed in *W16*, when Romaine, defeated in the courtroom, breaks out into a cry of: "You fucking men!" while Vole's barrister Sir Charles Carter speaks of the "perfidy of women" in general, not Romaine in particular.

Although Christie is generally praised for her supreme plot construction, Phelps has identified two plot holes which she removes in her adaptation. Firstly, Christie does not bother to establish an alternative suspect in case Leonard is innocent, beyond "a burglar"[6] and, briefly, some nephew of Miss French's. The stage version does not introduce alternative suspects at all. Phelps, by contrast, establishes the housekeeper Janet as an alternative suspect and even develops this plot strand up to the point when Janet is finally executed by mistake. Secondly, Christie does not give any motivation for Romaine's attempt to frame Leonard. In the short story, she merely responds to Mayherne's question "Why are you so bitter against Leonard Vole?" "I shall not tell you. I will keep my secret…" ("W": 14). Phelps explains that Leonard knew of Romaine's previous marriage, which would prevent her projected marriage to her fictional lover Max.

Mayhew's meeting with "the other woman" is also treated somewhat differently. In the TV version, Romaine chooses to introduce the character she is playing by name, calling herself "Christine Moffat", which is the name of an actress in her company who used to be the star and constantly humiliated Romaine. This may serve the purpose of deceiving the audience yet more thoroughly, as has been suggested for the device of "the other woman" in general (Carlson: 122). When

Romaine, in heavy but very poor make-up, identifies herself as Christine Moffat who has since been the victim of a vicious attack (not with vitriol, as in the short story, but a mixture of boiling water and sugar), the audience may be taken in for an instant, but this is highly unlikely, since her made-up face is so very obviously made up, and besides, Romaine's diction is clearly recognizable, not with respect to its accent but in its rhythms. If Mayhew is taken in nevertheless, he obviously *wants* to believe what he is told, even more so than Laughton in the Wilder version.

One of the most notable differences between *W16* and the previous stage and screen adaptations is that, like the short story, it dispenses with poetic justice. Phelps accordingly calls the short story "deliciously nasty". In its abandonment of poetic justice, *W16* goes even further than the story by having an innocent suspect – Janet – executed.

5. Historical Period

As the bonus material reveals, this production takes great pride in its historical accuracy. Screenwriter Sarah Phelps for instance points out that Christie's thrillers are "very much about their time. More so because they're not trying to be about their time." The main action is explicitly set in "London 1923", that is, approximately at the time of the first publication of the short story. Jarrold expresses his approval with the choice of the short story as the source text rather than the play, because this gave him a 1920s' setting. The current popularity of 1920s' settings, as for instance in the TV serial *Downton Abbey*, is pointed out expressly in the section of the bonus material devoted to costume.[7]

The concern with the historical period already becomes obvious in the opening shot, which is set about five years before the main plot: Leonard Vole is shown running across a Belgian battlefield and in a shelter meets Romaine Heilger for the first time. This opening shot was very demanding and expensive, requiring the laying of 250 feet of track over the "battlefield", and hiring real amputees posing as mutilated corpses. The company took an obvious pride in this sequence

and devoted a separate subchapter in the bonus material to it. The director expressly stresses the "epic" quality of the opening shot, apparently trying to establish his version's affinity with film rather than with drama. The second episode of the mini-series, after the necessary brief plot synopsis, reverts to the scene of the battlefield: Romaine and Leonard have now left their shelter and set out again into the outside world, hand in hand.

As in her previous adaptation of *And Then There Were None*, Phelps stresses the influence of the experience of war on each of the characters, particularly Leonard Vole. In an interview with Mayhew, Leonard delves into a lengthy monologue about the disappointment of the veterans returned from the war. And when he later encounters Mayhew once again and has to own up to having committed the murder, he merely comments: "Just one life after so many." The relationship between the post-war period and the crime play is indeed significant. The crime play as a genre invariably reaches its peak about ten years after an armed conflict. Arguably, it is one of the social functions of the crime play, to help viewers come to terms with an experience of actual violence, which, however, has become transferred to a different realm.

In connection with the historical period, it is also worth noting that both Phelps and Jarrold repeatedly refer to *film noir* as their main stylistic inspiration, although the TV show is shot in colour, not black and white. The colour scheme of the production, however, is remarkable. As long as the action is set in London, it is photographed entirely in dirty browns, yellows and greens. Jarrold explains that he wanted to give "the foggy nightmarish world of London" a "quite tough claustrophobic look". How pervasive this colour scheme is becomes particularly conspicuous in the final section of the show, when the scene is moved to France, to Le Touquet. This setting was chosen by the production team, since the short story does not specify where Mayherne and Romaine meet for the last time: "the place of their meeting is not relevant" ("W": 24). While London is brown and yellow, France is portrayed as very bright and white in order to underline the characters' escape from their past.

Another element closely associated with a *noir* or hard-boiled portrayal of crime is the representation of the dead body of the victim. The dead body had not been shown in the earlier versions, but it is displayed in great detail in the 2016 production and discussed in a separate subchapter of the bonus material. This is further evidence of the intention of the producers to distance themselves from the TV crime play of the "cosy" variety.

Another aspect of the concern with historical accuracy is the fact that the TV production highlights the aspects of class distinction and the contrast between rich and poor. The action proper begins with a cross-cutting from Leonard in his shabby flat to Emily French's posh art déco apartment, creating a deliberate contrast between the world of the poor and the world of the rich. In the story, this contrast is not very pronounced. Vole moves in the same social circles as French – he meets her for the second time at a party at a mutual friend's house. Miss French lives in Cricklewood, in very modest circumstances: "She lived poorly, almost humbly" ("W": 3). The Voles live at Paddington and do not keep a servant but they have a charwoman and apparently the house to themselves. Likewise, John Mayhew of the TV version is presented as living in genteel poverty. Again, the short story does not suggest that Mayhew is poor: 'as a solicitor, Mr Mayherne's reputation stood very high' ("W": 1).

Apart from the purely economic difference, the TV production also stresses class distinctions, for instance in a scene of gratuitous police brutality when Leonard is arrested in his flat: he is asleep when the police break in and immediately club him down. Another scene presenting blatant class-consciousness occurs when Mayhew discusses the case with the counsel for the defence, Charles Carter, in the men's room. Carter indulges in vulgar comments on the relationship between Emily French and a lower-class man and initially declines the brief until he hears of Emily's wealth. For all of Carter's pronounced hostility and vulgarity, the comment of KC Sir Charles in the short story is more effective: "If we can shake that Austrian woman's testimony, we might do something" ("W" 15), as he cannot even bring himself to calling Romaine Heilger by her name.

6. *W16* as TV Drama between Film and Theatre

Apart from the epic opening shot, Jarrold frequently employs techniques that are more closely related to the aesthetics of cinema than to live theatre. One instance of this is his use of flashback. During the interview of the housekeeper Janet, for instance, several flashbacks occur: Janet telling Emily that Vole is already married, her discovery of the dead body on her return from church, Janet witnessing Leonard performing oral sex on Emily, Leonard leaving the house, now wearing a smart suit. Romaine's evidence likewise is illustrated by flashbacks. In a crime play, flashbacks are an interesting device, because a lot depends on the status the audience assigns to a flashback. Is it intended to merely illustrate the speech of one of the characters, or is it a "genuine" flashback in the sense that it is meant to show what really happened? This unclear status of the flashback has been used in crime films from Alfred Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* (when the device was originally denounced as "unfair") to *The Usual Suspects*, and Christie herself made use of it in her crime play *Go Back for Murder*, a stage version of her novel *Five Little Pigs*.[8]

Another specifically cinematic technique is the cross-cutting between different plot strands. A particularly conspicuous case of cross-cutting occurs for instance between Romaine's revue, during which she spies Mayhew in the audience, clearly infatuated, and Mrs Mayhew lovingly dusting her son's room, with the camera, equally lovingly, resting on a collection of period toys. Later on, cross-cutting illustrates Mayhew's advancing career and Janet's mourning of her dead mistress – these two diverse processes are linked by the motif of printed letters that are painted on Mayhew's door and cleaned by Janet on Mrs French's gravestone. A similar technique of counterpoint is in evidence when the film cross-cuts between the scenes showing Janet on her way to the gallows and the Mayhews' preparation of their departure for a holiday at the seaside. The conspicuous use of flashback and cross-cutting demonstrate the TV crime play's attempt to break loose from the stage play that shaped it originally.[9]

In spite of its conspicuous hostility to the stage play, *W16* contains a pivotal scene that presents an apotheosis of live theatre: watch-

ing Romaine Vole perform a sentimental song on a Music Hall stage, Mayhew is immediately seduced by its emotional appeal. In the short story, by contrast, the theatre motif does not feature very prominently, maybe in order to safeguard the still fresh surprise of the ending. There are merely two references to Romaine's professional background in the theatre in order to prepare the final surprise reversal: "I was an actress in Vienna" ("W": 14) and "[y]et, Romaine Heilger was an actress" ("W": 23). The first quotation seems to suggest that Romaine is no longer an actress (and not merely that she is no longer in Vienna). A comparison between the three versions of Romaine's letter that is read out in court and makes the jury's sympathies shift in favour of Leonard is also instructive. The letter in the short story does not employ theatre imagery at all, while in the stage version, Christie included a reference to Romaine's desire to be "free from playing the part of a loving, grateful wife (*W*: 53, 85). *W16* by contrast includes two, much more explicit, references to theatre and roleplaying; Romaine refers to her "last theatrical role" and promises her fictional lover Max: "This will be my greatest performance."

Moreover, *W16* uses the theatre as a setting very pervasively and conspicuously, but its portrayal of the theatre as a professional environment is extremely critical. The first longer section set in the theatre shows Romaine backstage in a Music Hall. Instantly, her rivalry with Christine Moffat, the star of the show, is established. Christine ascends a crescent moon that forms the centrepiece of the stage set, without even acknowledging Romaine's presence. In the following scene, Romaine, standing at the stage door, attracts the attention of Christine's gentleman admirer and is warned off: "You're just the chorus, I'm the principal."[10] The next time we see Romaine at the Music Hall, a dance routine of a seaside scene with the tune "At the sea, at the sea, at the beautiful sea" is being performed. This creates a foreshadowing of the final encounter between Mayhew and the Voles and at the same time an effect of metalepsis, since the play-within-the-play, the Music Hall routine, seems to have finally spilled over into and invaded the "real life" of the TV play's action. This is followed by another scene highlighting the competitive and merciless relationship between the

various fellow actors. A colleague shows Romaine the newspaper that reports Vole's arrest and merely comments: "Nothing like a scandal to pack the house." As an immediate result of her new notoriety, Romaine is immediately promoted to the Moon and has now herself become a "principal".

The scene with Romaine sitting in her half-moon, dressed in a glittering costume and heavily made up, becomes the central scene of the entire production. Romaine sings a love song entitled "Let me call you sweetheart", which reduces Mayhew in the audience to tears. This scene is repeated, or rather "quoted", several times in the course of the series. A glimpse of Romaine in her moon, to the tune of "Let me call you sweetheart", marks the end of Episode One. Towards the end of the second episode, a flashback to Romaine in the moon causes Mayhew to collapse. And in the final scene of the entire miniseries, Mayhew is shown walking into the sea, towards the moon that has become a symbol of his desire to be loved. "Let me call you sweetheart" is then played over the end-titles.

Since this scene is so central to the entire production, a closer description and examination is perhaps called-for. The sequence starts off realistically, with Mayhew settling into his seat as the clapping from the previous number dies down and the overture is being played. The curtain opens slowly, with the Moon still down, half hidden behind a group of nine chorus girls, the scene lit in a light pink. This scene is shot from behind over Mayhew's right shoulder, as in a conventional dialogue scene. As Romaine begins to sing, an establishing shot shows us the entire stage with a dance routine in progress in front of the rising Moon. What this scene does establish for us is that it is now Romaine who is seated in the Moon instead of Christine. There is a cut to a medium shot of Mayhew, who is straining his eyes in an effort to see more clearly – which, of course, he doesn't, or not until the very end. A medium shot of the dancers, now in a red light, is followed by an upward move of the camera to Romaine singing, where the camera rests for an instant before zooming in on Romaine's face. The light on stage has now turned to blue. A cut to a medium shot of Mayhew shows us that he is now smiling, presumably because he has identified Romaine,

but also because he is clearly enjoying the sentimental song she is singing. The lyrics of the song, repeated twice, run as follows: "Let me call you sweetheart; I'm in love with you. Let me hear you whisper that you love me, too. Keep the love light glowing in your eyes so true! Let me call you sweetheart; I'm in love with you." As the scene progresses, the camera zooms in on Mayhew's face on which the subsequent light changes are reflected, as are his response to the lyrics and his growing infatuation with Romaine. The film cuts to and fro between close-ups of Mayhew and Romaine, suggesting that there is hardly any distance between them any longer, in a manner in which traditional editing would usually prepare a kiss between the two main protagonists. As Romaine sings of "your eyes so true", the camera shows us Mayhew's face with the action on stage partly reflected in his glasses. In the final close up of Romaine, her head is thrown back and her mouth open, and her posture and expression are mirrored by Mayhew's. A shot over Mayhew's shoulder as the curtain closes awakens us to the realisation of the actual physical distance between stage and spectator and makes us recognize the illusion of intimacy that live theatre can produce, albeit rendered here by the means of cinema. As the house lights come on and we hear the other people in the audience (of whose presence we have meanwhile been largely oblivious) clap and chat, Mayhew, in close-up, begins to sob uncontrollably.

This key scene itself seems inspired by an iconic scene from Josef von Sternberg's classic film *Der blaue Engel*. Marlene Dietrich as nightclub singer Lola-Lola is singing "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt", directly to Emil Jannings' Professor Emmanuel Rat, who is seated in a box and watching her spellbound. In the course of the song, the virtuous schoolteacher is gradually becoming aware of his sexual attraction to her, a feeling he has not previously experienced and/or consistently denied.[11] The repetition of this scene in *W16* hence may be considered an express homage to Marlene Dietrich. In this context, it is worth mentioning that in *W16* Romaine wears a Dietrich hairstyle for most of the action.[12] The short story, incidentally, gives a very different description of Romaine's outward appearance; the text expressly specifies "the dense blue-black of the hair" ("W": 12). After

the scene described in detail above, Romaine discovers Mayhew, still crying, in the auditorium long after the show has ended. This characterization of the lawyer is clearly at odds with the character envisioned by Christie in the short story: "Mr Mayherne was practical, not emotional" ("W": 1). This scene suggests that live theatre is an immensely powerful medium, which may explain why W16 is so categorically trying to distance itself from it.

7. Conclusion

In the initial paragraph, I asked how a reworking of a familiar classic of crime fiction manages to create a "surplus value" for the viewer. In the case of *W16*, the adaptation does not follow the model of the successful TV series *Sherlock* by updating the material, but instead goes full tilt for the period piece, lovingly recreating a historical period that is currently popular in TV drama, as is also proved by the stunning success of *Downton Abbey*. In its obvious delight in lavish sets and costumes, *W16* also substantially differs from the minimalist style in evidence in that other successful current intermedial adaptation, Patrick Barlow's stage production of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The 39 Steps*. The element of surprise previously thought to be so central to detective fiction is no longer created on the level of plot design but in terms of a violation of genre conventions. While the final surprise twist – the identity of Mrs Vole and the "other Woman" – obviously no longer works and is therefore presented in a manner that makes it easy for the viewer to penetrate the disguise, *W16* goes against viewer expectations in dispensing with poetic justice, even to the point of having an innocent suspect, the housekeeper Janet, executed for a crime she did not commit. The fact that the character of a domestic is developed to such a notable extent itself also amounts to a violation of genre conventions. Similarly, the graphic violence and sexuality of *W16* were at odds with the audience's expectations towards a "cosy" crime programme.

The second main question of this article was how *W16* as a TV play negotiates the different stylistic influences of stage drama and

film. The 1982 TV version had still acknowledged the close relationship between TV drama and live theatre by remaining largely faithful to the stage version. *W16*, by contrast, is trying to distance itself from the Billy Wilder film version to some extent – though with a kind of playful homage to the actress Marlene Dietrich – but much more substantially from Christie's own stage adaptation. This is already in evidence in the deliberate move away from the genre of courtroom drama and, more generally, away from the spatial confinement that had been such an important element in the most successful type of stage crime play: the subgenre dubbed the "Murder House Mystery" by Charles LaBorde and exemplified by Christie's own *The Mousetrap*. That the director prefers an "epic", cinematic, approach to the intimacy of the confined stage set already gets obvious in the opening sequence which is, somewhat gratuitously, set in a WWI battlefield. This expensive scene is rerun several times in the course of the miniseries, as is another scene, which surprisingly seems to celebrate the power of live theatre. When Romaine is singing on stage to Mayhew, the emotional appeal becomes so strong that it doesn't only reduce the onscreen spectator to tears, it even has the power to create metalepsis within the fictional universe by "spilling over" into first-level fictional reality. This suggests that one of the main causes for the hostility towards stage drama expressed by the entire production team of *W16* may be a considerable anxiety of influence.

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1 For instance Edward Wooll, Jack Roffey or Henry Cecil.

2 This may be explained by Christie's changed attitude towards punishment and justice, but also by different genre conventions in drama and narrative; a similar move from the cruel twist of the short story to poetic justice in the stage version may be observed in *The Letter* by W S Maugham and *The Gioconda Smile* by Aldous Huxley.

3 Marlene Dietrich here repeated the part she had played in Wilder's previous film on living conditions in postwar Germany, *A Foreign Affair*.

4 An example from Hitchcock's own oeuvre is the film *Vertigo*, where in contrast to the source novel *D'entre les morts* the identity of Judy and "Madeleine" is revealed very early on, and the audience then have the far greater pleasure of waiting to see when James Stewart, too, will discover the truth.

5 The graphic sex scenes were frequently criticized as unpleasant and unnecessary by viewers on imdb.

[6] This suggestion is not taken seriously for an instant, since it would constitute a breach of genre conventions, because the criminal must be a person of consequence and a character introduced to the reader.

[7] Even in this section, there is a notable focus on historical accuracy, highlighting aspects of economics, class and gender.

[8] As far as the flashback is concerned, it is worth noting that the 1982 TV version even dispensed with the few flashbacks Billy Wilder's film had introduced, while retaining the subplot revolving around Sir Wilfrid's heart disease and his obnoxious nurse. Hence we never learn how Vole first met his wife or Emily French – the focus is distracted from the dynamics of the Voles' marriage and little sympathy is elicited for the victim. This also means that the 1982 version is the closest to the stage play and does not attempt to distance itself from the medium of live theatre.

[9] When the TV crime play first rose to prominence in the 1970s, it was still closely related to the stage crime play. A particularly good example of this is the work of Francis Durbridge.

[10] The plot motif of the theatre as a scene of female rivalry is traditional in British cinematic treatments of life on the stage and occurs for instance in Alfred Hitchcock's whodunits *Murder!* and *Stage Fright*.

[11] Dietrich herself was to reprise this scene from *Der blaue Engel* several times in her later career, most notably in the above-mentioned *A Foreign Affair* and *Stage Fright*.

[12] It is only later in Le Touquet that she reverts to a Louise Brooks-style.