Playing detective in Simon Stephens's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (National Theatre, 2012, staged by Marianne Elliott)

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The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time[1] was adapted from Mark Haddon's best-selling novel that explicitly claimed it belonged to the British tradition of detective fiction. Indeed, its title (chosen preferably to the original one, "Christopher's Book") is a quotation from one of Sherlock Holmes' stories, "The Adventure of Silver Blaze". Moreover, in Mark Haddon's novel, Christopher, the first-person narrator, fancies himself as a modern teenage version of his literary hero, Sherlock Holmes, whom he frequently quotes, and with whom he shares an acute sense of observation and a similar "power to detach his mind at will" (Haddon: 92) due to his being afflicted by Asperger's syndrome. In Simon Stephens's play, which follows the original novel closely, Christopher is asked to take his own part in a stage adaptation of his book performed at his school. Thus, the play's double status as adaptation and its strong literary intertext are playfully brought to the fore. While the main protagonist poses as an amateur detective and a writer of detective fiction, the detective genre is offered as a mirror of Christopher's "slightly alien consciousness",[2] both (detective fiction and people with Asperger's) being concerned with analytical details, logic and reasoning. To try and account for Christopher's intensely chaotic psyche, the stage is turned into a patchwork of signs (numbers, letters, sounds and stroboscopic lights) that are as many puzzles and mysteries which the hero has to interpret to make sense of the contemporary world.

The Curious Incident is a pastiche of a detective story in which the spectators themselves are invited to play detective. Not only do they have to identify the protagonists (the supporting actors subsequently

playing different roles), they are also presented with an intertextual game of hide-and-seek that is more subtle in the play than in the novel however, as Simon Stephens's stage adaptation omits most of the explicit references to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, thus ascribing an active interpretative role (that of the literary detective) to the audience. This playful manipulation of the genre even started before the opening of the play at the Gielgud Theatre, as the seats that bore a primary number had a special cover and a little pocket with a leaflet in explaining how to solve a mathematical puzzle using the letters of your name in order to win a prize, the prize being a happy face badge.[3] What is more, it is thanks to his literary model, Sherlock Holmes, that the hero hopes to solve the mysteries of his own life. Because Christopher needs patterns to make sense of the world around him, the detective genre provides him with such a stable pattern: he can equate Mr. Shears with Sir Hugo Baskerville (both having an affair with a neighbour), Judy with Sir Charles Baskerville (both supposedly dying from a heart attack due to stress), and Sherlock Holmes with himself. Christopher, however, is unable to draw the right conclusions, and these intertextual reprises are there only for the audience's sense of gratification. Symbolically, the detective genre represents reassurance and the familiar: it is a system of codes and patterns that can be predicted, just like maths and numbers. However, Christopher seems to be more at ease with mathematics than detection. Although, like his literary hero, he gets his sense of observation and attention to details thanks to "a pathological and morbid process":[4] smoking and injecting cocaine for Sherlock, being on the autistic spectrum for Christopher, he is a failed amateur detective, since the solving of the mystery is eventually not due to the powers of the (clueless) detective but the culprit's almost spontaneously admitting to his crime in a moment of guilt and empathy for his son. Christopher therefore emerges as a victim rather than a cunning Sherlock Holmes figure and the pastiche turns into a parody. This is emphasized by the two-part structure of the play which reproduces the reverse journey from Sherlock Holmes' in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. While in Conan Doyle's novel, Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes move from London to Devon to carry

out their investigations, in *The Curious Incident,* Christopher moves from his home in Swindon (Part 1) to London (Part 2) where he is finally reunited with his mother.

Although the play ends with a sense of poetic justice, thus confirming the moral nature of detective fiction, the codes of the traditional detective plot are gradually subverted: Christopher's book is left unfinished, thus robbing the audience of the obligatory climactic scene of revelation and thwarting the traditional teleology; instead, the culprit's confession is a moment of bathos in which the triviality of the motive is only increased by the burlesque nature of the case (a dog's murder that the police do not want to investigate as it is not considered a serious crime). Besides, the murderer's identity is reiterated by the would-be detective several times, mechanically, to various protagonists, each repetition emptying the words of their potential dramatic power. As for Christopher's book, which started as the account of his detection and was supposed to lead to the discovery of the truth, it becomes evidence of his guilt in his father's eyes (he carried on detecting despite his father's forbidding it). The detective consequently turns into a suspect and the search for truth, ironically, is seen as a new crime. Once confiscated by the father, the book becomes the new object of the detective's quest (momentarily leaving aside the quest for truth), and inadvertently leads to the discovery of yet another piece of writing, an envelope containing letters addressed to Christopher by his mother Judy whom he believed to be dead. The realisation that his mother is still alive and now living in London takes the main protagonist on a mock-epic adventure that obliges him to leave behind the familiar world of home, and venture into the unknown (i.e. his hometown of Swindon, its station, London and the tube).

In fact, the whole stage becomes a patchwork of signs (projected neon signs, mathematical signs, missives read and recited by various protagonists, pre-recorded voices, notices, flashing lights) that the hero has to try and interpret. In *The Curious Incident,* the stage represents Christopher's inner mind assaulted by stimuli he cannot process adequately. His predilection for order is visible in the stage set which looks like the inside of a black box with a grid system of dotted lines of

light on the floor and the walls.[5] The space is very versatile, constantly adapting to the young hero's needs and following his erratic trains of thoughts: it is full of traps and cupboards in which the actor finds the needed props to suggest different places, such as the kitchen, the lounge, or the tube, a London street, etc. The other actors constantly remain on stage, moving forward into the limelight when needed to impersonate various protagonists as required by the hero's journey or his singular memories. Contrary to the traditional detective story situated in a world of stable social and moral norms (the Victorian society with its codes and conventions), *The Curious Incident* represents a mysterious world in which the protagonist is at a loss how to decipher, understand or interpret. The social world indeed contains signs to be interpreted: "You'll see the signs" (Stephens: 59), Christopher is told in the play, the problem being that he notices too many of them and is unable to prioritise them so as to be relevant in a given situation.

In fact, the detective genre poses as the hermeneutic key with which to access Christopher's alien consciousness. Like the traditional detective, Christopher relies on empiricism. He searches for patterns of logic and truth, a characteristic of people affected by Asperger's syndrome, but incidentally also of old-style detective fiction. However, contrary to Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot, Christopher does not have an instinct, an idea that would make up for the paucity of evidence and orientate his investigation. In fact, he has got no intuition at all but only trusts in logic, and this proves inadequate. In other words, empiricism no longer operates in today's world and Christopher's sense of logic is confronted with the absurdity of the modern world. He probably has more in common with the epic hero than with the traditional detective. In "Après l'âge d'or : le récit policier britannique contemporain entre nostalgie et hybridation", Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues that "le roman policier de l'âge d'or, comme tout roman, met en scène la nostalgie de la totalité sociale organique dont l'épopée était l'expression, et, comme tout roman, il met aussi en scène sa disparition définitive" (Lecercle: 400). Similarly, I would contend that *The Curious Incident* shows, if not nostalgia, at least a yearning for an organic social whole that would be Christopher's inner world where everything has a

logical cause and consequence, as in outer space and the cosmos, hence Christopher's dream of becoming an astronaut (a modern version of a Homeric epic hero). Nonetheless, Christopher is a problematic hero: he gives up writing his murder mystery novel before its denouement. What is more, his writing style is quite plain and repetitive, more like a police report than a novel. In conclusion, he is an unimaginative narrator, confronted with the impossibility of narrating. Indeed, Christopher is unable to talk about his mother or imagine what life would be like with her because he believes her to be dead and, as such, she no longer exists. Although he describes his mother's death as an objective fact, her death is surrounded with silence and mystery. The narrative that Ed, the father, has provided is elliptic: "I never meant for *it* to turn out like *this*" (Stephens: 47, my italics). He too has been unable to relate the truth; he is similarly afflicted by the impossibility of narrating his trauma (the break-up of his marriage). But the repressed narration will overwhelm the stage in the form of the mother's letters. Their narration is particularly complex and confusing as it is fragmented between several dramatic voices, different protagonists taking turns to recite the letters in the first person (Christopher, Siobhan the teacher and confidente, and Judy the mother and author of the letters). The effect on stage is of a destabilising proliferation of voices that represent the hero's sense of confusion. Soon, the stage becomes submerged with stroboscopic lights and an accumulation of sounds and spoken words until the protagonist has a fit. The use of language in *The Curious Incident* is mysterious, misleading, and puzzling. Whereas this very feature is discussed explicitly in the novel, in the stage production, it is the *mise en scène* that points to the limits of language and makes the audience experience a dizzying world of signs and letters.

The detective genre is therefore quite ambivalent in *The Curious Incident*. If, on the one hand, it is a fitting mirror of Christopher's search for patterns due to Asperger's syndrome, on the other hand, the epistemological quest that it stands for is called into question. Does language tell the truth? Ed's lie that led Christopher to believe his mother was dead further underlines the seeming inadequacy of words to represent reality and truth. As a consequence, Christopher rebels

against the literary and dramatic convention of suspension of disbelief: "I don't like acting because it's pretending that something is real when it is not really real at all so it is like a kind of lie" (Stephens: 50). Linda Hutcheon reminds us that, in the Saussurian model, "language is a social contract" that "has to be learned in some detail by users before it can be employed effectively" (Hutcheon: 183), a "social contract" that the hero is excluded from due to Asperger's syndrome. The play thus tries to confront from within the commodification of language as mass culture with Christopher's voice offering a disruptive perspective from which to reassess language and social codes. In *The Curious Incident*, using language and interpreting language is substituted for the detective game itself, an epistemological quest that is discussed explicitly in the novel: "it is fun not knowing what the words mean" (Haddon: 90), something the theatrical audience experience through the multi-sensory approach of the production.

Because the detective genre proves inadequate to account for Christopher's perception, the play engages yet another semiotic system to fully represent his mental world. Although the play's structure is minimalist in appearance (two parts with no scene division), there are in fact many different *vignettes* that follow each other, like so many cuts in a film. Film editing is indeed an important influence in the structure of the play and can be seen as a structural translation of one of the hero's comments in the novel:

> My memory is like a film. That is why I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack.
>
> And when people ask me to remember something I can simply press **Rewind** and **Fast Forward** and **Pause** like on a video recorder, but more like a DVD because I don't have to Rewind through everything in between to get to a memory of something a long time ago. And there are no buttons, either, because it is happening in my head. (Haddon: 96, bold type in the original)

The theatrical experience in the National Theatre production is created as synaesthetic, colliding multiple sensory stimuli (light,

sound, movement and rhythm, though not the smell that the narrator mentions in the novel!). The treatment of light in particular, [6] with stunning stroboscopic effects, reinforced by sound, creates a cinematic device that allows the audience to be immersed in Christopher's mental world. Such a cinematic dimension is also reinforced by the dramatic structure that comes close to cross-cutting editing (or parallel editing), normally used in film by cutting between two different scenes that are happening at the same time in different spaces. Here this device allows the representation of what happens in the plot and what goes on in Christopher's mind, therefore creating an impression of simultaneity. It also enables the play to tell one story (for example that contained in Judy's letters) and show another (the investigation into the mysterious murder of the dog). In the end, the play can be seen as one long series of crosscuts that disrupts linearity.

The play indeed rebels against the linearity of the detective genre, just as the novel tried to cheat linearity by using prime numbers as chapter numbers. There is a strong tension as a result between continuity and discontinuity in the play: scenes follow each other without any interruption but seem disconnected in subject and time. The audience is therefore immersed in Christopher's world, grappling, like him, to filter information and stimuli. This dramatic version of the stream of consciousness technique attempts to show an exhaustive picture of reality as perceived by people with Asperger's.

Thanks to the devices described above, the time frame is blown up. Whereas the novel is subjected to the linearity of the reading sequence, the stage allows for the conflation of different spaces and actions simultaneously. The present of the theatrical performance perfectly coincides with Christopher's vision in which only the present matters, while the past is "stupid", "not real" and "doesn't exist" (Stephens: 31). Theatre is the only medium capable of showing simultaneously, in the present, all the realities affecting Christopher. Although he expresses his distrust of drama, the theatrical medium is ironically the answer to his "endeavouring to frame some scheme into which all these strange and apparently disconnected episodes could be fitted" (Haddon: 92), a quote Christopher borrows from *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in the novel. This is

made possible by the multiple semiotic systems enlisted in the production that expand the novel's scope, although the novel's combination of narrative and cartoons can be interpreted as an attempt at escaping the limits of the narrative. The play reprises the book's narrative, spoken by its narrator or read / recited by different protagonists; the cartoons printed in the novel become performance art on stage with Christopher drawing directly on the stage or the backdrop; these are accompanied by acting, sometimes in a choreographed fashion, pre-recorded voices, music and sound effects, lighting effects and video projections. This results in a sensory overstimulation of the audience, at times verging on an impression of vertigo, and coinciding with Christopher's daily experience of the outside world so that what seems impossible in fiction because the traditional novel solely relies on language[7] becomes possible in the theatre.

Although Christopher is a failed fictional detective, he might be an experimental writer, recognising the limitations of language and linear narrative which restrict his creativity. The play also contains a metageneric dimension as it comments on Christopher's book and its literary merits. Christopher indeed underlines the objective features of his book that is "very short", with no "proper ending" (Stephens: 25) and violates the conventions of the genre because the murder has not been solved. But ironically, Christopher, who cannot make sense of the outside world needs forms, codes, formats and patterns to help him understand it, hence his obsession with the detective genre, "the puzzle format of classic detective fiction, a highly coded genre which has been said by some to be disconnected from the real world" (Guignery: 433). In the play, this translates as frequent metageneric comments that break the dramatic illusion. Christopher does not buy realist drama and he will not allow the audience to forget the artificial nature of the stage adaptation. Incidentally, his curious mental state coincides with the postmodernist focus on aesthetic artifice and metatextuality.

The detective genre appears to be a mere pretext in *The Curious Incident*, since the whodunit is solved midway through the play at the end of Part 1. The entertainment promised by the genre is subverted and replaced by a postmodernist game of literary borrowings, pastiche

and parody in which role-playing is denounced as "a ridiculous game" (Stephens: 23), even when Stephens's adaptation foregrounds the *mise en abyme* of play-acting in Part 2:

> **Siobhan**: Christopher I want to ask you something. Mrs Gascoyne wondered if we would like to do a play this year. She asked me to ask everybody if we'd like to make some kind of performance for the school. Everybody could join in and play a part in it.
> **Mrs Gascoyne:** I think it would be a good thing for everybody to join in and play a part in it.
> **Siobhan:** I was wondering if you'd like to make a play out of your book.
> **Christopher:** No.
> **Siobhan:** I think it could be really good fun Christopher.
> **Mrs Gascoyne:** I think it could be really good fun.
> **Christopher:** No. It's a book and it's for me and not everybody just for me (Stephens: 50)

This dramatic artifice and the lack of verisimilitude are repeatedly denounced by Christopher who comments on the fact that the actor playing the policeman looks too old for his part. So even when the audience is ready to suspend disbelief, Christopher's metadramatic remarks break the illusion. The comment sounds even more ironic when the policeman on the train asks: "Are you for real?" meaning figuratively "Are you serious?" (Stephens: 68) but also, literally, referring to his being a fictional character adapted for the stage in a play itself representing a *mise en abyme* of stage adaptation. Ironically, despite his distrust of drama, Christopher unwittingly accepts the role of stage director, insisting that the scene be played again to reproduce reality more faithfully: "It was Mother who gave me the milkshake not you" (Stephens: 82). In the end, the recurrent reminders of the dramatic artifice and the *mise en abyme* of performing participate in the celebration of the playfulness of language.

Still, it would be wrong to restrict the play to postmodern playfulness. There is more in *The Curious Incident* than mere attention to and manipulation of form; the play also proposes postmodernist playfulness as a social act. It holds a mirror to society and could paradoxically be seen as a social realistic play aiming to represent the treat-

ment of children with learning difficulties relegated to special schools; the struggle of parents faced with the blatant lack of academic ambition for their children; or the lack of social support resulting in broken marriages. Thus, *The Curious Incident* invalidates Roger Caillois's provocative statement in *Les Jeux et les hommes* according to which detective fiction is "nothing but abstraction and demonstration. It does not attempt to touch, to move, to exalt, or even to flatter the soul with a representation of its troubles, its sufferings, and its aspirations" (in Most and Stowe: 11). The reverse is true in *The Curious Incident*: the play touches, moves, and exalts. If Christopher's psyche is "nothing but abstraction and demonstration", at least the play manages to translate his world to the audience.

Parody is not just "trivial kitsch" says Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon: 182), and the recurrent intertextual and metageneric references to the detective genre in *The Curious Incident,* instead of leading to the "political self-marginalisation" of the play, "work toward a public discourse" (Hutcheon: 191). Like Hutcheon's architect, the dramatist (Simon Stephens) and the director (Marianne Elliott) are "shaper[s] of public space" (Hutcheon: 180). Linda Hutcheon also stresses the link between the self-referentiality of parody and the social, historical and political context. She adds that "postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderline between art and the world" (Hutcheon: 180). My belief is that *The Curious Incident* parodies the detective genre not merely for the intellectual gratification of the audience, but indeed to work toward such a public discourse about today's world.

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1 Referred to as *The Curious Incident* throughout this article.

2 Mark Haddon, National Theatre, "*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* – working on the spectrum". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2bV75ITXJw> (accessed 26/9/2017).

3 For a photo of such a seat, see <https://bluecurtainsbris.wordpress.com/tag/gielgud-theatre/> (accessed 8/1/2018).

4 *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 2 vols, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1930, 89.

5 For a photo of the set, see <https://bluecurtainsbris.wordpress.com/tag/gielgud-theatre/> (accessed 8/1/2018).

[6] The play's official trailer gives an idea of such a treatment of light: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O704ld5WQnk> (accessed 26/9/2017).

[7] "Siobhan said that when you are writing a book you have to include some descriptions of things. I said that I could take photographs and put them in the book. But she said the idea of a book was to describe things using words so that people could read them and make a picture in their own head" (Haddon: 85).