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RESEARCH

Re-Writing the Past, Autobiography and Celebrity in *Agatha* (1979): 'An Imaginary Solution to an Authentic Mystery'

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When crime writer Agatha Christie went missing inexplicably in December 1926, a national scandal erupted as detectives and the public searched for the author. After eleven days she turned up in a hotel in Harrogate where she had registered under a false name. While speculation ensued that she had been suffering from memory loss, or mental instability after learning that her husband wanted to leave her for another woman, the full story behind the episode was never revealed. Kathleen Tynan published a novel in 1978 speculating what might have happened, and this was adapted for the screen as *Agatha* (Michael Apted, 1979), starring Vanessa Redgrave and Dustin Hoffmann. Drawing on papers in the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, Exeter, and in the Film Finances archives, London, this article discusses the film's tortuous journey from script to release, causing controversy for reasons that exceeded the contested nature of its subject matter. Through the twists and turns of a fascinating case study of Anglo-American co-production and conflict, the article explores how a particularly intriguing set of circumstances connected the film to broader questions of celebrity, authenticity, memory and fiction that resonated in subsequent years as television and filmmakers continued to speculate about the eleven 'lost' days in Agatha Christie's life.

Keywords: Adaptation; memory; British film; Anglo-American co-production; Agatha Christie; celebrity studies

On December 4th 1926 Agatha Christie, aged 36, disappeared inexplicably. Her car was found on the Surrey Downs with few clues as to her whereabouts. The case became a *cause célèbre* as detectives and the public searched for the author. After eleven days she turned up in a hotel in Harrogate where she had registered under a false name. While speculation ensued that she had been suffering from memory loss,

or mental instability following her mother's death, the full story behind the episode was never revealed, not least in her autobiography published posthumously (Christie 1977). Kathleen Tynan published *Agatha: The Agatha Christie Mystery* (1978), a novel about the incident which formed the basis for her screenplay for *Agatha* (directed by Michael Apted, 1979), a film starring Vanessa Redgrave and Dustin Hoffman. Released at a time when interest in Christie was particularly intense – her death, the autobiography, a spate of film adaptations of her novels – the film represents a desire to know, to 'write' those missing sections of the autobiography in a way that Tynan and others involved in the film's production felt to be true to her character. This article discusses how this controversial biographical incident became the basis of a film that was similarly controversial, but not just because of its subject matter. The tortuous nature of *Agatha*'s production is revealed in the Gavrik Losey papers at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum and in the Film Finances archives.[1] In addition, they show how as a case study of Anglo-American co-production at a particular historical juncture, the film raises broader issues about contested authorship, celebrity, authenticity, memory and fiction. It will be shown how a number of interested parties had different motivations in resurrecting the incident, fuelling the seemingly never-ending subsequent fascination for writers and filmmakers with what might have happened during those eleven 'lost' days of Agatha Christie's life.[2]

Kathleen Tynan's book *Agatha: The Agatha Christie Mystery* has an epigraph at the beginning: 'An imaginary solution to an authentic mystery'; the phrase also opens the film. It is appropriate because the book and film explore the tension between notions of authenticity and imagination arising from an incident in Christie's life (authenticity) about which she thereafter kept silent (giving rise to imagination). This situation has led to many interpretations of what might have happened – Christie's fame as a mystery

[1] Both archives contain substantial papers on *Agatha*, some of which are in both collections. Since documents from Film Finances are not individually numbered those also located in the catalogued Losey collection ('BDC') have been cited whenever possible.

[2] An earlier form of this research was published as 'Autobiography in *Agatha*: "An Imaginary Solution to an Authentic Mystery"' in J.C. Bernthal (ed.), *The Ageless Agatha Christie: Essays on the Mysteries and the Legacy* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., © 2016), pp. 161–175. By permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640. www.mcfarlandbooks.com.

writer compounds curiosity about her real life and public desire for the author of thrillers to have a suitably mysterious life. Yet as a popular figure she commanded great respect, which influenced responses to Tynan's book and the film. *Agatha* demonstrates a complex intertextual dialogue between fact, book, screenplay and film that relates to what Minier and Pennacchia refer to as the 'palimpsestuous nature of the biopic…a form whose life is dependent on previous works, and it is bound to have some sort of afterlife' such as 'creative re-working' (2014: 13). Pubic fascination with Christie's disappearance has indeed inspired creative responses that mix the elusive evidence with fiction.

In her autobiography Christie wrote that she disliked recalling a part of her life that was unhappy. Her mother had died, and her husband Archie was of little support during her period of grieving. He stayed in London and started a relationship with Nancy Neele, the former secretary of one of his business associates, while Agatha cleared away her beloved mother's possessions. She recalled feeling lonely, was tearful and absent-minded; on one occasion she forgot her name when signing a cheque. When Archie returned, she felt him to be a stranger; he told her he was in love with someone else and wanted a divorce: 'He would hardly speak to me or answer when he was spoken to … he was fighting for his happiness' (Christie 1977: 353). Ill, depressed and unable to write fiction since her mother's death, Christie was haunted by self-reproach during this dark period: 'If I'd been cleverer, if I had known more about my husband – had troubled to know more about him instead of being content to idealize him and consider him more or less perfect – then perhaps I might have avoided all of this (1977: 352). Despite these elements of self-reflection and introspection, the autobiography makes no reference to the eleven days when she was missing, implying that it was a chapter Christie preferred to be kept private: forgetfulness should be forgotten.

At the time, Christie's disappearance attracted great speculation. The first sign of anything wrong was when Christie's car was found abandoned down a slope at Newlands Corner near Guildford.[3] In the car were her fur coat, a suitcase and an

[3] For an overview of the disappearance and the various theories about what happened see James Hobbs's website (consulted 18 May 2020) *Hercule Poirot Central*, http://www.poirot.us/disappear.php.

expired driver's licence; Christie was nowhere to be found. The newspapers had a field day reporting the case while the Silent Pool, a natural spring near the scene of the car accident, was searched in case the novelist had drowned. Theories abounded – some suspected her husband of foul play – and even the crime writer Dorothy L. Sayers visited the scene of the disappearance in search of clues. Some sources claim that Christie had written letters before she disappeared, one to Archie which he burned, one instructing her secretary to cancel reservations for a trip to Yorkshire and, confusingly, a letter to her brother-in-law Campbell saying she was going to Yorkshire for a recuperating break. Inclined towards spiritualism, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle took one of Agatha's gloves to a medium. Christie was eventually found in the Hydropathic Hotel, Harrogate where she had registered as 'Mrs. Teresa Neele of Cape Town', Neele being the surname of Archie's lover. Several people there had suspected her real identity, including journalist Peter Ritchie-Calder who was probably the basis of the character Wally Stanton in Tynan's novel. Without any clear information forthcoming from Agatha Christie about what had happened, her disappearance was put down to a loss of memory. Yet her silence on the matter did not result in drawing a line under the incident. Public curiosity was insatiable regarding this moment of non-conformity, which appeared both shocking and fascinating at the same time.

Many years later, these known facts – sparse but intriguing – interested novelist Kathleen Tynan, who turned to them for her book and screenplay, her 'imaginative' response to an 'authentic mystery'. The memory loss was referred to in Tynan's book by the doctor who examines Agatha in Harrogate as *la belle indifférence*, apparently a medical description of amnesia which can be caused by psychological trauma. In the novel Agatha translates this as 'a fine indifference … or perhaps ''blithe'' would be a better translation?' (Tynan 1978: 179). This implies a sagacious knowingness about the disappearance, a desire to be someone else for a brief time in order to cope with personal trauma. Books and films based on the lives of famous individuals often 'collapse' their celebrity status by focusing on vulnerable moments of personal crisis such as mourning or loss that link the extraordinary person with ordinary experiences,

pressures and emotions (Minier and Pennacchia 2014: 5). This sympathetic premise is key to Tynan's vision for *Agatha*, one that became embroiled in the machinations of filmmaking practice as the production proceeded. Apart from exploiting intense public interest in Christie, the film involved conflict between other celebrities and professionals who in their different ways struggled to make sense of this puzzling event in Christie's life.

A tortuous film production: Anglo-American collaboration and conflict

Agatha was a tortuous film production that went ahead in spite of many difficulties.[4] Registered as a British film but financed mostly by American capital, many British and American personnel were involved in the complex development and production process. Despite the contraction of American involvement in the British film industry in the early 1970s, *Agatha* was part of a revival of interest in co-productions aimed at international markets, including EMI and G.W. Films' four lavish adaptations (produced in 1974–82) of Christie's novels that featured top international stars, the most successful box-office success being the first in the cycle, *Murder on the Orient Express* (Sidney Lumet, 1974). In their focus on the past, featuring spectacular locations and middle-upper class protagonists, this cycle anticipated the conventions of 'heritage' films and television in the 1980s (Street 2008: 105-116). Although *Agatha* was Christie-themed from a different perspective, it was a quality production that showcases many hallmarks of middle-brow, heritage adaptations including period features, costumes and historic locations. British director Michael Apted was particularly distinguished for his work in television and all of the location shooting took place in the UK including at Harrogate, Bath, York and at Bray Studios. Much of the film takes place in The Swan Hotel, Harrogate, built in 1840 and still operating today. The Swan's grand Victorian architecture and Edwardian furniture

[4] According to Alexander Walker (1985: 167–8) the project was to have been financed by Rank but the company pulled out because Col. Christie had been a Rank company director and it would have been 'a bit off' to finance a film that represented him as 'a cad'. Christie had died in 1962.

create the impression of period authenticity, as does Shirley Russell's production design and costumes featuring 1920s flapper dresses, luxury fabrics and cloche hats. The production team consisted of Gavrik Losey, David Puttnam and Jarvis Astaire, British producers who contributed particular expertise at key stages, but Losey had the greatest creative input.

The American production companies that financed the film were Sweetwall Productions, Warner Bros and First Artists. Sweetwall Productions was owned by actor Dustin Hoffman, the main co-star in *Agatha*, who also had an interest in the film via First Artists. First Artists was a somewhat unusual operation since as a subsidiary of Warner Bros it had been founded in 1969 by very high-profile actors: Barbara Streisand, Sidney Poitier and Paul Newman, who were subsequently joined by Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman. The company's aim was to give these actors greater artistic control over productions than was usual. In exchange they traded up-front salaries for sharing a percentage of the films' profits and grosses; their desire was for cultural rather than economic capital, the complex consequences of which *Agatha* exemplifies as a case study. Hoffman's two films for the company were *Agatha* and *Straight Time* (1978). His expectations for having considerable executive control over *Agatha* were high and his First Artists contract stipulated that he could only star or co-star in a film rather than be a supporting actor. However, correspondence in the Gavrik Losey papers and in the Film Finances archives shows that Hoffman's personal ambitions for a high degree of creative control were frustrated by a number of factors that make the film fascinating for reasons that extend beyond the controversial nature of its subject matter. During production many people became concerned for different reasons – financial, creative and personal.

Public interest in Agatha Christie, combined with renewed curiosity about her brief disappearance following the publication of her autobiography and Tynan's book, made for an excellent prospect for screen adaptation. Any speculations about the disappearance so soon after Christie's death were, however, bound to require great care in showing how a novelist with Christie's popular profile might have responded to common experiences of family bereavement and marital betrayal. Before the various revisions of the screenplay are considered, along with the difficulties that

made the production so tortuous, a brief account of the film's narrative is necessary in order to evaluate its final speculations about the disappearance in comparison with the book and first screenplay. The film is not a straightforward adaptation of Tynan's book, but many key details are similar, contributing to a well-acted and in many ways powerful and evocative screen account of those lost days in Harrogate. Lack of detail about Christie's disappearance permitted a creative space for development which as this case demonstrates was exercised in particular by Tynan (writer), Apted (film director), Puttnam (co-producer) and Hoffmann (actor). The nature and extent of their conflicting viewpoints is clarified by surviving primary documentation which provides unusual amounts of detail on a British-transatlantic film project from the late 1970s that has never been discussed at length by scholars.

Agatha (**Figure 1**) starts with the lead-up to the disappearance of Agatha Christie (Vanessa Redgrave) and concentrates on her retiring manner at a literary luncheon, her husband Archie's (Timothy Dalton) coldness towards her and his announcement over breakfast that he wants a divorce (**Figure 2**). Key plot points are revealed early on, such as Agatha finding out that Archie's lover Nancy Neele plans to visit a spa to undertake weight-loss treatment. The important character Wally Stanton (Dustin Hoffman), an American journalist visiting the UK who attends

Figure 1: Title 'Agatha'.

Figure 2: Agatha (Vanessa Redgrave) and Archie (Timothy Dalton) at the breakfast table.

the literary luncheon, is introduced. He befriends local journalist John Foster (Paul Brooke) who is also interested in following Christie's increasing fame as a popular novelist after the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), the book being celebrated at the luncheon. Stanton tries to see Agatha at her house but is sent away by Archie who is angered by the intrusion. Agatha leaves and we see her car crash as she swerves to avoid a dog, a detail not in Tynan's book, which simply states that 'she drove off wildly and at speed in the direction of Newlands Corner' (1978: 33). The car is found empty and a major search begins at the Silent Pool and surrounding area. Archie does not seem too perturbed, dismissing the idea of suicide as 'ridiculous'.

The film then shows Agatha on the train to Harrogate where she registers as Teresa Neele from Cape Town. The shots of her journey are particularly effective in suggesting a temporal and emotional break with her past life. A close-up of her sitting on the train at first has her face obscured but the flicker of the light then illuminates her face intermittently as she stares ahead, responding to the staccato strobe effect by shutting her eyes (**Figures 3** and **4**). The screen fades to black and we next see her face more fully lit, presumably after sleeping, and she looks more engaged as the train enters the station in Harrogate.

Figure 3: Agatha's train journey.

Figure 4: Agatha's train journey.

In a few seconds of screen-time a rupture has been suggested that is similar to the dreaming effect in *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), another film dealing with a female protagonist in the midst of a personal crisis and with train travel as suggestive of both contemplation and transgression. In *Agatha*, the novelist's northward journey signals her temporary rejection of celebrity status, a desire to disappear from public view. Whether or not she can achieve this is a tension explored in the film when, for example, at the hotel she reads a newspaper reporting the search for Christie. The plausibility of her not being recognized (a maid later says she did) is suggested by the report's picture of her wearing a hat with the shadow of its brim obscuring her eyes. This image, also used for the film's title (**Figure 1**), resonates with Vanessa Redgrave's performance of Agatha as enigmatic while alluding to a time when the physical appearance of authors was not widely publicized.

At the hotel Agatha befriends Evelyn Crawley (Helen Morse), a resident who is receiving treatment at the baths. Agatha avidly follows the arrival of Nancy Neele (Celia Gregory) without confronting her and pretending to Evelyn that she is curious about Nancy as a possible relative. At the baths Agatha becomes fascinated with the workings of the equipment, taking notes and conducting research as if she is a detective. Meanwhile, Wally has been following Agatha Christie's disappearance. He learns of Archie's affair indirectly from John Foster and then from Agatha's secretary and confidant Charlotte Fisher (Carolyn Pickles) via an advertisement Agatha has put in the *Times* under the name of Teresa Neele, which Charlotte takes as a signal that she is safe. Wally goes to Harrogate suspecting that Agatha has gone in search of Nancy. Soon after arriving he befriends Teresa Neele and gradually falls in love with her, knowing she is Agatha Christie but not letting her know he has seen through her pretense. While Teresa/Agatha is wary at first, she appears to some extent attracted by Wally, enjoying dancing, swimming and talking with him at the hotel. It seems that Agatha's research at the baths covers how to cause a fatal accident with the electrical equipment, planting the suspicion that she is going to use this knowledge to kill Nancy. But we eventually learn that her plan, which involves Agatha pretending to work at the baths and switching around crucial electricity current dials

on the apparatus, is for Nancy to unintentionally kill Agatha; suicide by proxy. Wally becomes suspicious of Agatha's behavior and guesses her plan. After a suspenseful sequence involving Wally running to the baths, desperately searching for Agatha in the treatment rooms, he interrupts the 'accident' in time to revive Agatha after her brief exposure to electric shock. Nancy had turned up for treatment and was asked by someone (Agatha) she mistook for Mrs. Braithwaite, the usual person who administered treatment, to turn on the electric current. Not realizing that the 'on' and 'off' dials had deliberately been tampered with, Nancy ignites a terrifying blast of electricity. Wally rushes in and, to Nancy's horror, they find that that the person shaking in the chair is Agatha. Wally revives her after switching off the current.

Agatha is saved by Wally's timely intervention. Producer Gavrik Losey wanted it to be clear in the film that Agatha's attempt would not have worked, that she was an amateur blundering in the world of electricity and that 'all she would succeed in doing is blowing the rheostat and giving herself some sharper, nastier shocks than the machine normally gives' (Losey, n.d. BDC 6/1/8). Nevertheless, these finer details were not included in the film; instead, Wally tells her when she recovers that her plan was 'very clever'. In addition, the need for great care over Christie's image in the film explains why in Tynan's book Agatha tries, but fails due to an interruption, an experimental 'dry run' of murder on Nancy, an incident that does not feature in the film. Tynan did not approve of this omission – writing to Apted that she thought the 'dry run' was 'essential to the plot … she must appear to be carrying out one of her own stories' (20 Nov 1977: BDC 6/1/1/3). To imply that Agatha was in the end not planning a perfect murder, the book refers to a letter written to Evelyn explaining about the suicide intention. In the film, neither the 'dry run' nor the letter were included, nevertheless leaving the impression that she did indeed intend to kill herself. Both book and film were caught between needing to maintain suspense for much of the plot, while taking care to suggest that even though Christie wrote murder mysteries she would never entertain committing murder herself. This moral distinction between the 'real' author and her fiction gestures to Christie's persona as a well-respected professional writer who was known for her in-depth research

and ingenious plots. Suggesting that she might kill someone would have stretched credibility too far, a judgement that acknowledges Christie's status as a national and literary celebrity.

After the news of the missing author being found spreads, Archie reveals little about the incident at a press conference, puts down Agatha's disappearance to illness and denies that he has been having an affair. Agatha visits Wally for a final time before leaving Harrogate; he tells her he loves her and that he will not publish the story. By this time their relationship is mutually respectful even if Agatha cannot return Wally's affections. Agatha says she will go back to Archie because they must get a divorce, a remark that Wally comments on as a 'surprise ending', like in her books. He watches as Agatha and Archie leave Harrogate on the train. Echoing the final words of the book at the end of the film, a title informs us that two years later the Christies divorced.

Tynan's screenplay, contesting history and the Hoffman factor

The above version of events that reached the screen only reflects part of Kathleen Tynan's original vision, which related more closely to her book. Many compromises were reached along the way, making the production a highly contested one for creative as well as financial reasons. The credited screenwriters were Kathleen Tynan with revisions by Arthur Hopcraft. Murray Schisgal and Christopher Hampton also contributed but they were not credited. By examining the screenplay's evolution during the production process, it becomes clear that key details and nuances of character were omitted, some more striking than others.[5] While many film adaptations involve the editing of details and even cutting major elements, with *Agatha* the process caused an unusual amount of contention that started in autumn 1977 and continued during 1978 before the film was completed and finally released in February 1979.

[5] The Film Finances' files on *Agatha* contain Tynan's scripts, including the final revision dated 10 Nov 1977. Production office folder, 31 Oct-31 Dec 1977.

Tynan was made aware of the need for changes to the original script but was not entirely comfortable with them all, writing to director Michael Apted that she felt 'let down' and that 'some of the tone of the film and the meat are being irretrievably lost' (20 Nov 1977, BDC 6/1/1/3). One major change was the reduction of the significance of the character Evelyn, Agatha's new friend in Harrogate.

In the book Evelyn is a close confidante who accompanies her on shopping and bathing trips, and who Agatha generally uses to gauge the impact of her new persona as Teresa Neele. Losey later commented: 'The principle of the script, which would have made a better film, was that it was the tale of two women [Agatha and Evelyn]' (Losey interviewed by Paul Newland, 18 May 2007, BDC). Changes in casting might have influenced the decision to reduce the role of Evelyn after Julie Christie, forced by ill health to pull out of the production, was replaced by Helen Morse, a less high-profile actor (**Figure 5**). Tynan was not entirely happy with the reduction of Evelyn's role, but accepted it. She wrote to Michael Apted on 20 Nov 1977: 'The film must … work as a psychological thriller; a study of a woman in crisis who because of the experience she undergoes, and with the help of two catalysts – Wally and Evelyn – changes and grows. Of course Evelyn's part had to be curtailed, both from the plot point of view, as well as her relations with Agatha. Wally can do the same but

Figure 5: Evelyn Crawley (Helen Morse): more prominent in the book than the film.

Figure 6: Wally Stanton (Dustin Hoffmann): more prominent in the film than the book.

better' (20 Nov 1977, BDC 6/1/1/3). Advertising for the book and film reflects the augmentation of Wally as a character and also Hoffman's co-star billing (**Figure 6**). The book features Vanessa Redgrave as Agatha in the foreground with Hoffman as Wally in the background whereas in the film poster this positioning is reversed (**Figures 7–9**).[6]

Tynan's comments do show some agreement with changes to Wally's role but in view of her criticism of some of the script changes it seems she was not happy with the extent of this, even claiming that Hoffman did not want this:

> In principle I think it's daft to write in scenes for Dustin that don't carry the film forward plotwise or emotionally. It's quite evident how magical Dustin and Vanessa are together. I think it would only be damaging to Dustin's part to overexpose it just for the sake of putting him on camera whenever we can. He's always opposed that idea from the very first meetings we had (Tynan to Apted, 20 Nov 1977 BDC 6/1/1/3).

[6] The paperback edition with this cover image was published by Ballentine Books, New York, 1978. This is the only book cover I have located that used the film actors. Other editions featured a silhouette of Agatha Christie or a drawing of her abandoned car.

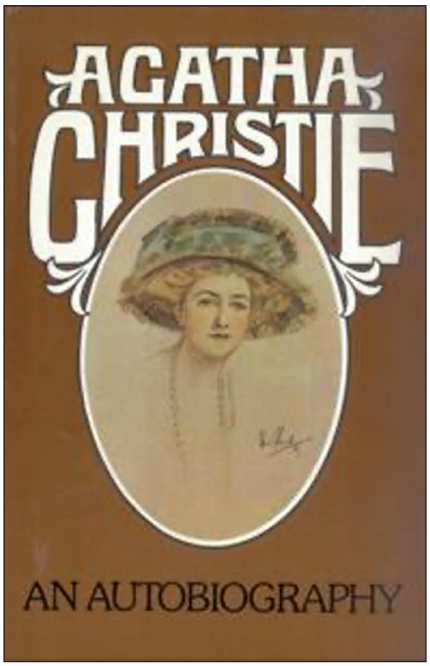

Figure 7: Christie's autobiography.

Figure 8: Tynan's novel.

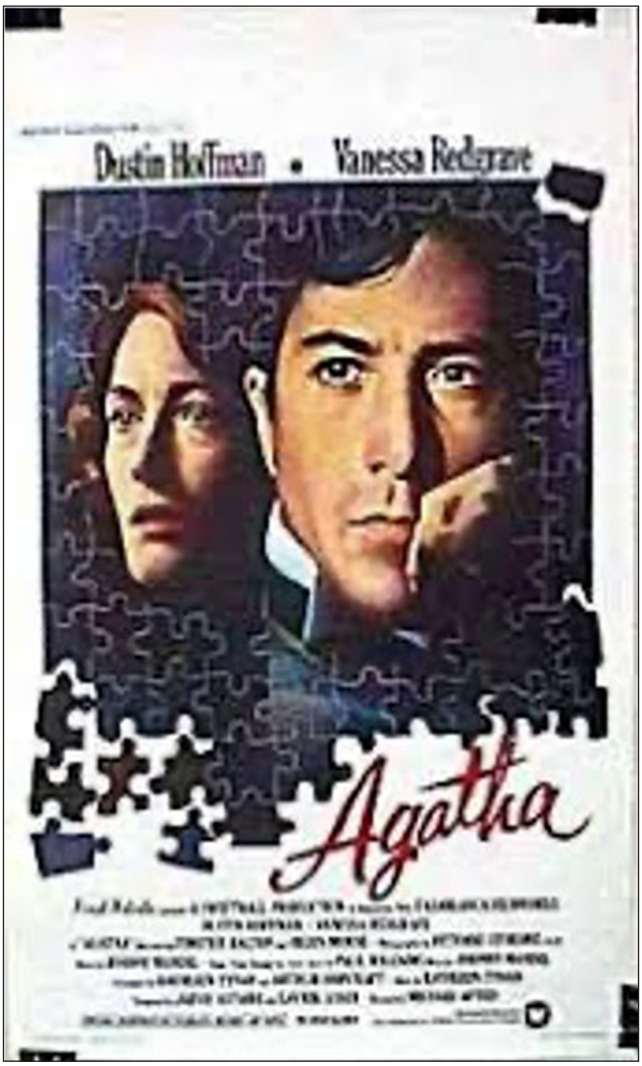

Figure 9: Film poster for *Agatha*.

There is great stress on Agatha's vulnerability in the book and her state of mind is signaled very early on, but as an inevitable result of adaptation from page to screen there is less opportunity for quite this depth of despair to surface in the film, Redgrave's performance notwithstanding. In both the book and the film, however, Agatha's assumed identity as Teresa Neele allows her to step outside of herself, a process observed most keenly by Wally who understands that this helps her psychologically. His collusion with her pretence is clearly motivated by a desire

to be close to the famous writer, while at the same time allowing him to collect the information he needs as a journalist.

Despite the fact that much was made of the augmentation of Wally's role as a result of Hoffman's First Artists contract that stated he could only star or co-star in a film, Wally was always a central character in the book. The main difference in the film is that there is more physical intimacy and suggestion of romance, for example in a scene when Wally asks Teresa/Agatha if she would 'care for a kiss' which she refuses at first, although she later returns the question with the opposite result (**Figure 10**). There is also a scene in which Wally and Teresa/Agatha are swimming, with him supporting her body tenderly as she appears to struggle against the water (**Figure 11**). These scenes risk cheapening their relationship, which in the book is more subtle, a point Tynan was keen to stress must be handled carefully in the absence of a more prominent role for Evelyn. Giving Evelyn more emotional weight in the book was arguably safer than exaggerating the romance angle with Wally to the extent that it is in the film, since the latter is in danger of making Agatha more akin to Archie who is cast as unloving and unfaithful.

As the production progressed Tynan was less involved and additional writers were brought in to work on the script; Hoffman also made many suggestions for

Figure 10: Agatha (Vanessa Redgrave) and Wally (Dustin Hoffmann) kissing.

Figure 11: Agatha and Wally swimming.

re-shooting scenes. *Agatha* went well over budget which prevented Hoffman from having the executive control over final cut he desired. The film started out with a relatively modest budget of £1,728,004 but this rocketed as re-shoots commenced, largely demanded by Hoffman who was eager to extend his role as Wally Stanton (Film Finances agreement, 17 Oct 1977; *Agatha* case file). Hoffman was keen to explain that in asking for re-shoots he was trying to perfect his performance rather than wanting to be on screen simply for the sake of his personal aggrandizement. This can be ascertained from a long report published in *Variety* early in 1979 where Hoffman defends his position, claiming that First Artists and not he pushed for the augmentation of his role:

> I feel somewhat passionate about this … because First Artists has tried to use the old reliable ego formula with stars in the press. The star wanted it rewritten for him, they seem to be saying. Number one, I would have just as well preferred to have a part that was supporting, but they wouldn't allow it. Number two, when it was to be made co-starring and I asked for the extra three weeks of rehearsal, that was *all* I asked for (26 Jan 1979, BDC 6/1/1/20).

Despite these protestations and even though Wally's romantic attachment to Agatha was accentuated in the finished film, Hoffman was frustrated at not being able to exert more of an influence in the editing stage. We get a fairly detailed sense of his wishes for the film in a letter from editor Jim Clark to Phil Feldman, First Artists' president and chief executive, in which some of Hoffman's suggestions are discussed (9 Sept 1977, BDC 6/1/1/18). Cross-cutting different scenes was one preferred strategy; for example, in the film's opening scene Hoffman wanted the film to convey a greater sense of the complex emotions going through Agatha's head as she watches an engraver completing work on a gift for Archie, a tankard engraved: 'Archie, my love, my friend, Agatha'. Clark records that they tried cross-cutting this scene with footage of publishers Collins & Fisher waiting for Agatha to go to the literary reception, but 'this became scrappy and confusing' (Ibid.). Similarly in the literary lunch scene, Hoffman wanted more cross-cutting between Agatha and Wally but Clark interpreted this request as Hoffman wanting to make up for an inadequate performance: 'I feel we can't go any further than we have … If Dustin wanted more out of this he should have played the scene in a less passive manner at the time. I get a little tired of actors who expect the editor to "create" something they didn't deliver when they had the opportunity' (Ibid.).

On the other hand, some of Hoffman's recommendations were carried out: for example, he requested that a scene of Teresa/Agatha and Wally joyfully dancing in the hotel should be intercut with the desperate searches for Christie. This underlines the stark contrast between the personal abandon in a luxury hotel experienced by Agatha and the great number of people and level of resources and seriousness behind the nationwide search for the missing author. For the scene in the swimming pool that represented 'the peak of trust' between them, Hoffman wanted even more explicit suggestion of romance, an idea that Clark was not sympathetic towards: 'I searched through all that footage for the most "romantic" elements, and cannot believe we had anything more touching' (Ibid.). Clark writes: 'If Dustin believes there was footage with "so much love in it" which I haven't used, let him come find it. Maybe our definition of the word "love" is different. I've been through that footage

a 1000 times and it hasn't yielded more riches' (Ibid.). Hoffman's suggestions were clearly interpreted as unhelpful interference by professionals such as Clark who resented actors trying to assume a major role beyond their performance. Hoffmann's performance was actually very accomplished, and was praised by several reviewers (Arnold 1979: E1).

It would seem, then, that Hoffman did exert a degree of influence in spite of his overall impression of being reined-in as the budget spiraled out of control. He was allowed to shoot a key scene towards the end of the film in which Wally once again declares his love for Agatha in a hotel as she recovers from her ordeal. It represents the conclusion of their relationship as Wally says he will not publish the story, which would surely have been a great professional scoop, and Agatha appears to care a little for Wally even though she makes it clear that she will return to Archie. Wally hands her his story, which she places in his suitcase as she gently folds his shirts, kneeling down and handling his clothes with loving care. Such gestures of tenderness are to convince the viewer that they have formed a deep friendship for which she is grateful. As Jim Clark's comments reveal, this was about as far as the rest of the production team was prepared to go with the romance angle, a view that chimed with Losey's awareness that it needed to remain as one-sided as possible. Despite the controversy Hoffman was pleased with aspects of the final film, including Vanessa Redgrave's performance and the cinematography, as well as claiming that he always maintained respect for Kathleen Tynan's original screenplay (*Variety*, 26 Jan 1979, BDC 6/1/1/20). These may have been diplomatic remarks to the press just before the film's release but as an example of a well-crafted film with top stars, beautifully shot by award-winning Italian cinematographer Vittorio Storano with astute direction and a fascinating story-base, *Agatha* subsequently enjoyed wide release and eventually made a modest profit.[7] Its critical reception in America attests to its perceived qualities, described as 'an impeccable period piece' in the *LA Times* (Kevin 1979: 16); as 'an engaging and stylish film mystery' in *Variety* (1979: 23), and

[7] Figures for US box office to date are $7.5 million, www.the-numbers.com/.

as 'a surprisingly glamorous, intoxicating entertainment' in the *Washington Post* (Arnold 1979: E1). These reviewers are appreciative of similar stylistic attributes to the heritage cycle of the 1980s and 1980s that were also well received in America (Street 2002: 196–200).

Beyond the perspective of Hoffman's personal situation, the wrangling over script re-writes and requests for reshoots created instability within the film's financial infrastructure. Despite being largely American this was dependent on a completion bond provided by the British company Film Finances. Film Finances worked as a form of insurance for film productions. In return for a percentage of the budget, Film Finances guaranteed to the lenders that the contracted film would be delivered to the distributor and undertook to meet any overspend. But it would only issue a bond once it was satisfied that the independent producer was able to meet a set of stringent conditions relating to the production of the film. In the very few cases where a guaranteed production got into serious difficulties, Film Finances had the right to take over and finish the film. The documentation generated by cases such as *Agatha* provides rich, detailed insights into the vicissitudes of a complex film project, from script to release. With *Agatha* it seems that in the end, and in spite of their attempts to halt the accumulating overspend, Film Finances gave up, withdrawing the bond and returning £60,000 in settlement (Film Finances, *Agatha* case file). The production companies ended up financing the project's overspend. The collapse of one of the film's major sources of external regulation created difficulties for the producers who largely blamed Hoffman for pushing for re-shoots at a time when money was running out. Disgruntled at being unable to complete the film quite as he desired, Hoffman sued First Artists (Hermetz, 1979: 17). Hoffman was in dispute primarily with Phil Feldman of First Artists, claiming that his contract was the root of all of the difficulties; he was only taking it to its logical conclusion and to do so he needed the full support of First Artists. What the case demonstrated was the impracticality of actors taking executive control over a production that involved several professional producers already as well as a financial infrastructure that required accountability at all stages.

The production's troubled development led to another key figure's disgruntlement. Co-producer David Puttnam pulled out once principal photography had commenced, and as the demands for re-shoots started to be made. At the time he was becoming immersed in finishing *Midnight Express* (1978), but he felt that *Agatha* was becoming too complicated. His feelings of frustration escalated in October when he wrote to producer Jarvis Astaire that the production was out of control:

> My own prognosis of the current situation is that the creative elements have (wrongly) lost confidence in the script. This, as any hardened filmmaker can tell you always happens immediately prior to shooting, and the temptation to 'improve the piece to death' becomes irresistible unless someone stops it. The script is always the target for attack because it can't argue its own case and relies on an element of 'faith' to keep it intact; this 'faith' being a commodity in short supply in an atmosphere in which a multiplicity of egos and ambitions are under considerable pressure (29 Oct 1977, BDC 6/1/1/14).

Puttnam felt his cautions against alterations to the script and additional shooting at the end of the schedule were not being heeded and that his professionalism was being undermined. He was also concerned about the vulnerable financial position regarding the guarantee bond from Film Finances, a warning that turned out to be true. Puttnam's reference to 'a multiplicity of egos and ambitions' is certainly pertinent to clashes between the production's personnel, including himself, but it seems that most of the resentment was directed at Hoffman. While some of this may have been exaggerated and inspired by the fact that Hoffman was an assertive American film star with unusual interests in production, as we have seen, he certainly made a decisive mark on the finished film.

The Christie Estate

Problems with *Agatha* were not only located within the film production team. Rosalind Hicks, Agatha Christie's daughter, tried to stop the film being made. Grounds for this were based on a U. S. court ruling on 'right to publicity' regarding the heirs and successors of famous deceased persons. They were protected by 'an

exclusive right' concerning the commercial exploitation of the name and likeness of those individuals, and to stop others from doing so without their permission (Film Finances, *Agatha* case file). The view was conveyed in a letter to Puttnam and the production companies of *Agatha* from Hicks' lawyers, Greenbaum, Wolff and Ernst: 'Mrs. Hicks and the other living relatives of Agatha Christie are most distressed and are in fact shocked that responsible producers and production companies would so blatantly trade upon the name of a recently deceased individual of the stature of Agatha Christie' (21 Oct 1977, BDC 6/1/1/21). Hicks' lawyers applied for a temporary restraining order in New York in November 1977, claiming the film would harm the reception of Christie's autobiography, but this failed (Film Finances, *Agatha* case file). They did not succeed in stopping the film but correspondence shows that concern over Rosalind Hicks's reaction meant that in the film Christie's daughter does not appear whereas she is mentioned in the book. At one point David Puttnam wanted to include a nursery scene but was advised against this by lawyers. The producers received legal opinion on treading very carefully in this respect. Kathleen Tynan also feared for her book and the possibility that she too was in danger of being sued by the Christie Estate (Stone to Losey, 9 Oct 1978, BDC 6/1/1/12). But the grounds concerning the 'right to publicity' were less easily targeted at the film when the *Daily Mail* serialized Christie's autobiography in October 1977 and at the same time published a 'reconstruction' of what might have happened when she disappeared. This was quite close to the version suggested by the book and film, so it was hardly the case that only the filmmakers were interested in the incident. In the event all was well for the production but the Christie Estate's reaction did not help the increasingly complex issues regarding the script and Hoffman's case for greater involvement.

Losey was sensitive to the need to respect Christie's reputation throughout the production; his attitude was extremely reverential towards the novelist. He argued, for example, that great care should to be taken that the audience should not think Agatha was trying to pin a murder on Nancy Neele. As his notes cautioned:

> We may be and are playing a fictional Agatha Christie but we cannot break the rules. The selling power of the film is the fact that it is about 'the mystery of Agatha Christie herself', to use the words of the *Daily News* at the time.

> The script drew on what is known, I have drawn on what is known and although we all of us would truthfully say along with everyone else, this is fiction, the power of the fiction will be, amongst other things, that it is drawn out of her world and her rules as she, the 'real' Agatha Christie, saw and expressed them (Losey, n.d. BDC 6/1/8).

This awareness of the impact of fictional representations of public figures was astute since the film's success to a great extent depended on the portrayal of Christie as being both believable and sensitive. Vanessa Redgrave did not look like Agatha Christie but her performance was appropriate for depicting the uncharacteristic nature of the disappearance. Her ethereality, other-worldliness and physical grace communicated an essence of the troubled novelist very well. The lack of physical resemblance arguably helped the film because it went well with its general fictional latitude and reliance on an audience's continuing curiosity about the mysterious affair at Harrogate. Pauline Kael described Redgrave's performance as endowing Christie 'with the oddness of genius' (1979: 101) while the *Chicago Tribune*'s review described the depiction of Christie as 'a high-strung, bright, old-worldly, beautiful, fragile national treasure' (1979: 4). The latter comment is particularly apt in terms of both Christie and the film's cultural positioning as part of 'global and national celebrity-manufacturing enterprises' (Minier and Pennacchia 2014: 1). As we have seen, the various texts offer an inter-related study of how life-writing/biographical work often transgresses media boundaries in complex, semiotic ways (Ibid.: 15–16). Since the 'truth' about the missing days was not really known, each text purported to be a verisimilar approximation of what might have happened: 'her world and her rules' led to the construction of a story with a 'surprise ending', as Wally's telling remark acknowledged.

Aftermath

Agatha Christie preferred the eleven days to be unrecorded, as part of life that was unhappy before she met archaeologist Max Mallowan to whom she was happily married for the rest of her life. Yet as this case shows, the past cannot be erased and the meaning of earlier events is never fixed. The eleven days were clearly significant

for Agatha Christie, marking a moment when she took action that influenced the subsequent divorce. Maybe it was necessary for her to come to terms with the present, to 'disappear' for a short time, even if it was marked by amnesia or even a breakdown. In a Freudian sense such life markers are important, even if their significance is not fully understood at the time, as a palimpsest of the unconscious when meaning can be repressed and subject to endless 're-writing' of the same event. In many respects this is what happened concerning this contested incident as Christie's biographers came up with many theories about what might have happened in Harrogate (Cade 2011). Christie's silence about her disappearance gave others the incentive to 'write' their own versions. Andrew Norman's 2006 biography, for example, claimed to have solved the mystery by using medical case studies to show that Christie was suffering from a 'fugue state', or period of 'out-of-body amnesia' induced by stress and which put her into a trance.

Tynan's script similarly became the subject of contested meaning as other voices sought to change its inflections as the production became increasingly complicated. Losey's vision was for the disappearance to be all about Archie – 'a distress signal … She hopes her husband will be distressed and that he will be shocked into realizing that he does love her … She also wants to hurt him, not with the aim of revenge – but to get him back' (Losey, n.d. BDC 6/1/8). While the drive to extend Wally's role and heighten the film's romantic elements is in part explained by the reduction of the character Evelyn's significance, Hoffman's First Artists' contract and status as a major film star had a profound impact on the production's budget. It also complicated the focus on Agatha, the depths of her personal despair and experience of grief and rejection. The contestations over the film's creative direction also reflect broader anxieties over celebrity and the need to take care with Christie's national and international image. The enduring fascination with the case itself is testament to Christie's fame extending beyond her reputation as a writer of popular fiction. The significance placed on the incident and the various creative and journalistic responses to it sheds light on Agatha Christie as an author whose celebrity exceeded her writing even if she was reluctant to accept this status. As a public figure Christie continues to be emblematic of a brand of national cultural heritage that is highly

exportable, as demonstrated by the worldwide success of the long-running Christie-inspired, middle-brow television series *Poirot* (ITV, 1989–2013), as well as numerous screen adaptations of her books. Christie's image is carefully supervised by Agatha Christie Limited, a company formed in 1955 to manage literary and media rights to her work. A 're-brand' in 2017 of Christie-themed monograms for a range of products and book jackets was inspired by Jim Sutherland's design for a Royal Mail stamp commemorating Christie's centenary in 2016. The puzzle-themed icons were drawn to suggest Christie's characters, all made from only question marks or exclamation marks. Christie's grandson James Pritchard, Chairman and CEO of the company, explained the logic: 'Christie is a clever and witty brand, full of mystery, adventure and glamour' and that 'as more modern and inventive Christie productions are released globally' it was important to create an image that reflected their vision for Christie (Agatha Christie Limited 2017).

As *Agatha* demonstrates, the Christie Estate could not however control 'the right to publicity' since it proved impossible to regulate comments about a figure with such a popular profile. By trying to base the film on 'her world and her rules' that Losey felt Tynan had come close to conveying in her book, *Agatha* was nevertheless pulled towards deviation, bordering on the unacceptable as Hoffman's role was in danger of distorting this core premise. It was the production's financial base and the views of key professionals such as editor Jim Clark that ensured the production did not go even more out of control. Compromises were reached all-round, from the perspectives of Hoffman, Losey, the Christie Estate and Tynan. As released in 1979, *Agatha* was marked by the series of interconnected machinations which this article has sought to unravel. As well as being a revealing case of the vicissitudes of Anglo-American collaboration the film's significance also resides in its anticipation of many of the quality-film attributes associated with heritage films of the 1980s. Since Tynan's book was not a literary classic and was largely based on conjecture, *Agatha* was freed from demonstrating the fidelity often demanded of film adaptations. As we have seen, a creative re-imagining of Christie in Harrogate was nevertheless influenced by complex contexts surrounding her status as a literary celebrity. *Agatha* was also marked by Dustin Hoffmann's own celebrity in his desire for levels of

creative control not normally permitted for actors and which influenced the film's depiction of Christie's predicament.

Trying to write those 'lost' days has been compelling for other producers; one of the most fanciful interpretations was in an episode of *Doctor Who* in 2008 entitled 'The Unicorn and the Wasp', in which Christie's amnesia is explained by her role in helping the Doctor defeat a deadly alien in the form of a giant wasp at the Silent Pool (**Figures 12–15**).

But perhaps Christie herself should have the last word. In 1934 she published a novel, *Unfinished Portrait*, under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. The character Celia is undergoing a divorce, she has also lost her mother and is suicidal. She comes to terms with her past when she confides in an artist while travelling. While one must take care not to read too much autobiography into this, it was perhaps another way for Christie to address the unhappiness that had beset her in 1926, to turn to writing something of her experience via a fictional character. As the character Celia experiences healing, Christie too went on to achieve personal happiness and even greater fame as a writer. The celebrated moment of *la belle indifférence* in Harrogate

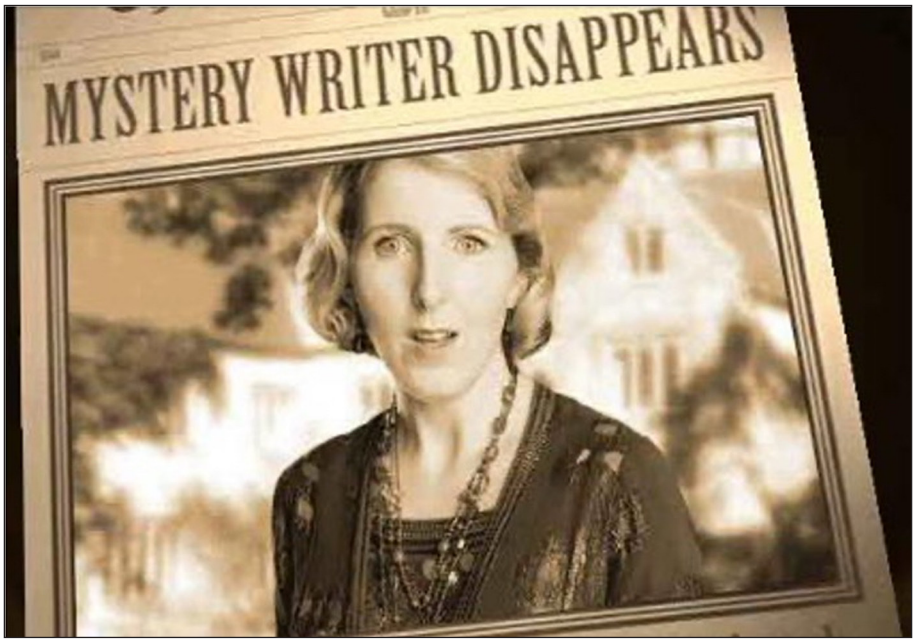

Figure 12: 4 shots from 'The Unicorn and the Wasp' (BBC, *Doctor Who*, 2008).

Figure 13: 4 shots from 'The Unicorn and the Wasp' (BBC, *Doctor Who*, 2008).

Figure 14: 4 shots from 'The Unicorn and the Wasp' (BBC, *Doctor Who*, 2008).

Figure 15: 4 shots from 'The Unicorn and the Wasp' (BBC, *Doctor Who*, 2008).

clearly served a purpose of transition, of stepping outside of herself as a celebrity and wife, in order to move forward. The eleven days indeed remain an enigma, continuing to fascinate with their apparently endless possibilities for re-writing ever more fantastic 'imaginary solutions' to an 'authentic mystery'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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