

REVIEW

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

ITV1 Christmas Day 2010 9pm

By Matthew Ingleby

The late Frank Kermode defined 'the classic' as the endlessly re-readable text. Classics energise the critical sphere afresh in each generation by proving themselves open to novel adaptations whilst escaping the confines of any particular interpretation. The plot-driven detective genre, which all too often fakes novelty by rearranging the Cluedo pieces, places an overt structural emphasis on interpretive closure. Threatening to reduce reading to riddle-solving, detective literature would thus appear to be the very antithesis of Kermode's classically good read.

Given that the detective genre promises increasingly diminishing returns for the returning reader, it is ironic that in this multi-channel digital age, platforms like ITV3 rely so heavily on repeats of *Morse* to fill up their schedules. Evidently the older daytime demographic of such marginal channels makes them particularly forgiving venues for such repetitiousness (in Repeatsville loss of memory is a boon). That said, detective programmes, however unsuited to the role, have obviously come to occupy the position of 'classics' in the television canon. The new version of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* screened this Christmas on ITV1 displayed admirable signs of recognising that there might be a problem in such canonisation. In anticipation of a bumper seasonal audience, its production was predictably lavish, but its intelligent reworking of the detective format was a subversive surprise.

'Whodunit? Theyalldunit.' Stewart Harcourt's script clearly assumed that for most viewers, such a spoiler would not reveal but only remind them of the famous twist in Christie's plot. The vengeful conspiracy of twelve against one is here made manifest from the beginning, so clumsy are the characters in their pretence at not knowing one another. Instead of treading the well-worn path from confusion to clarity, this *Poirot* made the problem one of ethics not logic. Shifting the original plot's timeframe forwards five years to 1938, Christie's narrative gains from hindsight the weight of impending world-historical trauma. Director Andrew Martin seems to echo Michael Haneke's 2009 film *The White Ribbon* by the subtle immersion of crime sensation in a highly resonant context, so as to explore ideas beyond the specificities of either subject.

More radical a revision was Poirot's 'outing' as a devout Catholic. While the books and earlier TV adaptations peppered the Belgian's speech with phatic invocations ('Mon Dieu!') these were casual cultural indicators, not clues to his faith. Here, Poirot prays aloud and alone in his cabin whilst feverishly fingering his rosary. The provocative decision to include the stoning of an adulteress in Istanbul at the beginning of the film confirms its post-9/11 steeliness in exploring the relationship between morality and violence. Having migrated from the art-deco modernist rationalism of earlier appearances, the actor David Suchet's current Poirot represents an unmistakably twenty-first century post-secularity. It is likely that the detective's conversion will strike many as unscriptural, there being no scenes of private devotion in Christie's novel. If it provokes viewers to return to that 1934 'classic' to check, however, its revisionary take will have been the best homage.

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