THE DECLINE OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

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RESUMO: *O mistério policial, originariamente britânico, aparece em cena quando já o criamos um gênero aparentemente em desuso. Neste estudo de caráter interdisciplinar, veremos como o filme “Gosford Park” (2001), de Robert Altman, recupera o gênero “detective story” parodisticamente e como dialoga com toda uma gama de textos que o precedem, particularmente com a peça “The Real Inspector Hound” (1968), de Tom Stoppard, peculiar em sua forma de discutir o gênero, satirizando-o e apontando a sua previsibilidade. Ambos discutem criticamente o gênero e exploram o espelhamento do relato dentro do relato, onde os limites entre a realidade e a ficção são temporariamente apagados, dando lugar a uma inusitada troca de papéis: espectador x ator, autor x personagem, crítico x ator, num discurso claramente metaliterário.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Gênero policial. Discurso metaliterário. Recepção. Interdisciplinaridade. Teatro e cinema.*

1 INTRODUCTION

This study will focus on the British mystery play, *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), by Tom Stoppard, which parodies the enclosed world of the English country house murder. A relatively recent movie will also be brought due to its parodic responses - *Gosford Park* (2001) by Altman.

Some critics believe we have seen too many detective stories to believe in updated versions. Reviewing Shaffer's play, *Sleuth*, Brian Clover states that *audiences in 1970 may have thrilled to the spectacle of a safe blowing open, but today it looks mildly silly, as does the waving about a revolver*ⁱ. But no one can deny the detective story had its place and time on the British stage, mainly at a time when the big screen was a hard to beat competitor.

From a site dedicated to J. B. Priestley, a prolific British dramatist who wrote the intricate *An Inspector Calls*, we learn that the theater had to develop in different directions, given the large range cinema had achieved:

Before the war, the cinema, and specifically the introduction of the 'talkies', began stealing the limelight - or rather, stealing the audiences. The popular theatre (plays big on entertainment, like musicals) tried to put on more of a spectacle to compete with the new attraction of cinema. But other kinds of theatre were also developing. Mystery thrillers by writers like Agatha Christie became popular, and 'discerning' theatre for the thinking audience, plays by writers like Priestley and Bernard Shaw, were also performed. There was also a Shakespearean revival, with acting greats like Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson rekindling interest in these plays.ⁱⁱ

Tom Stoppard's play, *The Real Inspector Hound*, satirises the whodunit genre showing its predictability by perverting Agatha Christie's most famous crime novel, *The Mousetrap*. The country manor and its upper-class owners, the stranger who comes unexpectedly, the multiple motives, the several threats, the corpse, and the detective – these are some of the elements brought from the traditional crime fiction genre to Stoppard's play. Far from celebrating its power, it aims at the degradation of it. *The Real Inspector Hound* is a “metaliterary” text in many aspects which will deserve further discussion.

2 THE PARODIC RESPONSE IN STOPPARD'S PLAY

Parody has characterized the work of many dramatists since Shakespeare started borrowing from the Ancient Greeks and from the Italians. These liberal borrowings have played an important role in the work of Tom Stoppard, such as Shakespeare in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* or Oscar Wilde in *Travesties*. Reworking on the formulas and materials of earlier crime plays and films, he has created the hilarious *The Real Inspector Hound*, in which two theater critics raise questions about approaches to literature and theater while seeing a play that doesn't seem to be any surprise to them. The play, which is a clear parody to Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, has others echoes, beginning with the title, which reminds us of another crime story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, one of the best-known of Sherlock Holmes' novels, written by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1901. Even if we do not see the eerie atmosphere of the novel recreated in Stoppard's play, both the scenery and the weather do not differ much. In *The Real Inspector Hound*, the most significant reference to Doyle's novel is

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these dialogue after the group listens to the police message on the radio, a warning about the search for a dangerous madman:

Felicity: There's something foreboding in the air, it is as if one of us ---

Cynthia: Oh, Felicity, the house is locked up tight – no one can get in – and the police are practically on the doorstep.

Felicity: I don't know – it's just a feeling.

Cynthia: It's only the fog.

Magnus: Hound will never get through on a day like this.

Cynthia (shouting at him): Fog!

Felicity: He means the Inspector.

Cynthia: Is he bringing a dog?

Felicity: Not that I know of.

Magnus: - never get through the swamps. Yes, I'm afraid the madman can show his hand in safety now.

(A mournful baying is heard in the distance, scary.)

Cynthia: What's that?!

Felicity (tensely): It sounded like the cry of a gigantic hound!

Magnus: Poor devil!

The name of the Inspector and the cry of a hound heard outside the house right before Hound finally shows up is too much a coincidence, provoking a shivering down everybody's spine. But apart from this parodic reference, there are many others which do not constitute any specific text, but a whole set of them – crime novels, detective stories, whodunits of all kinds. The common characteristics to all mystery plays are present here – the sudden arrival of the outsider (Gascoyne), the entrapping of a group of people in a house (bad weather), the multiple motives for a murder (everybody threatening the person who will fall dead in the end), the detective who comes to find out who is guilty and ends up by finding out several skeletons in the cupboard, and not few problems of identity, starting with the Inspector himself. All these elements put together remind us of the entire universe of whodunits we have already read or seen before.

Furthermore, other names are invoked, such as Kafka, Sartre, Shakespeare, St. Paul, Beckett, Birkett, Pirandello, Dante and Dorothy L. Sayersⁱⁱⁱ, the latest being famous for her mystery stories.

Maybe *The Real Inspector Hound* further influenced one of the most imaginative films in recent history, Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which he creates a story where a movie actor is able to leave the screen, and come into the life of one of his fans, not the movie star himself, but the actual character from the screen. In the film the actor who created the character is called to New Jersey to capture his character in real life, and convince him to go back where he belongs – the screen. Once the character has left the screen, the other actors and actresses become clueless; they have no idea how to handle the scene without him in it, so they just sit up there on the screen and wait for him to come back. Total chaos is established. Mia Farrow's character, a lonely woman married to a brutish husband, often goes to the movies to escape her reality. *The Purple Rose of Cairo* quickly becomes one of her favorites, and she sees it repeatedly. Finally, the main character notices her from the screen, and he soon leaves the screen to come down and talk with her. There is also a short story by Woody Allen which speculates about the same motive, fiction interfering with real life, real life interfering with fiction. In "The Kugelmass Episode," a man who was unhappily married for the second time and in search of some excitement finds a magician who sends him to the world of fiction, more specifically to Flaubert's novel, "Madame Bovary" (1857). Emma, who is a flower at the beginning, soon becomes a bore, and Kugelmass wants to get rid of her, too. Not satisfied with one more romantic failure, he asks the magician to send him to another novel, but is sent to an old textbook, "Remedial Spanish," and is kept there forever.

3 THE STORY WITHIN THE STORY

The structure of this play calls attention from its very beginning when we see two stories going on at the same time. The surface story being the one about the two critics who go to the theater on duty to see a play and probably review it later. Their dialogue is far from being connected – they do not seem to be speaking about the same thing and sometimes they do not even seem to be talking about the play, but about their own private lives. Moon is tormented by his colleague Higgs's success. He strongly believes he lives in the shadows of his rival:

Moon: It is as if we only existed one at a time, combining to achieve continuity. I keep space warm for Higgs.

My presence defines his absence, his absence confirms my presence, his presence precludes mine... When Higgs and I walk down this aisle together to claim our common seat, the oceans will fall into the sky and the trees will hang with fishes.

Birdboot, the other critic, asks Moon where Higgs is several times, what irritates the other deeply. The open rivalry between Higgs and Moon, the latest a second rank critic, is patent. His hatred of his competitor is savage and he makes no pretense of coping with the other's success and name recognition. All his fury is translated into his dream of revolution: Moon: It will follow me to the grave and become my epitaph – Here lies

Moon the second string: where's Higgs?... Sometimes I dream of revolution, a bloody coup d'état by the second rank – troupes of actors slaughtered by their understudies, magicians sawn in half by indefatigably smiling glamour girls, cricket teams wiped out by marauding bands of twelfth men – I dream of champions chopped down by rabbit-punching sparring partners while eternal bridesmaids turn and rape the bridegrooms over the sausage rolls and parliamentary private secretaries plant bombs in the Minister's Humber – comedians die on provincial stages, robbed of their feeds by mutely triumphant stooges – and – march – an army of assistants and deputies, the seconds-in-command, the runners-up, the right-hand men – storming the palace gates wherein the second son has already mounted the throne having committed regicide with a croquet-mallet – stand-ins of the world stand up! –

Birdboot ignores Moon hatred completely. He is self-absorbed by his egg-shell universe – his wife, the gossiping about him and the actresses he goes out with, his pretense ability to identify new talents, scrutinized through dinner parties and candle lights. His comments on the play always involve the two actresses who are playing the roles of Cynthia and Felicity – apparently, the actress who is playing Felicity has had a relationship with him and the actress who is playing Cynthia is his latest finding.

Everything is going quite smoothly and predictably until Birdboot suddenly becomes part of the cast. The telephone on the stage rings and Moon, irritated by the insistent noise, picks it up. It is Birdboot's wife on the stage phone. Nobody, not even Birdboot, seems to find it awkward. In the tricky sequence, the scene in which Felicity first sees Simon is repeated, but Birdboot is the one who catches the tennis ball. The same dialogue is repeated almost *ipsissima verba*. So, both the telephone and the tennis ball are the objects which bring Birdboot to the stage and engage him in the play, playing the role of Simon Gascoyne. By the end of the play Moon tries to bring Birdboot back to his seat, but the other refuses to do it, hypnotized by Cynthia. Playing the role of Simon, Birdboot finds out that the corpse under the sofa is Higgs. As soon as he does that, he is shot dead, exactly like Simon was in the play. Moon, who was part of the audience until then, invades the stage and becomes part of the play, too – he becomes Inspector Hound. At the same time, the two actors playing Simon and Inspector Hound are seen on the seats Birdboot and Moon were sitting before – critics become actors, actors become critics:

Simon: To say that is without pace, point, focus, interest, drama, wit or originality is to say simply that it does not happen to be my cup of tea. One has only to compare this ragbag with the masters of the genre to see that here we have a trifle that is not my cup of tea at all.

Hound: I'm sorry to blunt but there is no getting away from it. It lacks pace. A complete ragbag.

The solution is nothing less than pure catastrophe, given the too many problems of identity raised. Below there is a chart which pictures the main changes of identities in the play:

Inspector Hound	1 st a policeman who says he will call the police at the sight of the second body 2 nd Moon, when he invades the stage right after Birdboot's assassination 3 rd Magnus, the crippled half-brother of Lord Muldoon who turned out of the blue from Canada 4 th Puckeridge, who is no one else than Magnus recognized as such by Moon 5 th Lord Albert, Cynthia's deceased husband, who hadn't died but only lost his memory temporarily, having become an Inspector
The first corpse	1 st according to the first inspector, it is Cynthia's husband 2 nd according to Birdboot, it is Higgs
The second corpse	1 st Simon Gascoyne 2 nd Birdboot
The madman	1 st Simon Gascoyne 2 nd Birdboot 3 rd Moon, who also dies in the end of the play
The critics	1 st Moon and Birdboot 2 nd Simon and Hound

The dialogues in the play seem totally disconnected sometimes. Only few times in the play Birdboot and Moon are talking about the same thing. Most of the time they are conjecturing about their own private interests, which do not coincide, like in this passage:

Birdboot: Do you believe in love at first sight?

Moon: It's not that I think I'm a better critic –

Birdboot: I feel my whole life changing –

Moon: I am but it's not that.

Birdboot: Oh, the world will laugh at me, I know...

Moon: it is not that they are much in the way of shoes to step into...

Birdboot: ... call me an infatuated old fool...

Moon: ...They are not.

Birdboot: ...condemn me...

Moon: He is standing in my light, that is all.
 Birdboot: ...betrayed of my class...
 Moon: ...an almost continuous eclipse, interrupted by the phenomenon of moonlight.
 Birdboot: I don't care, I'm a gonner.

While Birdboot considers the possibility of having a new affair, Moon explains why he would like to see Higgs dead.

Another good example of disconnected speech is the dialogue in the play when the four people are playing cards. Everything they say has a double meaning:

Cynthia: Right! Who starts?
 Magnus: I do. No bid.
 Cynthia: Did I hear you say you saw Felicity last night, Simon?
 Simon: Did I? – Ah yes, yes, quite – your turn, Felicity.
 Felicity: I've had my turn, haven't I, Simon? – now, it seems, it's Cynthia's turn.
 Cynthia: That's my trick, Felicity dear.
 Felicity: Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Simon.
 Simon: Yes, I've heard it said.
 Felicity: So I hope you have not been cheating, Simon.

So the card table is a place for a dispute, Felicity and Cynthia disputing for Simon, Simon and Magnus disputing for Cynthia. These four people are clearly measuring their forces, sharpening their knives, oiling their guns.

In the end, who the killer is appears to be a very complex answer - Puckeridge, or better saying Inspector Hound, who also happens to be Lord Albert, disguised as Magnus. Puckeridge, the third in the rank, becomes the first. Due to his expertise, all his rivals are dead: Higgs, Birdboot, and Moon.

4 METALITERARY DRAMA

The text is full of discussion about theater and literature. As soon as Birdboot arrives at the theater, he confirms with Moon the kind of play it is, saying it is *sort of a thriller, who killed thing, a whodunit*. He concluded that due to the corpse lying on the floor since the beginning of the play, which obviously indicates what the play is about, as if there were no surprise in the theater anymore.

In this story-within-the-story play, the audience is left perplexed when the limit of the stage is pervaded by the spectators Birdboot and Moon, who suddenly become actors by the end of the play. In a clear criticism to theater and its conventions, the play becomes a farce full of clichéd actions which can be found in most English mystery novels or plays from that period.

Stoppard himself asserts in his preface that originally the play was not meant to be about critics. He merely wanted to show two members of the audience becoming involved in the action. But intentionally or not, the fact is that much of the effectiveness of *The Real Inspector Hound* derives from the presence of the critics. The pair's comments on their personal lives and the way in which their eventual involvement in the play parallels their own lives provide the entanglement of the play and the play within the play. There are differences of perception, being Birdboot superficial in perceiving the details and distracted by the two women's physical attributes and Moon being in search of the text underneath:

Moon: Already in the opening stages we note the classic impact of the catalytic figure – the outsider – plunging through to the center of an ordered world and setting up the disruptions – the shock waves – which unless I am much mistaken, will strip these comfortable people – these crustaceans in the rock pool of society – strip them of their shells and leave them exposed as the trembling raw meat which, at heart, is all of us. But there is more to it than that – Birdboot: I agree – keep your eye on Magnus.

While Moon searches for potential meaning, Birdboot continues to watch the potential suspects. At one point, Moon decides that the play is concerned with "the nature of identity," and further concludes that the central question which the critic is "entitled to ask" in regard to the play is "Where is God?" The more literal minded Birdboot responds by dubiously looking for God's name in his program.^{iv}

5 GOSFORD PARK

When we think no one else would be interested in producing an English manor-house whodunit, Robert Altman offers the public *Gosford Park* (2001), with all its archetypes: arsenic bottles, sinister butlers, smoking-pipe detectives. But besides revitalizing those archetypes, the film deconstructs them. As much as in Stoppard's play, the pathetic detective, Inspector Thompson is a failure, a complete idiot, reaching no conclusion at the end, contaminating the crime scene and asking wrong questions to wrong people.

Like in *The Real Inspector Hound*, there is the retelling of another story, a story from the past, which could well serve as a good motive for a crime, a dark story of ruthless class exploitation, disguised paternity and the injustices of factory life. This story seems to be an echo from Priestley's *An Inspector Calls*. Upstairs/downstairs division of the classes is well pictured in the movie, where the dutiful servants live their masters' lives from behind curtains and doors. The problems of identity are shown in the way each servant is addressed – their real names cannot be used, but the master's instead. Again, people are not exactly who they claim to be. The American movie producer of Charlie Chan movies brings a servant who is not a servant, but an actor trying to play the role of a servant in order to learn from the other servants. There are rich people who are not rich anymore, but parasites living out from Sir McCordle's money; there is a maid who is, more than a maid, the lover of the owner of the house; there is another servant who is the illegitimate son of Sir William McCordle with an employee from his factory.

The film also pictures well the success of the movie-making industry through two characters, a film producer and a famous musician and songwriter, Ivor Novello. The film producer spends most of his time on the phone, talking to his assistants about the making-up of a whodunit. The story he dictates on the phone mirrors the one going on in the manor-house he is in.

Despite the predictability of whodunit intricacies, the last decade alone has produced dozens of other films that play with the conventions established in the first half-century of crime films – for example, *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994), *Serial Mom* (John Waters, 1994), *Get Shorty* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1995), *Bound* (the Wachowski brothers, 1996), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, 1996), *Palmetto* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1998), *Wild Things* (John McNaughton, 1998), *Goodbye Lover* (Roland Joffe, 1999), *Drowning Mona* (Nick Gomez, 2000), *Nurse Betty* (Neil LaBute, 2000), *One Night at McCool's* (Harald Zwart, 2001).

6 CONCLUSION

Moon's attempt to extract a hidden significance from a clichéd play like that proves to be in vain. On the other hand, Birdboot's attempt to examine only the external elements of the work is also misleading, because no work of art should be chained to a framework. The predictability of the genre failed to be fulfilled at the exact moment both Birdboot and Moon got entrapped in the play. The ideal critical approach, then, depends to a significant extent on the nature and merits of the work itself.

Moon's dark and neurotic musing about Higgs and Higgs' death is maybe the darkest identity problem pictured in the play. When he says the play is about identity problems he has no idea how right he is and how much he will have to pay for being correct – in a rapid succession, the crippled Magnus is revealed to be first the real Hound, then the third-string critic Puckeridge, and finally and most fantastically, the long lost Lord Albert Muldoon. This frenetic unmasking costs Moon his life.

Birdboot and Moon demonstrate the ways in which our personal preoccupations may distract us when attempting to approach literature or plays from a critical perspective. Moreover, their critical approaches are also made to seem absurd. The treatment of critics and criticism also raises some questions and difficulties for the reader or audience member, however. It is difficult to attempt to analyze this play without suspecting that one may be falling prey to the Birdboot approach, and looking at the obvious while ignoring the subtleties and significance of the play. However, when attempting to probe the play, one feels adopting the pretentious approach of Moon, and digging beneath a thin surface. In suggesting that individuals may become literally caught up in fiction, Stoppard dramatizes the pitfalls of either approach. Ultimately, Stoppard's play leads the reader to question his own approach towards literature.

Notes:

ⁱ Review by Brian Clover based on the 11th July 2002 performance at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London W1. Source: www.curtainup.com/sleuth.html.

ⁱⁱ From www.learn.co.uk. This site brings a short biographical text about Priestley and concentrates mostly on his major play *An Inspector Calls*.

ⁱⁱⁱ STOPPARD, Tom. *The Real Inspector Hound and Other Entertainments*. London: Faber & Faber, 1996. p. 32.

^{iv} Ibidem. p. 24.