YOUNG POIROT: AN ORIGIN STORY

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ABSTRACT

Young Poirot: An Origin Story (YP) is a one-hour television pilot and bible, that reimagines the early life of Agatha Christie's iconic detective, Hercule Poirot and attempts to construct an origin narrative in the absence of clear canonical or textual precedents. As such, the idea of crafting a prequel became a critical and creative inquiry into how one builds narrative and character depth when there is little-to-no backstory that exists in the original materials. Imagining Poirot's past is a study in balancing creative innovation with ethical responsibility.

Drawing upon historically charged contexts for dramatic purposes, questions of morality and historicity, where adapting complex histories into new narrative forms generate new intertextual layers with the power to reshape meaning. Through a dialogue with past texts, outmoded genres, and audience collective memory, *Young Poirot* (*YP*) balances creative innovation with a sense of responsibility in the storytelling process. The script and bible proposes not simply a narrative prequel, but a critical reflection on adaptation as a transformative and morally complex act. We see how tensions between invention and authenticity, past and present, coalesce. The overall goal for the television show is to establish a vibrant, diverse, and adventurous writers' room and invite collaboration.

Finally, my support paper is entitled *Whose Origins?* which is a requisite point of entry into any discourse on film adaptation.

DEDICATION

This thesis and script is dedicated to my grandbeing,

Harnoor Kaur Singh Synenko

with massive love and affection. Never give up.

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WHOSE ORIGINS? HISTORICAL ADAPTATION AND YOUNG POIROT

> And a story retold, as Aeschylus retold Homer, continues.
> —John Dean, *Adapting History and Literature into Movies*[1]

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND SHORT PILOT SYNOPSIS

Origin stories possess a unique narrative power: they not only encapsulate social change but also uncover the causalities that drive character development and moral motivation. These stories shape our engagement with protagonists, provide deeper insight into the cultural and the historical frameworks that define them.

In the seminal work *Enter the Superheroes*, Romagnoli and Pagnucci emphasize that origin stories "not only reflect the socio-historical contexts in which heroes are created, but they also reflect a culture's understanding of what makes superhero storytelling unique vehicles."[2] Although Hercule Poirot is deeply embedded in the British literary imagination as Agatha Christie's iconic detective, this reimagined narrative seeks to return him to his roots, his native Belgium, reconstructing his early years as a product and citizen of late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. This approach offers an opportunity to explore his character not as a static genius, but as a young person shaped by turbulent times, political unrest, personal loss, and moral dilemmas.

The *Young Poirot (YP)* pilot and series attempts to engage in broader questions. For example, how historical drama, memory, and fidelity operate in adaptation theory; what does fidelity mean when it's to a character whose early life has never been explored; how do

contemporary historical dramas mediate between imagined pasts and modern sensibilities; and what does it mean to remain ethically faithful to historical truth if reshaping it for a modern audience?

In constructing a fictional past for Poirot, a discourse arises between the aesthetic and ethical implications of representing real historical traumas, such as genocide, class struggle, and exile, but within a fictional framework. This discourse investigates the resulting layered intertextuality that arises from adapting a character deeply embedded in western popular culture. It explores how prequels and origin stories function as sites of creative reinterpretation, generating new meanings in dialogue with genre conventions, audience expectations, and collective memory.

As creator of his origins, I have set Hercule's birthdate at December 17, 1865, the day of King Leopold II's inauguration into royal power, with the idea to purposely align the birth of a future crime fighting hero with a king whose reign becomes the most infamous in the western world for corruption, destruction and terror. By the time Hercule comes of age, his childhood is steeped in Leopold's domination and stranglehold of all of Europe and Africa.

Belgium under Leopold's rule engages in increasingly brutal colonial exploits in the Congo and other places in Africa, which result in a horrific genocide but also meets political opposition as his own country falls into extreme poverty, crime and disease. This backdrop of imperialism, industrialization, and national identity becomes fertile ground for storytelling. In the pilot episode's teaser, King Leopold II is introduced as our first antagonist in the series as his influence and malice stretches across decades until his death in 1909 in the second season.

According to Yuxi Zhou's article "Current Narrative Research on Historical TV Dramas from a Bottom-Up Perspective"[3] advancements in contemporary historical drama TV series

entails a new focus on ordinary people or commoners and their "life trajectories, survival status, and life experiences" where the audience might "find their own parallels." This bottom-up aspect of contemporary drama, offers what Zhou emphasizes:

> The significant shift in the creation of historical TV drama [which] reflects the interaction between the deep exploration of film and television artistic theories and the changing social and cultural contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the prevalence of this bottom-up perspective in historical TV series demonstrates the core ideas of "decentralization" and "diversity" in postmodernist theory.

Two good examples of decentralization and diversity in current historical drama are *Peaky Blinders* about the working-class Shelby family, whose mixed lineage of Irish and Romany-Gypsy, creates a criminal enterprise; and *My Brilliant Friend*, where socio-economic, emotional bonds and female friendship amongst tensions in post-war Naples. Both dramas span decades with multiple seasons and shift or evolve historical timeframes from the humble beginnings of the main protagonists.

Young Poirot follows Hercule from age 12 until his departure for Britain well into his mid-50s. It is this longitudinal perspective which demands attention not only to historical authenticity but also to the incremental development of character motivation with psychological depth. This dynamic interweaving of history and character echoes Dean's assertion that literature, history, and film exist in constant dialogue.

> In the movie business, as opposed to the history business, authentic does not mean factually erudite. It means coherence. It means history recast into fresh dramatic form. At its best, the epic spectacular combines heroic political history with pluralistic, polyvalent, and democratic themes…[4]

A critical approach to any adaptation recognizes the form as a transformative, ethically complex act and no longer only informing period or heritage spectacle. When tensions arise between origin invention and source authenticity, the past and present coalesce into revitalized dramatic forms which alter the structure of the narrative.

Relating this to the young Hercule's flourishing narrative, *YP* gauges the multifaceted relationship between the historical and the heroic, as Zhou points out ""Diversification" is another core concept in postmodernist theory, emphasizing that the emergence and development of things in the world are determined by multiple different origins and factors."

What might have served purely as historical retelling now challenges the television audience with an origin story steeped in dramatic human complexity. This adaptive approach to origin is perhaps the most important function of the series; without it, the historical drama would fall flat, the heroics would appear simplified or less authentic, and Hercule's character would lose much of his dynamism.

By extending the boundaries of these challenges, Young Poirot transcends limits of biographical narrative to emerge as a reflection on the intersections of personal and historical trauma, identity, and justice that underpin Christie's conception of the world's greatest detective.

YOUNG POIROT PILOT EPISODE : A SHORT SYNOPSIS

The pilot episode opens on Hercule Poirot, an undernourished 12-year old, in a dire situation—two dead bodies lay at his feet and he holds a bloody knife in his hands. He bolts out of the crime scene chased by Brussels' police. From this point on there is no turning back for the young boy, this is a life-altering moment for the young Hercule with no choice but to wait to see how fate wants him to move forward. Contained by Brussels' homicide detectives, Max Willems and Toussaint Malonga, they soon set off to discover who the real murderer is and a strong bond forms between Hercule and the two detectives, as they navigate ever closer to the truth—and more murders.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL DRAMA THROUGH ADAPTATION

If it can be written, or thought, it can be filmed. — Stanley Kubrick[5]

Linda Hutcheon states that adaptation is "its own palimpsestic thing."[6] That is, each version forming a stratified layer upon the previous or subsequent iteration, becomes an integral, intertextual part of a composite whole. Each adaptation preserves a degree of element from its source, whether overtly or subtly. *Young Poirot* forms such a layer as an origin story but with few direct connections to Christie's auteur or subsequent sequels other than Poirot's existence and his future occupation as a crime fighter. This origin project thus occupies a distinctive place within this palimpsestic structure, building a strata that may connect audiences, familiar with Christie's Poirot, to a reimagined beginning previously unknown for the character.

The young Poirot, born to poverty, raised in domestic violence, is an orphan destined to endure the specific periods or instalments of Brussels' geopolitical and historical timelines, as well as his own rate of surviving the circumstances of his life, rather than a strict list of attributes through the Poirot franchise. Zhou further reflects that:

> When historical dramas start to focus on common people, they begin to explore and reveal the diverse cultures and individual experiences overlooked by mainstream historical narratives, offering different narrative perspectives on the same historical events. As a result, history is no longer a mere accumulation of heroic historical viewpoints but a complex tapestry woven from the life fragments of countless ordinary individuals, each with their unique life value and emotional

world.[7]

Historical drama occupies a space within film and television, where a convergence of fact and fiction, legacy and imagination, create the boundaries which can be often blurred but also raise important questions regarding representation, authenticity, as well as artistic license.

The origin adaptation, therefore, by its own narrative nature, is a more complex layer in the act of palimpsestic, that sets it aside from sequel. In approaching Hercule's origin story, I was often overwhelmed at the possibilities of creating a world outside of Christie's oeuvre for Poirot, but also, by following my research regarding the time period, became aware of the potential of interwoven storylines of worldly events and fictionalized origins. Zhao and Chsing (2023) captures this tension succinctly:

> In the realm of drama, the line between fiction and history often blurs, leading to intriguing intersections and departures. A hero, whether rooted in history or sprung from the realm of fiction, serves as a focal point in narratives, embodying the values, conflicts, and aspirations of their respective contexts.[8]

This framing underscores how contemporary historical dramas are rarely about pure historical reconstruction. Instead they function as cultural and artistic interpretations, with protagonists often crafted to reflect contemporary desires. Whether taken directly from historical records or re-imagined, the best of some of these shows, for example, *The Serpent Queen* or *The Americans*, reflects deep interactions that use historical setting as strong conduits for exploring human concerns, whether about identity, morality, power, or sacrifice.

In the *YP* pilot script a subplot foreshadows King Leopold II's vile nature and sexual proclivities. This provides a compelling lens through which to understand his character in terms of his historical presence but also sets him up as an evil antagonist. As the King creates the corrupt enterprise that will soon become the Congo genocide, I needed, as creator, to understand the motivations and mindset he operated from, outside of any historical stance or political tragedy, as a man driven by greed and lust. I had to image Leopold both as an evil man and not just an evil historical figure, in order to base him inside the reality of his story arc to fully engage in immediate narrative consequences and repercussions within plot lines.

Rachel Carroll notes that "Classic adaptations create an illusion of the past against which the 'authenticity' of future adaptations is judged."[9] More classic British series—for example *Upstairs, Downstairs, Downtown Abbey* or *Brideshead Revisited*—emphasize an authenticity and faith either to original source materials or a fidelity to a historical reality. This dilemma of fidelity is especially evident in the sub-genres of costume, period or heritage dramas, where the emphasis is fully on accurate reproductions and any deviation from its own historicity could be interpreted as a possible affront to both literary source texts and depictions of historical events. However, while fidelity or authenticity to source drives these types of screen narratives, I wondered how an *Young Poirot* origin story might be considered equivalently faithful or veridical to the author's renowned original character? How would the origin story stand up against Christie's countless Hercule Poirot books or the thousands of stage or film adaptations based on his character?

The relevance of fidelity gradually fades from prominence as new thinking and debates emerge around concepts of textuality and intertextuality, which soon come to dominate Adaptation Studies, and especially Film Adaptation. Contemporary patterns of film and television consumption, as well as the growing popularity of multi-season historical and

biographical dramas as evinced in streamer culture, drive demands for intelligent adaptations which engage with present-day cultural concerns and current ideas.

In response, film, through these new methodological approaches, begins to reassess adaptation as a creative practice involving a plurality of texts, sources, and voices. As Shiloh observes, textual theories often "cast a false aura of originality on the precursor text, and ignore the fact that all texts, whether literary or cinematic, are essentially intertextual."[10] Shiloh's concept of a "false aura of originality" shows the need to take into account those intricate interrelationships between texts and other references or sources. The fidelity connection, after all, of my Poirot to Christie's is not fidelity to form or re-creation, replicating costume or heritage dramas, but rather a fidelity to a literary lineage which traces where and how Poirot developed his nature from his upbringing: How he actually becomes Christie's version of the British Poirot with characteristics such as fastidiousness, knowledge of human nature, his malapropisms and sense of justice. The young Poirot in different stages of personal development or maturity, in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, sets the stage for the popular version that is better known to us.

When a film or TV series attempts solely to be faithful to its literary source, it undermines how both the source material and its adaptations can successfully evolve through reshaping, retelling, reinterpretation, and ultimately, finally, transformation. We have the historical figure of Anne Lister, in *Gentleman Jack*, breaking the fourth wall to add entertaining insights into the unfolding episode. We have Will Sharpe's *Landscapers* where actors appear and disappear into themselves and the role they are conveying, with no impediment to reality. These transformative reinventions link source with adaptation in a way that suggests that not only are contemporary scripts in an ongoing dialogue with their textual predecessors but also that ideas and norms of the

historical period are also a part of the conversation. For *YP*, there is an emphasis upon the divisive nature of aristocracy and the underclasses, with our protagonist, Hercule Poirot, known to western culture as Christie's uptight, fussy, arrogant middle aged man with a funny moustache and particular habits, is fighting for his youthful survival, involved in raw historical events as they happen, and suffering from hallucinations—far from Charterhouse Square where his older self finds comfort, solace and puts down strong roots in London. While a historical setting and at times, lightly humorous, I want to bring into the mix the contemporary psychology behind what makes us who we are, how our values are deeply embedded by our experiences. We often think of historical moments as monumental, in a blurry grand sweep of the past; but, as with young Hercule, it is at the street level where present reality prevails and what is valuable to be adapted and explored in order to humanize us.

A new attitude towards adaptation has invigorated historical drama, shifting focus from the necessity of faithfulness towards a more nuanced approach of how stories migrate across media and epochs and make them valid for contemporary audiences.

For every screenwriter attempting historical drama, John Dean highlights three important truisms about literature, history, and cinema, all relevant for the pilot episode for Young Poirot:

1. **Legend precedes historical fact:** Origin stories by their nature start as legend. Poirot, mine or Christie's, exists not because of historical verification but as a product of both the imagination and a cultural framework beyond historical verity;
2. **A fundamental distinction exists between history and memory:** If we refer back to Hutcheon's idea of adaptation as palimpsestic, *Young Poirot* acts as a part of a cultural collective

memory which reshapes the legend and myth of Christie's Poirot far beyond any locatable chronicled reality;

3. **Literature must be understood in its broader cultural sense:** That comprehensiveness of literature or more generally art, being both acts of the imagination and parts of engaging in a deeper awareness of humanity, embody the aesthetic and moral sensibilities of their creators.

Dean's critical insights lead him to this provocative question: "The viewer can expect a movie to be like literature. But can you expect a movie to be history?"[11] Such framing illustrates the importance of embracing cinematic adaptation not as historical document, but as a creative text that reflects as much about the time/era it is made in, as about the time/era it is meant to represent. This is the case for the origin creation of *YP*. While located in the thick of cataclysmic historical events—poverty, war, genocide, etc.—the pilot episode is also a creative rejection of authentic history in favour of narrative intrigue and plot.

Whelehan and Cartmell cites Robert Stam's influential work in adaptation theory as he dismantles what he sees as an "elegiac discourse of loss"—the idea that something essential is always "lost" in the move from book to screen—and point out how Stam instead views adaptation as a generative, multidirectional process:

> Adaptations redistribute energies and intensities, provoke flows and displacement; the linguistic energy of literary writing turns into the audio-visual-kinetic-performative energy of the adaptation, in an amorous exchange of textual fluids.

This “amorous exchange” frames adaptation as a form of artistic liberation, not lesser-than or a loss. It is a celebration of creativity rather than a mourning of alteration. The energy Stam describes is not only transformative, it is also irreverent and chaotic, pushing adaptation into the realm of artistic reinvention rather than textual servitude.[12]

Consequently, historical drama becomes not a passive transmission of facts, but a space where history is reinterpreted through narrative and form. It is not merely about resurrecting the past, but about making it resonate with the present aesthetically, emotionally, and ideologically.

My goal in this origin show is to place emphasis upon the moral and emotional world of a young boy caught in a series of tumultuous events, where there is both a redemption and an exchange, from historical to contemporary values. It is, as the legacy of his name indicates, a hero’s journey and heroes are reimagined to reflect evolving cultural values. For example, in this origin narrative, the audience is persuaded to relinquish Christie’s traditionalist Poirot, who arrives on British soil with an air of privilege, wealth and ambition, regardless of refugee status, and embrace instead this younger version, who is poverty-stricken, often abused and still an unruly, undisciplined youth, often confused in his attempts to interact with others. We see him slowly, over time, develop his personality with an honest fallible naivety some impressionable young person might foster under similar less-than-ideal circumstances. Here, roots of Hercule’s origins reveals events that are condensed, dramatized or altered, to serve broader thematic purposes and visual storytelling take precedence over historical literalism. In sum, contemporary historical drama as adaptation resists being evaluated solely through the lens of historical accuracy or literary fidelity. *YP* invites a richer, more expansive conversation—one that acknowledges intertextuality, myth-making, memory, and unique affordances of visual storytelling as a way to decentralize the narrative.

There has been the tendency to glamorize or whitewash historic event in drama. Heritage or costume dramas, with over-the-top historically accurate settings and intense detail to costuming, etc., rehash old themes visited in many other adaptations of the same nature or period or even, same author. Many may also resist representing new aspects of modern production, in casting, for example, and fail to engage a savvy contemporary audience in ways that enrich their experience of drama genres. As Zhao and Chsing suggest, the hero may stand at the centre of the story, but the real power of historical drama is its ability to shape how history itself is reimagined and given a contemporary stance in which to make it relatable to today's audience.

CHAPTER 3: A STUDY IN FIDELITY

I think in the making of the story, we are honest with you, the audience, about the fact that we are also just storytellers and this is just a version of the truth.
—Will Sharpe, Director of *Landscapers*[13]

Shiloh writes film adaptation has now forever become "an intertextual practice, contributing to a dynamic interpretive exchange between the literary and cinematic texts, an exchange in which each text can be enriched, modified or subverted."[14] Similarly, McFarlane concludes: "The stress on fidelity to the original undervalues other aspects of the film's intertextuality…those non-literary, non-novelistic influences at work on any film."[15]

Historical narratives in television present a paradoxical proposition within adaptation studies, particularly concerning concepts like fidelity, authenticity, and moralization. Historical drama is a prodigious and vibrant arm of current visual culture and screen storytelling, that when conceived effectively and artfully, holds the potential to enlighten us as viewers about our current circumstances in the world. For example: We are introduced to young Poirot a few years before he comes fully of age, at twelve. This allows us to experience how his upbringing forms his moral character, how he is shaped psychologically and emotionally by what occurs around him, and what and how he chooses out of these circumstances to set as his personal standards of conduct. The parallels between his world and ours show that as witnesses to the corruptions and injustices of society, we too—like young Poirot—set our moral compasses to respond to the complexities of the external world around us.

In earlier television drama, especially adaptations of classic novels, there was a much stronger critical insistence on being faithful to the story than exists today. This long-standing

emphasis on fidelity in historical or period adaptations was, as Brian McFarlane notes, challenged only when new critical ideas like textual studies, began to loosen the grip on demanding "authenticity" and “faithfulness” on a contemporary adaptation. He references Beja’s essential question: “To what should a filmmaker be faithful? What relationship should a film have to the original source? Should it be ‘faithful’? Can it be? To what?”[16]

That ardent “to what?” reverberates throughout adaptation theory and is pertinent to *YP*. Agatha Christie left only minimal information about Poirot’s early life, vague facts or basic personal information such as his country of birth and alluding to a career in crime fighting. Because of this, I found any attempts to adapt his origins ventured into uncharted creative terrain, where adhering to fidelity concepts were not only impractical but also almost impossible.

Like a mirror-within-a-mirror, the demonstrative function of fidelity is to prove representation to a reliable single defining source. Because Christie never detailed Poirot’s life prior to his arrival in Britain, *YP* must necessarily rely on imagination and invention. Historical events serve as narrative anchors but the show’s foundation becomes a creative extrapolation. What is utilized, though not completely faithfully, is the understated tone often used by Christie in her original portrayal as well as some of the signature traits of Poirot’s core character, particularly his obsessive-compulsive tendencies, which in contemporary terms, resonate as markers of identity and interiority.

These reinterpretations channel the novelistic stylization of Christie’s literary world and have potential to bring deeper meaning to her Poirot by uncovering his origins. The known or popularized version of an adult Poirot, a fully realized character, benefits from an origin story by reintroducing the character in a novel way to an audience already aware of his existence and has potential to rejuvenate interest in the franchise by appealing to a younger audience. This

intertextual awareness breathes new critical life into an adaptation like this. It shifts the focus toward how stories are truly translated or translatable, how literature interacts with and interprets history and becomes more dynamic cinematic or television narratives. As Dean insightfully noted previously: "story and legend often precede historical fact." In the case of *YP*, it is hoped the legend is revitalized and the story/stories continues.

Recognizing the intertextual nature of world-building allows for broader definitions of what constitutes a successful adaptation. It encourages artistic risk-taking, cultivates a more expansive creativity, pushes the boundaries of what visual storytelling can achieve. Historical drama is typically described as mainly a traditionalist form, often that can mean either that the approach to dramatizing history is not well integrated into the story or it needs a fresh contemporary take to make it vital and, importantly, meaningful to today's audience.

British director Will Sharpe's *Landscapers* (HBO, 2021) is a case in point. A true crime drama about a couple who killed the wife's parents and buried them in their garden immediately drew attention not just for its content, but for how its chosen mode of direction and staging evoked fiery debates amongst several British critics, as well as my own colleagues and friends. Sharpe's vision, his use of hyper-intertextuality, is a formidable undertaking and I found it immensely intellectually stimulating.

Many in the public and press had strong reactions to the limited series. I only knew Sharpe's work in *Giri/Haji* as an actor. As a screenwriter, I admired and was surprised by the world he created for what, on the surface, might have just been another overdone true crime show currently populating streamers by the hundreds. Maybe because of this fatigue of the obvious—I believe most of us know from the start whodunit—I was enthralled to watch a more challenging and sophisticated take on a tired, old format. I found what Sharpe did in

Landscapers refreshing and revolutionary, but friends, to say the least, decidedly did not. Columnist Tim Lewis (*The Guardian*, 2021) captures the essence of Sharpe's storytelling and direction in an review:

> The bones of the story could have made for a fairly conventional true-crime procedural … Sharpe, though, pushed to go deeper; there is a dream-like, fantastical element to his retelling of events.[17]

Sharpe's cerebral and cinematic interpretation of true crime defies the typical conventions of the genre. If the characteristics of a true crime drama includes real-life criminal events told in a sensationalized way with an investigative style framework, in *Landscapers*, the "truth" of the crime becomes intersectional, layered with competing textual realities that build into an increasingly bizarre and frenzied visual salad.

For the average TV viewer expecting a true crime linear retelling, Sharpe's contemporary approach might seem too much—too far removed from the tradition and structure expected of a true crime reenactment. To them, Sharpe had overstepped, pushing directorial vision at the expense of genre fidelity. Is True Crime format, after all, too closely tied to an idea of fidelity where truth within a True Crime genre creates an authenticity that is non-negotiable?

To me, *Landscapers* is undeniably a brilliant piece of contemporary television—one that revels and frolics in intertextuality, exploring the slippery-slope nature of long-held truths about visual storytelling. *The New York Times* reviewer Mike Hale notes that:

> Sharpe shoots some scenes as keyholes in a black screen, as if we're watching a play. Others he stages like full-on Hollywood productions, echoing the films Susan (Coleman) loves, like 'High Noon' and 'The Last Metro.' (Gary Cooper and Gérard Depardieu are significant, if imaginary, figures in the story.) At key moments Sharpe literally breaks the fourth wall, pulling back the camera to show us the soundstage as the actors, in and out of character, walk from one set to another.[18]

It's audacious. It's disorienting. And yet it works.

Sharpe's directorial style and his interpretation of Ed Sinclair's brilliant script, made for rich production values and depth of scope, allowing actors Olivia Colman and David Thewlis to fully inhabit the surreal multi-tonal world the show constructs. One imagines the trust and communication between director and actors to be key to allow the discipline and freedom required for such an unconventional narrative structure. The energy of the scenes are kinetic, often surprisingly varied, and yet still entirely in service of a layered true crime scenario, albeit fractured. The result is a kaleidoscope of shifting perspectives. At audience level, Sharpe's quirky visions invites us to question memory, guilt, and storytelling itself. We are full of certainty and doubt throughout the broadcast, as Sharpe's take on true crime raises the tensions between maintaining a fidelity to genre or a fidelity to creative reinvention.

The demand for rigid faithfulness to a source text, a refrain so often heard when books or historical events are adapted for screen, feels increasingly outdated. For example in the series *The Serpent Queen*, if the plight of Catherine de' Medici where depicted as a faithful historical account of her rise from orphan to queen, it would not, I believe, hold the same audiences impact as when in this series, the young Catherine (played Liv Hill) breaks the fourth wall and directs

her thoughts directly at us in contemporary language. It's interesting to note, that like *Landscapers* and other dynamically produced dramas, this show too was highly lauded for its historical depictions, a break with tradition, and overall cleverness; but equally, rebuked for historical errors, using contemporary speech, and modern language, and anachronistic characteristics.

The reason for this chasm shows how the tight clasp of fidelity is still being insisted upon, but modern ideas or takes on intertextuality must encourage a wider sense of freedom, invention, and transformation for both the creators and audience. *Landscapers* demonstrates an example of what's possible when a creator refuses to be bound by genre convention or fidelity anxiety and the oppositions that remain when accomplishing that. One can only hope that such inventiveness, where creators and collaborators are unafraid to play with form, history, and emotional resonance, continues to elevate historical drama as a genre in creative flux which explore without impediment, regardless of outcry.

These series represent to me what is possible for *YP*. Hercule, a deeply complicated child, engages the fourth wall in the figure of an invisible detective, Monsieur Lecoq, whom is only experienced with the boy. He interacts with Lecoq who has been a remedy for his deep loneliness and privy to Hercule's inner life. For *YP*, these innovative shows, feeds a vision, calls for newly set levels of depth to characters and to their lives, and for me, releases us from the confines of Poirot's literary incarnations.

CHAPTER 4: ETHICAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Here, only the silent survive…—Dith Pran in The Killing Fields.

In his landmark book, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, Adam Hochschild quotes German Chancellor Bismarck on King Leopold II audacity to colonize Africa: "His Majesty displays the pretensions and naive selfishness of an Italian who considers that his charm and good looks will enable him to get away with anything."[19]

Leopold II did just that—and worse.

Under the guise of great acts of philanthropy, Leopold privatized an entire nation, turning the Congo into his own personal colony to use and abuse as he saw fit. His regime left millions dead and created a legacy of brutality that has scarred Central Africa to this day. It was not merely agrarian imperialism but a systematic destruction of a people for the sake of a king's own personal gain.

In *Young Poirot*, Leopold is the first major antagonist we encounter. His reach and ruthlessness make him the perfect embodiment of institutional evil, a man whose wealth, influence, and unchecked power fuelled one of European history's most shameful atrocities. He is the antithesis of Hercule Poirot.

Born on the day of Leopold's rise to power, Poirot's coming-of-age runs parallel to Leopold's reign, a symbolic synchronicity that is no accident. From his early days as a lowly junior police recruit, to his formative years in national security and intelligence, Poirot grows up under the dark shadow of Belgium's colonization of the Congo. Over the course of the first two

seasons, Leopold's presence haunts and shapes multiple plot-lines, directly and indirectly motivating action, investigations, and character revelations.

I felt it was imperative to confront this brutal chapter of history head-on. Researching Leopold's rule and the atrocities of the Congo Free State, I knew I couldn't exclude these aspects of Belgian history from the world *Young Poirot* inhabits. This is not just history—it is an unresolved moral weight that still shapes the present. If we are to examine the origins of European modernity, empire, and identity, we must name names. Leopold's crimes did not happen in a vacuum or without very powerful European royalty and politicians supporting his plans.

Leopold is more than a villain. He is an example of systemic evil, the kind that thrives behind curtains of money, charm, and privilege. He runs his kingdom like a gambler without a conscience. And as Poirot edges closer to uncovering the King's darkest secrets—for example his involvement in the Queen's mysterious death—Hercule and those close to him become targets.

Throughout Seasons 1 and 2, Leopold and Poirot clash in a slow-burn, high-stakes arc that culminates with the King's death in 1909. But Leopold's legacy and the networks he built, echo through the rest of the series, bringing with them tales of misery and corruption. These initial seasons explore how absolute power corrupts and how seeking justice from those already corrupt, creates harsher eruptions in crime. The only beneficiaries are those powerful enough to be shielded by politically-charged stratums of diplomacy, aristocracy—and moreover, silence.

In the last episode of the first season of *YP*, a decision is made by Max, Toussaint and Hercule to journey to the Congo to rescue Toussaint's sister. It's fraught with life and death situations and has a profound effect upon all of the main protagonists, but no more so than Toussaint's senior, Max.

Max becomes acutely aware as he witnesses the madness and cruelty of unprecedented violence in the jungle, that his inherited position in life, great privilege and his race, stems from men "just like him"—white malefactors and cruel overlords, some of which, Max understands, to be his contemporaries and peers. Max's moral compass is shaken by the experience. Toussaint's family and the Congolese have endured the ultimate price paid for Leopold's reign and the shift in all three characters brings a rededication to expose ill-doings everywhere, to fight criminality and expose corruption.

In shaping this aspect of the story, I've been especially mindful of the ethical responsibility of depicting colonial violence. As writers and creators, we are responsible for what we show and what we omit, to balance and blend reality and research with our creations and storytelling. And in the times we live in, we cannot turn our face away from genocide, past or present. Whatever the country, whatever the context, silence is complicity and storytelling, at its best, is an act of witness and testimony.

Considered one of the finest examples of historical narrative film-making, Roland Joffé's 1984 masterwork, *The Killing Fields,* whose main storyline is the involvement of the United States in Cambodia and the rise of the Khmer Rouge, which lead to the country's genocide.

The critical acclaim for Joffé's approach is based on his brilliant addition and edit of archive footage, the authentic casting of Cambodian citizens, and capturing realistic characterization without abandoning meaningful storytelling.[20] It is a film that resonates as I consider the Congo episodes in *YP* and to further my understanding of Toussaint's character. Joffé's depiction of a country under a brutal regime, interference from an outside nation and presenting the authentic faces of conflict, are all significant attributes to bring to developing the

Congolese aspects of *YP*. Like Joffé's insistence on casting real Cambodians, my thesis question *Whose Origins?* becomes a relevant discussion point around faithful casting.

In the television series *Bridgerton* examples of how to integrate racial representation into casting was met with a mixture of positivity and criticism. In a guest column for The Hollywood Reporter, *Bridgerton* creator and show runner, Chris Van Dusen, explains how he intentionally wanted to develop the show, set in England during the Regency era, to highlight an inclusive representation of roles.[21]

Though fans of the show applauded the efforts, critics like black British author and historian, Steven I Martin[22] points to the difficulty and potential danger of including people of colour in the very British genre of historical drama:

> It's an absurd take on Black history…set at a time when Britain was the largest trader in human lives on the planet. Slavery was central to the British economy…inviting, or fomenting, the forgetting or overlooking of the realities of that period…

Shonda Rhimes, the producer of *Bridgerton* and creator/writer of the sequel *Queen Charlotte*, counters this criticism by pointing out that the casting of the shows were "colour conscious" instead of "colour casted"[23], and that the series is less about historical accuracy or facts as it is about indulging in romantic TV fantasy. Generations of British-born black and POC TV watchers have been brought up watching British historical dramas, the majority of which feature none or few people of colour included in the casting. Part of the important popularity of the *Bridgerton* franchise is that it fulfills—albeit superficially perhaps—an important contemporary obligation to cast outside of the British historical drama trope of white women in

pretty gowns and dashing white men on horses sweeping them off their feet. This attitude to casting, regardless of criticism, pushes past limitations on characterizations to start to gain new territories of acceptance, representation and opportunity for others—and wider viewers.

In my own work, the character of Toussaint Malonga, one of three major protagonists in the *YP* series, is a black man born and raised in the Congo who has lived in Paris since his early 20s and who travels from Paris to Belgium to join the police force. His experiences during the colonization in his homeland are a big part of his story in *YP*.

However, unlike *Bridgerton*, Toussaint's origins (and, later, that of his sister, Sihi's) are not driven by the act of racial or cultural subterfuge where we expect their story to be reduced to costume or as Martin points out, "an absurd take on Black history" but rather, I wanted to explore who, what and how the Congo genocide was contrived by the white men in power, specifically King Leopold II, to unveil the political machinations, conspiracies and participants which, violently and unremittingly, impacted the spirit and freedoms of a whole continent. The criminal root of this atrocity is in Belgium where Toussaint, along with Max and Hercule, attempt the downfall of its main perpetrator, Leopold and his allies.

The approach I feel is fundamentally different from Rhimes's or Van Dusen's rationale of "colour consciousness" and more in line with Joffé's practice. I want to expose how genocide could readily exist within a supposedly rational society, by hearing Toussaint and Sihi's voices, and not dissimulate, defuse or bury the Congo genocide or the burden of responsibility.

Unlike *Bridgerton*'s take on representation, Toussaint does not exist in order to hide or ignore or understate his experiences as a black man, whether in the Congo or life in the European diaspora. He does not serve as a fantasy figure nor was he created to simply reject or pretend this history did not occur. He, and other black characters in the show, are not there to provide racial

affirmatives or to validate other non-black characters' identities. Toussaint's place in the story is not an erasure of black engagement but to further reveal the horror of King Leopold's role in these atrocities. The consequences of colonization on Toussaint's life and on others, is experienced without prevarication, and like Joffé's Cambodian casting, particularly the role of his character Dith Pan, he is a Congolese man driven from his country to settle in the Flemish-Catholic city where, he realizes, he will always remain a colonized stranger. His addition to the story has no sense of being a substitute for a white character and Toussaint is fully and proudly who he is—brash, unafraid, boldly presented and driven, like Max and Hercule, to bringing justice into the world.

While it is one of several historical reenactments or retellings in the *YP* series, to me as creator, it is the most vital one to engage in fully. I feel, especially as current world events take place where increasingly, even to mention or protest against genocide, is outlawed, in some cases with a hefty price to pay, it is valuable to seek out and name the major instigators and the predators who will gain monetarily.

In a New York Times article by Anemone Hartocollis (Oct. 23, 2024) activism comes under attack in an institutional setting where freedom of speech is threatened. Hartocollis cites several incidences of academics who, by speaking out on the genocidal actions in Gaza "faced consequences…or were construed as antisemitic" amongst a "growing assault on the ideals of academic freedom, a principle that most American colleges and universities hold dear." But what is the alternative? How do we chose not to speak out? By discovering the historical conditions of the Congolese genocide and bringing attention to its injustice, writers, artists and academics are often at the frontlines of western protests against genocide, and as such, often have their careers ended or lose livelihood or meet with violent confrontations at protests. Silence for me, as a

creator of a historical piece set in a time of genocide, is not an option. Pierre-Philippe Fraiture states:

> the history of Belgian colonialism is complex. It involved many stakeholders from a religiously and linguistically divided country. But also international actors who, from the beginning, were attracted by Leopold's project and the many resources—natural, mineral, and human—offered by the new colony.[24]

This is perhaps at the heart of presenting Toussaint's story, a colonization is happening in both his worlds, his past and present, and he is formed by it emotionally and psychologically and throughout the series we see his struggles manifest in different ways. Going back into a Congo ripped apart under siege to rescue his only surviving relative, creates in him a much needed space in which to honour his ancestry, the vital connections to the land of his origins, he realizes, Leopold could never destroy. It's a powerful transformation for Toussaint as a man, as a crime fighter and as a Congolese native.

Bridgerton's casting was successful with its audience but it was not without inspiring discussions about representation. As Saul reiterates—

> *Bridgerton* may have been celebrated for its diverse casting…[but] the show perpetuates stereotypes and fails to accurately represent Black people and their experiences…[and] epitomizes the ways an 'add diversity and stir' approach to representation is problematic…its portrayal of Blackness ultimately does little to challenge the status quo or promote true representation and inclusion.[25]

I could not include the historical period in European colonial history that provides the backdrop to *Young Poirot* without confronting the details of Toussaint life and to take the audience into the heart of the Congo to save his sister's life or tell of the details of how Leopold orchestrated such wide scale deception and terror and who was next to him when he did so, leaving a legacy of which still effects peace in western Africa to this day.

Toussaint Malonga is a character I thought of from the very start of the first draft. His beautifully arrogant energy and intelligence bounces off Hercule's naive bewilderment from the moment they meet. Toussaint, unlike Hercule, has a directness that cuts through illusion, and I grew to appreciate that and knew early on he would be an important character to many plot lines and be a crucial teacher in Hercule's development. The Congo episodes trace an emotional and transformative journey for all involved. There is no sidestepping this particular European scar on the face of humanity.

Through times of conceptualizing the series then writing the pilot, I made note of different Congolese individuals and organizations and resources, representing a wide spectrum of West African cultural, historical, and artistic life, for example: Joëlle Sambi Nzeba, a Belgian-Congolese poet, activist for the Belgian Network for Black Lives; Maison des Mondes Africains in Paris, a source for African writers, academics and artists; Dr. Denis Mukwege, a Congolese doctor who won the Nobel Peace Prize (2018) for his work in ending sexual violence as a weapon of war; as well as many incredible artists like the Congolese painter, Chéri Samba.

I plan to tap into the vibrant Congolese diaspora in Paris, Brussels and London, to guide me toward finding credible consultants, collaborators, and meaningful conversations. I strongly hope that in the future Congolese and African writers will sit around the *Young Poirot* table if the

project ever advances to that point. I also intend to seek a diverse group of emerging European directors, actors, and crew. I see this as an essential, ethical step in pre-production that I am committed to upholding. By potential collaborations with people like Dr. Denis Mukwege and others, I aim to ensure that Toussaint's experiences in the Congo are portrayed with authenticity, and reflect Joffé's attitude to historical storytelling, informed by real-life accounts and contain accurate historic details. These consultations will help to shape his narrative arc without resorting to stereotype or simplification but with a deep sense of who he is, where he comes from, and what burdens he carries.

While based in Europe this coming year, I will start to reach out via introductory emails to several of these individuals and institutions as well as to producers. With enough connections and recommendations, I hope to schedule in-person meetings in London, Paris and Brussels starting February, 2026. These conversations will I hope allow me to explore and inform the creative vision of the project as well as invite critical feedback. My aim is to co-create rather than extract—to listen, to learn, and to ensure that a future writers' room for *YP* reflects the complexity of the world we are portraying and is representative of the present.

To do this type of story ethically, to give proper narrative weight to the colonial histories and diasporic realities requires not just sensitivity, it also calls for a solidly inclusive creative team. With a collaborative network of voices that reflect the cultures and histories the show plans to engage in, an opportunity exists to build relationships in the early development stages and I plan to approach it with humility, curiosity, and deep respect for those whose experiences intersect with Toussaint and Sihi's.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: REVISIONING A LEGACY

"A detestable, bombastic, tiresome, ego-centric little creep…"
— Agatha Christie about Hercule Poirot

At times, I've struggled to understand what kind of adaptation I was creating for *Young Poirot*. For several drafts, I kept writing Poirot out of his own story—not consciously, but perhaps, I see now, out of fear. I found myself resisting the need to revisit my own confusing, lonely childhood, which ironically, after more drafts, was what finally allowed me to create a more authentic connection and bond to the young Hercule. However, when I leaned into that discomfort something shifted between he and I. Hercule, this mini-adult, prematurely sharpened by trauma, an oddball, and what we might label today as neurodivergent, came into clearer focus.

There are characters you want to spend time with and others you simply do not. I began to see Hercule more, not as the famous moustached meme or a pursed lipped Suchet, but as a child shaped by abuse and abandonment, operating in that constant state of hyper-vigilance abused children adopt and traits, of course, shared by many children who grow up in unsafe environments. They are the children who often become highly intuitive, socially incompatible, often too mature for their years, and terribly misunderstood. Yet they are stuck in childhood like the proverbial ugly duckling, unsure of the world or their place in it.

And, they often make for fascinating detectives, artists or storytellers.

There's something powerful in John Dean's assertion, that "legend precedes historical fact", that shows us storytelling brought to the forefront of history, adds a variety of understanding our reflected humanity and our commonalities and allows us, especially through

the medium of film, for the miraculous visual experience of the daily struggles we as human beings are caught up in and smashed against the rocks by its emotional tides.

When Agatha Christie first introduced Hercule Poirot, she presented him as a refugee fleeing Belgium in 1916 aboard a boat to Dover. We know he had a brilliant crime-fighting career before arriving in Britain, but Christie gave him no true origin story. He seemed only destined to be the popularized version of the Poirot we know. He appeared before us, fully formed, in mid-life. With *Young Poirot*, I aim to explore those lost years before his arrival at Dover, where the psychological, political, and emotional experiences must have gone to shape him into the Poirot we think we know so well.

My protagonist arrives already weighed down by a well-established literary lineage and countless textual, theatrical, and film representations. There exists a vast cultural space around Agatha Christie and her work. Her writings have been adapted in the thousands; Hercule Poirot alone has been portrayed by at least a dozen prominent actors. Christie is, of course, widely considered one of the most influential mystery and crime writers in the Western canon. Yes—it is daunting when I consider the sheer weight of that legacy, while attempting to create an origin and original story for such an iconic character.

Christie herself drew inspiration from other detective figures—most notably, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. She was also likely influenced by lesser-known figures like the Welsh writer Frank Howel Evans and his character, Monsieur Jules Poiret, among others from early French crime serials. This is not to diminish Christie's originality but to emphasize that literary invention is often a layered, iterative process, with a collaboration across many sensibilities and timelines.[26]

My own approach to adapting the young Hercule Poirot was hard-won. It took numerous drafts and discarded ideas before I began to clearly hear his voice. I began to understand that the way into his character was to disregard Christie's popular franchise and begin to explore the uncomfortable effects of childhood trauma, to understand what shaped his fears, his fastidiousness, his obsession with order, and his driven desire to understand human nature. I needed to ask: What were his emotional motives? What drove his fear? What would allow him to navigate a complex array of formative experiences to ultimately, literally and figuratively, grow into the man the world will know as Poirot?

I am not a lifelong Christie devotee. I don't remember reading her as a young person. I have respect for her as a literary force, certainly, but I always saw the Poirot franchise as a mixed bag of screen adaptations—some excellent, others uneven, varying in direction and production value.

Peter Ustinov's Poirot is the one I remember best. His performance carried a kind of brash snobbery, razor-sharp sarcasm, and undeniable screen presence. His more continental energy and approach to the character felt more genuine to me than David Suchet's interpretation, which I found overly British, overly correct, and at times too sanitized. Suchet's Poirot smiles often but says little of personal substance, and he never reminisces on his past. There's no genuine connection between him and his past, little longing, little regret, just a polished exterior of a man who appeared to have scrubbed away his own life, and not a small part of his life, for unknown reason. That, to me, always felt suspicious. In contrast, I wanted to create a young Hercule who is *not* a caricature, a pastiche, but a fully fleshed-out character whose trauma, cultural identity, and emotional landscape become the vanguards of the series.

As we have seen, Linda Hutcheon[27] and others have argued that adaptation is less about faithful translation and more about transformation. Stam, as quoted by Whelehan and Cartmell, suggests that adaptations can "take an activist stance toward their sources… inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism." That sentiment is central to my approach. Beja's question "What do we owe or bring to our understanding of a film or TV show?" underscores the importance of the audience's cultural literacy and historical context. In this view, fidelity to the original text is no longer the gold standard. A more inclusive, layered approach to adaptation can be richer and resonant as evinced in the more current historical dramas I've suggested.

But even then—whose "origin" are we talking about? The more we try to trace literary or cultural origins, the more we fall backwards into an Alice-in-Wonderland rabbit hole, pulled through layers of voices, mythologies, eras. When the creative process is liberated from the demands of fidelity or moral gatekeeping, then adaptation as cinema, television or theatre, can reach its fullest potential. As Cartmell and Whelehan cite theatre historian Allardyce Nicoll, there is an argument to be made for elevating film to the level of literature: "Poetry must enter the cinema." Nicoll argued that screenwriters—like the playwrights of Shakespeare's day—deserve more recognition, more credit, and more value.

In creating *Young Poirot: An Origin Story*, I have grounded the series in the socio-historical context described by Romagnoli and Pagnucci, starting in Hercule's homeland at the time of his birth in 1865 and culminating when the German invasion of Belgium forces him to flee in 1916. His world is shattered not once, but three times by world-historical events. Yet he responds, much as he does when we meet him at age twelve, with a force of reinvention and a will to survive beyond his young years.

Destinies are rarely singular. They are a succession of life events, that, when faced boldly, form the backbone of a hero's journey. Hercule Poirot's origin story, like that of his mythological namesake, centres on a deep curiosity towards the hearts and minds of others. Christie gave us one version, one destiny, one brilliant layer of this extraordinary character, but I believe there are many more. And in discovering them, we expand our understanding not only of Poirot but of adaptation, of literature, and of the many voices that shape cultural memory.

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