

## **Exporting Englishness: ITV's *Poirot***

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### **Introduction**

Former Director of Global Distribution at ITV Studios, Tobi de Graaf describes *Poirot* as just the kind of programme international buyers want because it represents a 'safe bet' (Fry, 2009). This chapter explores why *Poirot* represents a 'safe bet' for programmers in Britain and the US – its biggest export market. In tandem with analyses of key themes in a selection of episodes, and the style in which Christie's stories have been adapted, I explore *Poirot* within the context of the English Heritage industry. I consider how the programme's success relates to the export of a nostalgic brand of Englishness and what this reveals about shared values between England and America, both in a cultural and ideological sense. Although much recent critical attention (including in this volume) focuses on novel treatments of the crime genre, *Poirot* exemplifies how some of the most popular and profitable examples are mainstream and fit within the conservative genre of period mystery drama.

### **'Ratings Warhorse'**

In 2012 Elizabeth Jensen, in *The New York Times*, declared: 'America is having a love affair with British drama and mystery' – an assertion based on the popularity of the Public Broadcasting System's (PBS) *Masterpiece* series (1971-), the longest running prime-time drama series on American TV, offers a range of British productions.<sup>1</sup> As part of its *Mystery!* franchise, *Poirot* is screened in conjunction with other ITV dramas including *Endeavour* (2013-), *Foyle's War* (2002-15), *Lewis* (2006-) and *Marple* (2004-13).

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2008 under the umbrella titles *Masterpiece Classic*, *Contemporary* and *Mystery!*

*Agatha Christie's Poirot*<sup>2</sup> premiered on 8 January 1989, and it has enjoyed remarkable longevity, ending its twenty-four year run on 13 November 2013 when *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* was screened.<sup>3</sup> Its seventy episodes, divided into thirteen series, exhausted Christie's catalogue of short stories and novels featuring the Belgian sleuth in a mixture of fifty-minute and feature-length episodes. In March 2011, though, it appeared that *Poirot* had reached its end, when ITV announced its cancellation as part of a cost-cutting exercise (Holmwood, 2011). Production costs were considerable; IMDb estimated the budget for one feature length episode, *Death on the Nile* (2004, Season 9, episode 3), at two million pounds (2004). Nevertheless, the decision was unusual given *Poirot's* consistent ratings success and the home advertising revenue and foreign sales that it regularly generated. In the domestic market, well into its second decade, *Poirot* remained able to dominate the ratings in an increasingly competitive multi-channel market. In 2003, Gareth McLean described the show as a 'ratings warhorse', commenting on the timeliness of its return in *Five Little Pigs* (2003, Season 9, episode 1) given the overall failure of ITV1's contemporary drama season.

By November 2011, *Poirot* had won a reprieve: ITV reversed its decision to 'bump off' its most famous detective, and instead commissioned feature-length adaptations of the five Christie novels yet to be filmed (Radio Times, 2011). The show's domestic success cannot be discounted here. In January 2006, *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (Season 10, episode 1) out-performed the BBC's Oscar-winning *Chicago*, attracting 7.4 million viewers (Tryhorn, 2006). In 2009, the series was one of two ITV3 programmes to draw audiences of over one million (ITV, 2009). However, overseas profits might have counted even more strongly in its favour. As the Introduction to this collection records, exports figure as UK commercial television's largest income stream, with crime/mystery drama counting among the most lucrative of finished television exports. However, Simone Knox explains, in some

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviated title *Poirot* will be used throughout the rest of the chapter.

<sup>3</sup> New episodes were not filmed on a yearly basis, with repeats being shown when there was a production hiatus.

cases British drama is not ‘simply being exported’, but being ‘produced to be exported and exportable in a global marketplace’ (2012, p. 43). Hence, the kind of programmes British television can produce, particularly ITV which relies so heavily upon exports, is increasingly influenced by what American networks will buy and, in the case of PBS, what its corporate sponsors are willing to subsidise.

Since its inception, *Poirot* has proven one of the most successful of UK export products. It helped ITV open new territory in Europe when it was sold to an Italian network, thus ‘breaking the unwritten rule that Italy is a territory which won’t buy UK period drama’ (Broadcast, 2003a). *Poirot*, alongside *Marple*, was the lead draw in Granada International’s sales to ABC Asia in 2004 (Broadcast, 2004). Indeed, it seemed that anywhere the little Belgian detective travelled, tall profits were sure to follow. In 2003, *Poirot* was sold throughout the Middle East, including to Bahraini, Iranian, and Saudi TV (Broadcast, 2003b). In 2005, ‘Chinese broadcasters’ appetite for classic UK drama ... helped Granada International secure five new deals in the territory’ (Broadcast, 2005). Christie’s undoubted enormous readership has made her writing a particular favourite for adaptation to TV and film,<sup>4</sup> but the success of ITV’s adaptations has created a reciprocal commercial relationship, one whereby the adaptations are now feeding the success of Christie’s originals. Harper Collins, which produces a series of Christie novels designed to be used in English language teaching abroad attributes their huge appeal partly to the TV adaptations (Garner, 2012).

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### ***Poirot* in America**

By 2009, *Poirot* was pre-eminent among UK exports, with Noel Hedges, head of drama at ITV Global Entertainment, reporting sales to more than ‘180 territories’ (Hurrell,

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<sup>4</sup> The variety of sources that estimate Christie’s sales offer figures that vary from 2 million to 4 billion, with translations into 45-50 languages, with books remaining in print in over 90 countries.

2009). However, the US remains the single largest market (Broadcast, 2006b), where *Poirot* has been shown on the Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E), a cable and satellite channel established in 1984 as a commercial counterpart to public television. By the mid-1990s, A&E reached '69.5 million subscribers in the U.S. and Canada, representing close to 66% penetration in the U.S.' (A&E, 1996), giving *Poirot* exposure to a substantial segment of the pay TV market. However, *Poirot* has gained its largest share of American viewers through its screening by PBS and its over 350 affiliate stations across the country, where the show has been a flagship title since 1990.

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Henry Chu cites average audiences of five million and a 'national rating about 80 per cent higher than the public network's prime-time average' (2013). PBS receives limited congressional funds and thus relies heavily on viewer donations to purchase rights to expensive UK programmes. *Poirot* has been core to PBS's 'pledge schedule', attracting high levels of revenue from private donors (Sefton, 2014), and though PBS is commercial free, its programmes are underwritten by corporations who seek to increase the value of their own brand by associating it with another quality brand.

*Poirot* was among the catalogue of British programmes that enabled Acorn Media to defy the downward trend for home video sales in the US (Jensen, 2012). Recognising its commercial value, in 2012, Acorn acquired 64 per cent of the Christie literary estate, making it the majority owner of her novels, plays, and their TV adaptations (Wagner, 2012). In 2014, the company exercised its exclusive option to bar PBS from screening the final three episodes of *Poirot*, which could be seen only on Acorn TV, the first service to offer streaming of the series in North America (RLJ Entertainment, 2014).

One element that makes ITV's *Poirot* stand out from other adaptations is the series' heightened degree of fidelity to Christie's vision of the character and his world.<sup>5</sup> Throughout its run, Poirot was played by David Suchet, who recounts reading every story and novel featuring the character in preparation for the role. Suchet records his goal of portraying 'Poirot exactly as Christie wrote of him, right down to the smallest detail' (Dillin, 1992). He describes resisting attempts over the years by scriptwriters who wanted to do 'new things' with the character. 'I am very firmly Agatha Christie's Poirot and I won't allow him out of the box in which she put him', he stated (Thomas, 2012).

There is a current trend for updating iconic detectives on British TV. Most notably, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes has been given a radical facelift in Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's adaptation for the BBC (2010-). Even the spinster Miss Marple is sexed-up in the opening episode of ITV's *Marple*, featuring Geraldine McEwan, whom we watch bid goodbye to her married lover as he boards a train bound for the trenches. In contrast, John Voorhees notes, *Poirot's* 'formula is familiar' and predictable (2013). *Poirot* bucks the trend of refreshing crime writing for a contemporary audience, and its static nature raises the question of why audiences remain keen to watch it, especially American viewers who have an almost countless array of innovative alternative detective programmes available.

*Poirot's* ability to attract viewers and revenue is buttressed by its high production values. Winner of four BAFTAs, and an Edgar Award in the US, *Poirot* has earned critical kudos for its well-crafted scripts and strong acting on both sides of the Atlantic. Christine Spines argues that 'Anyone who's seen previous iterations of ... Christie-inspired policiers developed for British TV knows that these are considered to be the acme adaptations and among the only ones to reliably pass muster with even the most discerning of Brit mystery

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in contrast to CBS Entertainment's *Thirteen at Dinner* (1985) and Warner Brothers' *Murder in Three Acts* (1986).

buffs' (2011). Even though Christie's novels belong to a genre – detective fiction – that is associated with popular culture rather than the privileged category of literature, and as such denigrated by some, critical accolades for *Poirot* place it firmly within the sphere of quality programming, underscored by the fact of its presence on PBS – the undisputed hub for quality TV. Knox defines PBS' *Masterpiece* as synonymous with a very particular type of heritage quality drama in the US (2012, p. 31). Worth noting is the distinction between what counts as quality TV among many in the British industry, however, as Knox recognises when she quotes Channel 4's former programme director Jeremy Isaacs' comment that *Masterpiece* represents the 'worst of what we do' – 'simple, safe costume dramas' (2012, p. 45).

### **Christie's Poirot and Edwardian England**

Christie was outspoken about her love-hate relationship with the character of Poirot. Earl F. Bargainnier quotes her speaking about Poirot in 1938: 'There are moments when I have felt: "Why, why, why did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature?" ... eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustache, eternally tilting his egg-shaped head' (2005, p.45). Susan Rowland suggests that Poirot represents an English anti-type, labelling him 'An affront to English masculinity in his neatness, fussiness, demands for fine food and central heating', and because he can be critical of English habits (2001, p.63). Poirot is remarkably different from the type of detective developed by most classic writers of the genre during the inter-war years in Britain. Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn belongs to the English gentry, and Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey is a wealthy aristocrat. They are members of the established order, for whom investigating crimes is a hobby.

To the contrary, Poirot is a former Belgian policeman whose comfortable standard of living depends on attracting wealthy clients. At the same time, he cuts a dapper figure in

upper-class circles, within which he moves with ease. Despite the slight whiff of labour about him, there is nothing in Poirot's character to detract from either his social respectability, or his relation to the traditional view of the British justice system as compassionate and paternal. Indeed, his outsider status, a common trope of the detective genre, enables him to act as a benign critical friend of the English establishment. Structurally, his good-natured criticisms of English food and love of outdoor pursuits afford a gently ironic perspective on English identity.

As a Belgian repeatedly mistaken for French, Poirot possesses a façade of foreign mannerisms, but his many quirks paradoxically align him more closely with other classic British detectives by placing him in the tradition of English eccentrics. Historically, personal eccentricity has been not merely tolerated in English society, but positively valued as a specific incarnation of Englishness. David Long's *English Country House Eccentrics* (2011) demonstrates the close connection between eccentricity and social respectability by mapping the peculiarities of the gentry; whereas Edith Sitwell's classic *English Eccentrics* (1933) asserts that: 'Eccentricity exists particularly in the English, and partly, I think because of that peculiar and satisfactory knowledge of infallibility that is the hallmark and birthright of the British nation. This eccentricity, this rigidity, takes many forms' (p. 16<sup>?</sup>). Thus, Poirot's heightened individualism, combined with his ability to solve the most baffling crimes, places him in the very best of English company.

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Christie's framing of Poirot recalls the England of Empire. She gives the character a birth date at some point in the mid-nineteenth century, and places him as a war refugee in 1916 England where readers first encounter him in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1916). Though in the midst of the First World War, the nation remained a global power, with a far-reaching cultural influence, and in the course of solving mysteries, Poirot ventures across Britain's colonial territories. Yet, wherever we encounter him, we find ourselves, like Rupert

Brooke's eponymous soldier, in a place that is 'forever England.' Thus, it is fitting that most of Christie's Poirot stories are set in England, specifically the Home Counties, and frequently in country houses, for beneath the mask of foreignness, Poirot functions to validate English nationalist sentiment.

Detective novels are generally perceived as structurally conservative. They follow a tight set of generic rules, something especially true for the puzzle-fiction that Christie helped invent. Similarly, they are viewed as ideologically conservative. Critics are divided about the politics of Christie's fiction, with some viewing her work as conservative and even reactionary, whereas others suggest she challenges established values at least as often as she confirms them. Stephen Knight identifies Christie's original readership as the English property-owning class, and mainly women who shared a background of socially formative experiences with her (1980, p.107). Christie's 1977 (posthumously published) autobiography makes clear her longing for imperial England. As a retrospective on Christie's work in *The New Yorker* makes clear, her fictional world mirrored the society in which she felt at home:

Her people are upper middle class, or ... upper class. They gaze with astonished disgust at housing developments and supermarkets. They complain bitterly about how heavily they are taxed and how they can no longer afford to maintain the grand houses they saw as their birthright. Eventually, they sell these huge piles to the nouveau riche. (Anon., 2010)

Christie's autobiography contains wistful accounts of her childhood in the seaside resort of Torquay, Devon. Before her father's financial difficulties, she recalls how he would spend his days at his club, return home in a cab for lunch, go back to the club for an afternoon of whist, returning home in time to dress for dinner. Christie's mother, free of mundane domestic chores, spent her time writing poetry and dabbling in esoteric interests ranging from



Theosophy to Zoroastrianism (1977, p. 13; p. 23) Christie's novels nostalgically evoke the kind of Englishness represented by affluent members of her parents' generation. One need not read far to see how her fiction is driven by a sense of melancholy loss for a presumed authentic Englishness – an identity she believed had been eroded by the cultural forces unleashed in two world wars.

Christie's conservatism is replicated in ITV's highly faithful adaptations. The England presented to viewers represents a social idyll, one that is defined by archaic class hierarchies that represent continuity and security for the upper-classes. Poirot himself displays values that English nationalist discourse designates as peculiar to Englishness: a devotion to fair play and justice being chief among them. Significantly, his allegiance is to a trans-historical system of 'natural justice' rather than any statutory framework that might be polluted by post-war liberal values. He works independently to solve crimes, with the result that 'good' is seen to prevail over 'evil' through the restoration of the status quo. Poirot's ordinary background seems to contrast with his extraordinary traits, and his sense of duty with his independence, but in fact, they accord with a popular literary trend that followed the First World War, which Gill Plain defines as an attempt to validate and restore the individual in the aftermath of the excesses of death that characterised the Great War (2001, p.34).

Christie helped usher in the golden age of detective fiction during the modernist period. Whereas modernist writers responded to the devastation of the First World War and the social changes that followed by rejecting established stylistic forms and abandoning faith in traditional beliefs and institutions, Christie eschewed such innovations. Preferring traditional narrative forms, she also maintained allegiance to pre-War social conventions. Her conservatism appealed to a large section of the reading public, for whom radical social change was disorienting and frightening. Christie's fiction could enable readers imaginatively to neutralise social changes. Similarly, *Poirot* appeals to viewers because it offers a

comfortable experience, where the greatest challenge one faces is guessing 'whodunnit.' On a deeper level, it feeds into a contemporary longing among some segments of English society for a bygone and largely mythical England.

This sense of nostalgia marks the series from its beginning. Consider Clive Exton's adaptation of 'The Dream' (1937) – episode ten, series one. Christie writes:

Hercule Poirot gave the house a steady appraising glance. His eyes wandered a moment to its surrounding, the shops, the big factory building on the right, the blocks of cheap mansion flats opposite.

Then once more his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age – an age of space and leisure, when free fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the hectic sea of modern London. (2011, p.623)

The mournful tone of this passage is reproduced on screen through dialogue between Poirot and Hastings, as well as the use of colour and sound to suggest that the landscape has been irremediably tarnished by modernity. The men arrive at Northway House on a chilly evening. Darkness shrouds the still grand manor, but which now abuts a pie factory. The destruction of the rural beauty that once surrounded it is punctuated by a loud hiss of steam emitted by the factory's smokestacks, which startles the men and provokes Hastings to observe that the owner 'lives above the shop.' The fact that Northway House is now owned by the untitled Mr Farley, whose wealth comes from making large numbers of horrible pies, clearly underscores the sense of deterioration of the English social fabric. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges suggest (1987), nostalgia takes its emotional energy from this kind of opposition between an idealised past and a decadent present.

Setting is not the only means through which *Poirot* fuels a sense of longing for an age of greater certainty. How Poirot solves and sometimes prevents crimes, as well as the nature of the crimes, is another way to mythologise and signal the metaphorical restoration of an English golden age. In ‘The Kidnapped Prime Minister’ (1990, Season 2, episode 8), Poirot foils a plot to kidnap Mr David McAdam, who is described by Christie as ‘more than England’s Prime Minister – he *was* England, and to have removed him from his sphere of influence would have been a crushing and paralyzing blow to Britain’ (2011, p.95). By saving McAdam, Poirot ensures much more than the safety of an individual. He guarantees also the perpetuation of a set of dominant political and social conventions that, in reality, were already in the descendant when the story was published in 1923.

At a time when fears that national sovereignty is being slowly yielded to the European Union, *Poirot* offers the contemporary British viewer a chance to share imaginatively in a world where threats to social stability are easily identifiable and foiled.

This kind of comfort-viewing stands in contrast to other iterations of period mystery drama, most notably ITV’s *Midsomer Murders* (1997-). Whereas *Midsomer* also deliberately evokes the style and social structure of ‘Golden Age’ detective fiction, Tiffany Bergin illustrates how it does so as an act of ‘intentional pantomime’: it is structured and filmed in a way designed to call attention to its own artificiality (2012, p. 87). *Midsomer*’s violence, gore, profanity, and post-coital dialogue also stands in marked contrast to the straight-laced gentility of *Poirot*, which is designed to lure the viewer away from unpleasant aspects of contemporary daily reality.

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**Comment [BS4]:** Slowly eroded? Foreigners is a contentious term, given Ashgate’s guidance. DELETE POSSIBLE OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

Jake Wallis Simmons compares *Poirot* to the pleasures of a gentleman's club – 'a reassuringly fixed point, the echo of a civilised English way of living, a place where people still prefer a silver salt cellar that doesn't pour to a plastic one which does.'<sup>6</sup>

There have been minor cosmetic changes over the years ... but essentially Poirot is Poirot, and watching it makes one feel that all is right with the world.

Far fetched it may be, but here's the thing: we need this stuff. Unlike with modern police dramas, Poirot keeps us at all times several steps removed from reality, and that is really the whole point. When the final episode airs next month, Britain will doubtless become a slightly less colourful and reassuring place. (2013)

Simmons' review resonates with Raymond Williams' construction of a 'culture of feeling' (1961, p. 64) – a shared set of perspectives and values that characterise a generation or era and that are observable in cultural forms, including literary and visual ones. *Poirot* is unusually faithful to the 'culture of feeling' that informs Christie's fiction, marked by her Edwardian political worldview. Her biographer Laura Thompson relates how, as a child, Christie was 'protected by structure and certainty' (p. 20), and as an adult she 'lived in an enclosure, that of the upper-middle class into which she was born' (p. 145). A recurrent indicator of this is the racial exclusiveness of *Poirot's* world. One connection Christie shares with modernists like Pound and Eliot is an 'unfortunate egregious racism' (Birns and Birns, 1990, p.124). The prominent figure of the social outsider in her fiction ties into the kind of caricature of the alien 'other' that is a feature also of British tabloid journalism and less salubrious right-wing political propaganda.

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<sup>6</sup> Simmons quoting Anthony Lejeune's *The Gentleman's Clubs of London*.

Threatening foreign characters abound in *Poirot*, reinforcing the idea of unbridgeable difference between ‘us’ – the English – and ‘them’ – everyone else, and which underpins much current public discourse about the dangers of immigration. A prime example is found in Christie’s *Cards on the Table* (1936), adapted as a feature-length episode, (2006, Season 10, episode 2). Firstly, there is uncertainty about the dark-skinned, effeminate Mr Shaitana’s origins: ‘Whether [he] was an Argentine or a Portuguese or a Greek, or some other nationality, rightly despised by the insular Briton, nobody knew’ (Christie, 1969, p.10), but there is no uncertainty regarding the illegitimacy of his presence in England. Hence, Mr Shaitana is duly dispatched by one of his many blackmail victims.

In narrative terms, the removal of Shaitana, alien in terms of his racial, sexual and national difference, allows for the re-affirmation of conservative values and patterns of division between groups in English society that stem from its imperial history. Roland Robertson identifies one ‘of the major features of modernity which has had a particularly powerful impact with respect to nostalgia is undoubtedly the homogenizing requirements of the modern nation state through much of the twentieth century in the face of ethnic and cultural diversity’ (1992, p. 153). Outside the box, so to speak, this aspect of the series could serve as palliative for viewers who are concerned about foreign threats to a traditional understanding of English identity and culture by virtue of offering a congealed Englishness, one defined as superior to an ultimately containable ‘other’ in the face of anxiety about the spread of multiculturalism that began with post-Second World War immigration.

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### ***Poirot* in America: Global Nostalgia**

The model of national identity we see in *Poirot* resembles what Stephen Haseler describes as ‘theme-park Englishness’ (1996, p.57). This is the ‘English product’ that is sold around the world, and is favoured especially by American audiences. The idea that such a

contrived replica of English political and social mores resonates with contemporary American audiences appears aberrant when this brand of conservatism is compared to the values that allegedly uphold the American way of life – democratic and egalitarian. However, it looks less unusual if, following Haseler, one understands Englishness within the context of the televisual heritage industry as principally about lifestyle and status (1996, p.57). The fictional English heritage of natural Toryism fits snugly with American consumer capitalism, and the ever-present desire to demonstrate social superiority, and indeed the quintessence of Americanness, by means of acquiring a certain type of material lifestyle. Middle-class Americans may buy many, if not all, the accoutrements of Englishness displayed in *Poirot*. For those lacking the capital for mimicry, the series allows a vicarious taste of a glamorous, aristocratic world of leisure.

Images of the series' 1930s Art Deco surrounds are commonplace in its advertising, whether press releases, network websites, or promotional materials for DVDs and streaming services. When *Poirot* was first broadcast in the US, *The New York Times* applauded its arrival in a review that emphasises the series' faithful recreation of period England: 'Once again the British producers bring into play a boutique's worth of togs and furnishings from the 1930s, along with the odd vintage car' (Goodman, 1990) – items that rarely have a narrative function. Paul Kerr assesses the function of props in classic serials, where they are 'employed specifically as signifiers of the past ... Such ambitions of authenticity function to factify the fiction, literally to prop it up, performing a positivist role as the tangible trace of a lost era' (1982, p. 13). *Poirot* is crafted to evoke a sense of pleasure in the display of heritage artefacts. Poirot's flat and the houses he visits are filmed to show in detail their Art Deco settings, and he is frequently filmed in his dressing room taking meticulous care over his period costumes.

In this way, *Poirot* may be compared to other instances of heritage drama, such as *Upstairs Downstairs* (LWT, 1971-75). Discussing the iconic 1970s series, Helen Wheatley describes how the room functions as television's definitive space: the television studio is a room in which another room is created, which is then broadcast into the viewer's room (2005, p.145), with the fictional spaces reflecting and/or influencing how viewers design their real life spaces.

Style is important also as a key factor in *Poirot*'s phenomenal international success, especially when compared to the relative lack of success of contemporary British programmes abroad. In 1999, a report for The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Broadcasting Policy Division concluded that the style and content of the majority of British programming, and the nation's image portrayed therein, is unattractive to foreign audiences.<sup>7</sup> In 2008, BBC One's *Spooks* and *Hustle* were 'going great guns – but according to Hedges these were 'the exceptions rather than the rule' (quoted in Shepherd, 2008). Shows such as *Eastenders* are perceived as filled with distasteful characters and storylines that 'show ... a relatively poor, down at heel place, which does not inspire interest' (quoted in Carson and Llewellyn-Jones, 2001, p.9). This remains the case, as evidenced by a recent PACT report on UK exports, which cites overly domestic content as an obstacle to programme sales (TRP Research, 2014, p. 3). American viewers, who are most sought after by commercial networks and advertisers, do not want to watch unvarnished portrayals of poverty and social failure being experienced by an unglamorous working class.

*Poirot*'s popularity is not entirely due to the charm of its luxurious lifestyle, though; it also carries ideological resonances for American viewers comparable to those of British ones, a theory buttressed by similarities in audience demographics. Drawing upon Nielsen data, PBS reports that 'Over the course of a year, nearly 90% of all U.S. television households -

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<sup>7</sup> Report titled: *Building a Global Audience: British Television in Overseas Markets*.

and 217 million people - watch PBS. The breakdown of PBS's full-day audience reflects the overall U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, education and income' (Anon., 2014). However, if we break these statistics down according to programming type, socio-economic differences between audiences for particular series become clear. Charlotte Brunsdon uses the term 'sociology of taste' to describe the 'demonstrable links between social origins/position/trajectory and taste sets' in television viewing (1990, p. 74). *Poirot* followers represent such a niche demographic. They share similar social biographies with those who prefer the heritage variety of mystery drama in the UK, tending to be upmarket, older (outside the 16-34 age bracket), and, like Christie's original readership, primarily female.<sup>8</sup>

Having inherited the role of the great imperial power from Britain, John McGovern argues that Americans' Anglophilia lies in US expansionist impulses. He uses the James Bond Franchise as a case study to show what British cultural exports reveal about Anglo-American relations. In short, he argues:

The pleasures of the empire are experienced through Bond. The promises of capitalism are embodied in the lifestyle of Bond; travel to exotic locations across the globe, sex with beautiful women, luxurious accommodations, high-end cuisine and expensive booze. (McGovern, 2012)

Not all of these characteristics are shared with *Poirot*, but there are enough commonalities to render McGovern's comments applicable to this exemplar of heritage TV. Besides, *Poirot*'s upmarket audience can more likely afford a taste of grandeur, evidenced by the lucrative corporate sponsorship from Exxon Mobil and luxury brands Viking River Cruises and Ralph Lauren that the show has helped PBS to access.

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<sup>8</sup> See Chozick, 2012. This is also true of UK viewers; see Rogers, 2008.



America's status as global power, however, does not preclude the nation's susceptibility to fears about the potential for its power to be diminished by a host of internal and external threats. The 'War on Terror' represents an incessant reminder of the nation-states' vulnerability and the possibility of being drawn into costly and seemingly unending foreign conflicts. Like their British counterparts, Americans experience anxiety about a range of identity issues. Increasing immigration from Central America, conjoined with extra-legal border crossings from Mexico, calls for illegal immigration amnesties, and concomitant 'culture wars' are perceived as threats to the privileged status that white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants have held traditionally as *the* distinctively American social grouping. Further, Americans must contend with their fears about the loss of a traditional American way of life without the help of stabilising grand narratives of bourgeois progressivism or religion that were available to previous generations.

Heta Pyrhönen asserts that the typical settings for, and even the conundrums in, Christie's novels reflected her classes' sense of confidence about being able to control their world, a world in which individualism is carefully balanced with collectivism, wealth rightly accompanies morality, and notions of duty because freely chosen safeguard a system of living that promises the respectable classes continued enjoyment of the lifestyle they have earned (1994, pp.100-101). The ideological field upon which *Poirot* is structured enables it, albeit partially, to anaesthetise one to the disconcerting effects of the postmodern condition – for a brief moment it can return the viewer to a mythical pre-modern age where traditional narratives go unquestioned, society coheres, and where no threat, foreign or domestic, can disturb the order of things. For Robertson, the accelerated speed and attendant cultural complexities of globalisation amplify the need for nostalgic forms of a secure world order (1992, p. 146; p. 162), making nostalgia just as much an issue of post-modernity as modernity. The success of *Poirot*, as exemplar of heritage programming, suggests that

television adaptations of the English mystery genre represent an important cultural space for accessing the kind of nostalgic experience many contemporary viewers seek.

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