

Confinement and Duplicity

Mise-en-scène in Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express*

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ABSTRACT

Murder on the Orient Express (20th Century Fox, 2017) provides an example of some of the features that often distinguish the directorial films of Sir Kenneth Branagh, such as his deliberate choices designed to involve the audience members as active participants in the cinematic experience through the use of elements of mise-en-scène, including camera movement and angles, costuming, the set, and casting. In the scene in which the detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) reveals the news to his fellow passengers that there has been a murder on the train and that someone on the train must be the murderer, all of these elements appear as Branagh creates a sense of confinement and immediacy, enclosing the audience with Poirot and his fellow passengers on the train and establishing them as participants in the action.

KENNETH BRANAGH USES elements of mise-en-scène to consciously involve the viewers in the cinematic experience by placing them, along with the passengers, within the narrow, claustrophobic confines of the train carriages in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Camera movement and camera angles are employed to achieve this goal and to foreshadow the duality and duplicity of the natures of the characters. Historical authenticity of additional elements of mise-en-scène, including costuming and set, further enhances the feeling of engagement and familiarity.

In the scene in which the detective Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) reveals the news to his fellow passengers that there has been a murder on the train and that someone on the train must be the murderer, Branagh creates this sense of confinement for the viewers. In this scene, Branagh “invite[s] people onto the train ...to enclose them as well” (Branagh and Bateman). In the opening medium shot for this scene, the camera is placed eyelevel with the seated passengers, placing the viewer as one of them, on the train with a point-of-view shot looking up as Bouc and Poirot enter the dining car to announce the news (Fig. 1).

In the establishing shot that follows, the actual passengers of the train are seated at different tables along either side of the aisle, establishing the placement of the characters in relation to each other within the narrow dimensions of the train carriage. Prominently displayed are the symmetrical parallel lines of the doorways, windows, and the receding walls of



Fig. 1 | Looking Up at Poirot, 41:31:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

the train converging towards the assumptive vanishing point (Fig. 2). This symmetry of the centre aisle, the passengers on each side, is used to demonstrate the power and strength of Poirot, making him seem in control of the situation. He is at the centre of the story, both emotionally and physically. The mirroring of the characters and tables on either side of the aisle adds a hint of foreshadowing of the duality that exists within each of the characters.

Branagh's research into the history of the Orient Express is evident in the replica of the interior of the train which was built to serve as the set for the film. As Branagh states, “We did recreate all of this... We found all those original plans from the people who designed this amazing thing” (Branagh and Bateman). The dining car, with its tables for four on one

side of the aisle and tables for two on the other, is authentic to the period setting of 1934 and the design by which luxury trains were built by Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (CIWL), the Belgian company founded by Georges Nagelmackers which built the Orient Express as well as the 1920s and 1930s restored carriages that make up the modern Venice-Simplon Orient Express ("History of Compagnie Internationale") (Figs. 3-4).

The establishing shot is followed by a point-of-view tracking shot as Poirot moves down the centre aisle, mimicking his eyes as he glances from side to side at the various passengers, assessing each of them as his gaze travels across them. They, in turn, feel compelled to raise their eyes to him and remark upon the murder when he holds their gazes (Figs. 5-6). This tracking shot emphasizes the limited parameters of the train. It further accentuates the understanding that the killer is among them with nowhere to hide.

Poirot then stops at the end of the compartment and turns to inform the passengers that he is "probably the greatest detective in the world" (*Murder on the Orient Express*). This closeup shot is another study in symmetry, with Poirot positioned as the centre of power in the middle of the doorway with lighted sconces equidistant on either side of his head. He instructs the passengers to stay inside their compartments with the doors locked, to which Caroline Hubbard (Michelle Pfeiffer) replies, "I feel like a prisoner here" (*Murder on the Orient Express*). Her statement is indicative of the feelings of the passengers, as well as the audience, that they are all imprisoned. The train represents a beautiful prison, but nevertheless, still a prison.

Costuming here is a significant factor in exuding period authenticity. Women wear short curls, like those exemplified by 1930s-star Myrna Loy, and mid-calf to ankle length skirts with slim-fitting silhouettes. Men are elegantly attired in three-piece suits with wide, padded shoulders and baggy trousers. All are tailored to match the 1930s styles popularized by Hollywood stars such as Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy (Figs. 7-8).

A medium tracking shot then features the seated characters through the beveled glass of the doorway between the compartments, with the refraction from the glass presenting dual images of each character before moving on to the next. This technique of observing the characters from outside the room through the glass of the windows is used to create a voyeuristic and sometimes paranoid feeling that someone is watching, thereby giving Poirot an almost omniscient presence on the train. The double reflections through the glass are symbolic of the duplicitous nature of the characters, each of whom hides a secret identity that is yet to be revealed (Figs. 9-10). The refracted images are used to further foreshadow the duality and duplicity of the characters.

In Branagh's choice for Poirot's moustache, his attention to detail and authenticity can be seen, as well as his homage to the original hypotexts (Fig. 11). In the hypotext upon which the film is based, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, the tenth Poirot novel, Poirot's character is already established and is



Fig. 2 | Establishing shot, 41:33:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 3 | Dining Car of CIWL Train circa 1906. Wagons-Lits Diffusion.



Fig. 4 | Restored Dining Car of Venice-Simplon Orient Express. Luxury Train Club.



Fig. 5 & 6 | Hector MacQueen (Josh Gad) and Mary Debenham (Daisy Ridley) meet Poirot's gaze, 41:46:00/41:57:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 7 | Myrna Loy. Turner Classic Movies.



Fig. 8 | Myrna Loy and Spencer Tracy in Sam Wood's *Whipsaw*. MGM, 1935.



Fig. 9 & 10 | The duplicity of Mrs. Hubbard (Michelle Pfeiffer) and Henry Masterman (Derek Jacobi), 42:45:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 11 | Poirot's Moustache, 42:22:00. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

BRITONS



Fig. 12 | World War I poster of Lord Kitchener. War History Online, 2016.

described as "a little man with enormous moustaches" (Christie 3). The first novel that introduces Poirot, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, provides the physical description of Poirot that dictates his character throughout the rest of the series. He is described as "an extraordinary looking little man... [who] carried himself with great dignity... The neatness of his attire was almost incredible" (Christie, *The Mysterious Affair* 42). In reference to the moustache that he maintains, Christie states that "His moustache was very stiff and military" (42). It is to this description that Branagh refers in his choice of moustache for the film. Branagh chooses one that represents the historical type worn by men in the British military in the early decades of the twentieth century, as exemplified by Lord Kitchener in the posters from World War 1 (Fig. 12).

This scene thus demonstrates the ways that Branagh uses elements of mise-en-scène such as costuming and set, as well as camera movement and angle, to place the viewers on the train. The camera angles and tracking shots create an immediacy and sense of confinement for the viewers, while the movement of the camera is further used to foreshadow the duplicity of the characters that is later revealed. The authenticity of the set and costumes provides a sense of familiarity that contributes to placing the audience in the scene as participants in the action. ■

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