

Symmetry and Centrality as Power

The Use of Mise-en-scène to Create Power in Sir Kenneth Branagh's
Murder on the Orient Express and *Death on the Nile*

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ABSTRACT

Murder on the Orient Express and *Death on the Nile* director Sir Kenneth Branagh employs elements of mise-en-scène to convey his characters' sense of power or powerlessness and their control or lack thereof in a given situation. This article explores the various means by which Branagh achieves these conveyances through the use of blocking, set design, symmetry of images, camera angles, and costuming. In both of these films, the character Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) is the main seat of power and is often placed at the centre of a shot. When Poirot is not in authority he is placed off-centre, indicating that he has lost control of the situation and other characters move to the centre. Camera angles, the use of colour, and set designs consisting of repeated parallel lines in architectural features all contribute to defining the power structure that exists between the characters.

In his film adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022), director Sir Kenneth Branagh uses symmetry and centrality to illustrate who wields power and control. Branagh conveys this power, or the illusion of power, and the desire for control in a variety of ways using elements of mise-en-scène, including set design, blocking, camera placement, and costuming. In addition, the compulsive need for balance in aspects of his life is a further motivation for the actions of the lead character, Hercule Poirot (Sir Kenneth Branagh). The theme of balance is also evidenced in Branagh's frequent use of symmetry in his frame composition. Thus, this article explores the means by which Branagh conveys the sense of power or powerlessness of his characters, their control or lack thereof, and Poirot's desire for balance.

Poirot's need for balance is demonstrated in an early scene from *Murder on the Orient Express* when Poirot walks through the street and accidentally steps with his right

foot into a pile of manure. Unnerved by the imbalance of having manure on only one shoe, he steps into the manure with his left foot. As Branagh states, "It's not so much with this new Poirot that he is prissy and precious about getting his hands, or indeed, feet dirty, it's something else, which is balance" ("Commentary" 00:03:35). Poirot feels compelled to step into the manure a second time so that there is balance and both feet are the same.

This compulsion for balance is also highlighted in *Death on the Nile* when Poirot moves the right foot of the corpse of Linnet (Gal Gadot) so that it is neatly aligned and parallel with the left foot (Fig. 1). In the scene, Poirot is in the centre of the screen with a light hanging directly over his head, purposefully illuminating his quirks and eccentricities.

Like Poirot, Branagh creates a world of balance in *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile* where this balance frequently equates with strength, power, control, authority, and stability, and it is translated on film as a world full of symmetry.



Fig. 1 | Parallel feet of Linnet, *Death on the Nile*, 1:12:59. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

The use of symmetry has been a constant in many of the directorial films of Branagh, as it is in life itself. The existence of symmetry has been shown to be essential in nature to create stability. Even at the molecular levels of such building blocks as proteins, it “confers stability on the molecular system” and is “associated with cooperativity,” yet “mild perturbation from perfect symmetry may be essential...for dynamic functions” (Blundell and Srinivasan 14243). The properties of symmetry in architecture and art mirror those seen in nature.

In his book *Symmetry*, which deals with his classic study of the principle of symmetry in nature and in the arts, Hermann Weyl states, “Symmetric means something like well-proportioned, well-balanced, and symmetry denotes that sort of concordance of several parts by which they integrate into a whole. *Beauty* is bound up with symmetry” (3), particularly in the case of “bilateral symmetry, the symmetry of left and right, which is so conspicuous in the structure of the higher animals, especially the human body” (4). Bilateral symmetry, where “the halves of a composition mirror each other...is by far the most common form of symmetry in architecture, and is found in all cultures and in all epochs” (Williams 271). For example, the Parthenon in Greece, the Taj Mahal in India, and the Alamo in the United States are each representative of bilateral symmetry. Kim Williams, in her study of *Symmetry in Architecture*, argues that this popularity of bilateral symmetry in architecture may be “an expression of our experience of nature, and in particular with our experience of our own bodies. As many cultures believe that God created man in His own image, architecture has in turn probably been created in the image of man” (271).

Weyl points out that artists as far back as the ancient Sumerians, circa 2700 BC, regularly used bilateral symmetry in their works, as have other artists throughout history (8-15). Bilateral symmetry can refer to mirror images of each other along a vertical axis or to examples of “broken symmetry...

where the precise geometric notion of bilateral symmetry begins to dissolve into the vague notion of *Ausgewogenheit*, balanced design” (15-16). In these instances, elements on the left side of the vertical axis may be different than those on the right, but may still present a balanced Fig. that gives the appearance of being symmetrical. I.C. McManus, in his study of symmetry in Italian Renaissance art, concludes that “Asymmetry, when it is used in the arts, is used to season symmetry...some asymmetry is added to that symmetry to generate interest and excitement, for a little asymmetry, correctly used, makes objects optimally satisfying” (176).

McManus provides a “summary of the psychological and aesthetic properties of symmetry and asymmetry, according to art historians and philosophers” (160). According to McManus’s findings, symmetry represents law and order, binding and constraint, fixity, and stasis. Following in the tradition of millennia of such artists, Branagh is a strong proponent of the aesthetically-pleasing aspect of symmetry in cinema and its ability to convey the notions of strength, stability, authority, and control. However, Branagh also employs the use of broken symmetry, or balanced design, as well as asymmetry to generate interest and excitement in the set design and the camera framing in his films.

As a filmmaker, Branagh is a proponent of formalism, which “tempts one to set highly visible” styles above more naturalistic ones but does not...demand this hierarchy” (Dudley 84), for, as questioned by Béla Belázs, “Who could find the atmosphere of Claude Monet’s paintings in actual nature?” (176). In filmmaking, the aesthetically pleasing is more important than realism, and actors, as well as props, are used to create symmetrical frames.

The production designer for both *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile* was Jim Clay, who also worked with Branagh on the production designs of *Artemis Fowl* (2020) and *Belfast* (2021). Also working on both films was director

of photography Haris Zambarloukos, who served in the same capacity for Branagh's films *Sleuth* (2007), *Thor* (2011), *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), *Cinderella* (2015), *Artemis Fowl*, and *Belfast*. The production designer, director of photography, and director all worked together to bring to life Branagh's vision of lateral symmetry and broken symmetry to symbolize both beauty and power in *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*.

In *Death on the Nile*, the characters take a cruise down the Nile River on a ship called the Karnak. For the design of the ship, Jim Clay states, "We researched the Thomas Cook fleet...and then designed our own. [Branagh] had specific requirements about how the boat should look. He wanted it to feel rather threatening and sleek and shark-like, because these waters of the Nile were dangerous, especially in our particular case. So we adapted the shape of the hull" ("Design" 2:32:27). The ship is filled with repeating symmetrical vertical lines that are mirror images along a vertical central line to convey the power, strength, and stability of the ship (Fig. 2).

The same can be said of the design for the Cataract Hotel. In describing his design for this hotel, Clay states:

There is a real place called the Cataract Hotel, and in fact, it existed in the 1930s. Agatha Christie stayed there and was reputed to have begun writing *Death on the Nile* in the Cataract Hotel...we didn't copy it. We used the name, and I used an amalgamation, of various styles of architecture from Egypt in the 1930s, and we built our own composite set specifically for the requirements of the script. ("Design" 2:29:09)

Like the Karnak, the hotel is composed of numerous examples of symmetrical architectural features that highlight its strength and stability.

These examples provide a sharp contrast to the opening scene of the film, which begins with a flashback to Poirot's time on the battlefields in World War I. The opening shot of the Yser Bridge in Belgium on October 31, 1914 (00:00:49) depicts a broken symmetrical image, or balanced design, of burnt-out trees on either side of the ruined road littered with craters created by artillery shells. Smoke clouds rise and dissipate on either side of the desolate landscape. Near the end of the bridge stand similar carts on either side, further adding to the balanced design of the image. The parallel vertical lines of the tree trunks lining the path lead towards the vanishing point on the far side of the bridge and appear shattered and weak, the opposite of stability. This opening image, with its broken symmetrical design, evokes strength and power, while emphasizing the all-encompassing, domineering, and destructive power of war.

In numerous instances for Branagh, the symbolism of symmetry as strength goes hand-in-hand with the significance of centrality in the framing of his characters, the definition of centrality implying not only taking position in the middle of the screen but taking and commanding authority and control of the action. Centrality of the characters represents a break



Fig. 2 | The Karnak, *Death on the Nile*, 00:34:22. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

Branagh is a strong proponent of the aesthetically-pleasing aspect of symmetry in cinema.

from the usual rules in cinematography, wherein the rule of thirds is the more common feature. This departure from the rule is employed when a specific reason or purpose is evident or intended.

In his 1797 book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*, English writer, painter, and engraver John Thomas Smith is the first to coin the phrase, "the rule of thirds." In examining paintings created by the master painters, especially those of Rembrandt, Smith noticed that

the principal light is most frequently placed near the middle of the scene; and that above two-thirds of the picture are in shadow. Analogous to this Rule of thirds (if I may be allowed so to call it) ...I have found the ratio of about two thirds to one third, or of one to two, a much better and more harmonizing proportion, than the precise formal *half*...and, in short, than any other proportion whatever. (Smith 15)

This rule of thirds proposes that, in composition for painting, photography, and cinematography, the frame be divided into thirds and "major points of interest in the scene [be placed] on any of the four intersections of the interior lines" (Blain 26).

The rule of thirds has been used by artists for centuries to create what is commonly believed to be the most aesthetically pleasing image as it tends to draw the eye of the viewer deeper into the image instead of simply focusing on the centre. However, "Filmmakers often use a deliberate violation of these principles for a particular effect" (26). In these two films, Branagh's often breaks this rule by using centrality to showcase power, control, and authority. As he states in the commentary of *Murder on the Orient Express*, "I feel when I watch the movie, I hope that those of you watching at home [feel]...the sense that everything probably means something" ("Commentary" 00:34:29).

From Poirot's first appearance in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Branagh quickly establishes him as the seat of power. As Poirot is being served his breakfast, two eggs of equal size, the shot depicts Poirot seated in the middle of the room, in

the middle of the table, and in the centre of the doorway (Fig. 3). On either side of Poirot, the image is a study in bilateral symmetry with black and gold pillars on either side of the doorway. Next to them are windows with latticework that are mirror images, and another black and gold pillar on the other side of each window. This symmetry of the set puts emphasis on the centre of the screen and the focus of power, and even while focusing on the centre, it helps to highlight the symmetry.

Two additional characters grace the scene: the policeman standing slightly off-centre to the right in the doorway and the waiter slightly off-centre to the left at the table. However, it is Poirot who commands attention, even though his back is to the camera, as he sits in the exact centre of the frame. Much like in the films of Wes Anderson, the blocking and symmetry “seem not just meticulously designed in their interiors but very carefully arranged in their presentations- and arranged specifically to be viewed from one particular angle at which the camera obligingly positions us” (Kornhaber 30). In the composition of this frame, using blocking of the additional characters and the symmetry of the set design, Branagh demonstrates from the beginning of the film that Poirot is a man of power and authority.

Branagh uses this technique again in *Death on the Nile* in the scene in which Poirot reunites with Bouc (Tom Bateman), his friend from *Murder on the Orient Express*. As the scene begins, the overhead establishing shots of the Pyramids of Giza follow the rule of thirds, with the two largest pyramids occupying the two dividing lines (00:16:21). The pyramids are not symmetrically aligned because the purpose of these shots is to establish the location and there is no need to break the rule. The pyramids are shown to be of different sizes with the Great Pyramid, the largest, situated between the other two.



Fig. 3 | Poirot as the Seat of Power, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 00:02:21. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

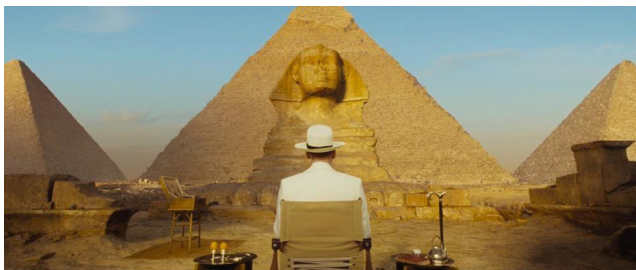


Fig. 4 | Poirot in Control, *Death on the Nile*, 00:16:39. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

However, these establishing shots are followed by a symmetrical shot that shows the largest pyramid in the centre of the screen and the two smaller pyramids on either side (Fig. 4). The two pyramids on either side are depicted in the previous scenes as being of different sizes, yet in the following figure they appear to be of equal size. This is done in order to create the symmetry needed to aid in demonstrating Poirot's authority.

In the centre of the largest pyramid is the imposing figure of the Sphinx. In the exact centre of the Sphinx is Poirot, shown from the back as he faces the Sphinx head-on, as though he is facing off with it. This demonstrates Poirot's authority and power as the eye is drawn to Poirot in spite of the commanding presence of the Sphinx and the might of the pyramids facing him. His centrality establishes him as the one in control, heightened by this juxtaposition of the might, reverence, and longevity of these great Wonders of the Ancient World. His costuming, the white suit and hat, adds to the emphasis on Poirot as he stands out against the browns and tans of the rest of the scene. This emphasis is further enhanced by the broken symmetry of the stonework and the two tables on either side, creating a balanced image. The two eggs of similar size on the left table reference the above-mentioned scene from *Murder on the Orient Express*. The centrality of Poirot in the following reverse shot reinforces his dominance in his surroundings (00:16:44). The symmetry of the buttons on his suit, the way he sits with legs slightly spread and knees bent at a ninety-degree angle, and his hands placed firmly on his thighs indicate that he is a confident man who is in control.

In *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, centrality is also used to help in the storytelling process for other characters. For example, in a scene from *Murder on the Orient Express*, it is not Poirot who is in control as Dr. Arbuthnot (Leslie Odom Jr.) holds a gun on Poirot and threatens to shoot him. Arbuthnot has power and control, standing in the centre of the broken symmetrical interior of the train, the vertical lines of the door, the windows, and the shelves framing Arbuthnot, adding a feeling of strength (1:25:22).

Similarly, when Linnet (Gal Gadot) is first introduced in *Death on the Nile*, both symmetry and blocking are used for her entrance into the club, designed to announce her as a powerful woman (Fig. 5). Linnet is spotlighted in the centre of the screen as she comes down the stairs with the crowd parting to make way for her advance, giving her significance in the centre of the frame. Couples dance on either side of the pathway that is created to showcase Linnet's power.

Linnet is in control of the situation, dressed in a glimmering silver gown that makes her appear almost angelic, foreshadowing her role as an innocent victim. Linnet is a pale contrast to the striking red that Jackie (Emma Mackey) wears in the same scene, foreshadowing her role in the film. Studies have shown that “the color red is known to influence psychological functioning, having both negative (e.g., blood, fire, danger), and positive (eg., sex, food) connotations”

(Kuniecki et al). This makes red a fitting colour for the character of Jackie because she is deliberately trying to manipulate the feelings of those around her, leaving them feeling upset, anxious, and unsettled. In this way, costuming is used to give insight into these two characters, one as victim and the other as master manipulator.

This scene in the bar provides foreshadowing of the rivalry that is to come in the film between Jackie and Linnet over the affections of Jackie's fiancé Simon (Armie Hammer), whom Linnet soon marries. Initially, Linnet appears to be in control. However, appearances are deceptive as Jackie has hidden advantages about which the audience does not yet know. Therefore, they appear to begin as equals (Fig. 6). The symmetry of the two profiles indicates that they are supposedly both equal components competing for power, rivals for control, and counterbalanced. Although these two characters appear here to be on equal footing, there will be clues provided as the film progresses that indicate Linnet's declining power and Jackie's emergence in this battle for the centre, for control and dominance.

This use of side-by-side depiction of the characters is duplicated in a later scene when Bouc confesses his love for Rosalie (Letitia Wright) to Poirot as the Karnak continues its journey down the Nile. Bilateral symmetry is demonstrated in the architecture along the central pole as axis, as well as in the rattan chairs on either side. Both Bouc and Poirot have their hands in similar positions atop the rail and they are in mirror positions in the middle of the chairs behind them.

No longer taking the central position, Poirot allows Bouc his moment in the sun as Bouc reveals his true feelings, giving Bouc equal footing as his friend. This is not a case of a younger man going to his elder friend for guidance, but an example of equality in friendship with Poirot allowing Bouc to share in the spotlight for that moment and again when they take a seat in the chairs behind them. The closeup that follows of Bouc, seen through the latticework of the chair, is reminiscent of a confessional as Bouc bares his soul before Poirot, confessing his love but worried about gaining the approval-and financial backing-of his mother, Euphemia (Annette Benning). Much like the usage of symmetry in Peter Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), the symmetry in these shots "draws our attention to the relationship between the actors and the sets, encouraging us to read the scene intellectually" (Lawrence 77).

In the battle for control between Linnet and Jackie, the first indication of Jackie's rising control is her walk up the steps to enter the Cataract Hotel (Fig. 7).

As Jackie ascends the steps, she is also ascending in power. She appears once more bedecked in vibrant red in sharp contrast to the pale pinks, whites, and beiges of the other guests at the wedding party. She encompasses the colour red and everything the colour represents. She is full of danger, passion, love, aggression, dominance, and power, with the train of her dress flying behind her like a red flag signifying the presence of impending trouble and danger.



Fig. 5 | Linnet as Power, *Death on the Nile*, 00:11:47. 20th Century Studios, 2022.



Fig. 6 | Rivals for Power, *Death on the Nile*, 00:13:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.



Fig. 7 | Jackie's Ascension, *Death on the Nile*, 00:26:06. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

As Jackie ascends the steps, she is also ascending in power.

Jackie is defined as a powerhouse with the symmetry of the image as she takes the centre of the screen, walking up the bridge with mirroring stone railings on either side amid the rocks that form the edge of the water. In the shot that follows, Jackie rises in the centre of the screen at the top of the stairs, flanked by symmetrical stone columns, palms trees, large pots, and rattan chairs (00:26:18). This is a power play and Jackie is making her move to gain control and power over the situation.

This scene, along with the first entrance of Linnet, book-ends the battle between Linnet and Jackie. The outcome has already been decided, although the audience does not realize this yet. Linnet, as she enters, descends the staircase, symbolizing and foreshadowing her loss. Jackie, as she enters, ascends the staircase, symbolizing and foreshadowing her victory. Although in a later scene Jackie appears to be out of control



Fig. 8 | Poirot as Perceived Protector, *Death on the Nile*, 00:32:01. 20th Century Studios, 2022.



Fig. 9 | Euphemia in Control, *Death on the Nile*, 00:47:08. 20th Century Studios, 2022.



Fig. 10 | Rosalie, Simon, Jackie, and Bouc, *Death on the Nile*, 1:00:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

He is, again, centralized within a symmetrical set design above and around him.

and tells Poirot she cannot control herself, the foreshadowing in this scene reveals the truth, that she is a woman fully in control of the situation and her own actions and is capable of manipulating the emotions and actions of others.

The emotionally distressed Linnet turns to Poirot for help and protection. She and her new husband, Simon, ask for Poirot's guidance and suggestions for what should be done about Jackie's constant stalking of the newlyweds (Fig. 8).

In this scene, Poirot is central with multiple arches above and behind him. The architecture of the set boasts bilateral symmetrical lights, windows, and pillars, indicating strength and stability. The wine glasses on the central dining table, the placement of the chairs on either side, and the smaller table lights that appear behind the table, are all symmetrical, with

the two waiters on either side providing a balanced design. Linnet and Simon are on either side of Poirot, and are seated at the table and looking up at him. All elements combine to demonstrate the perceived power of Poirot over the newlyweds as they acknowledge his authority and control of the situation, and seek his guidance.

However, this scene is designed to demonstrate the idea of perceived rather than actual power. Poirot appears to be in control, yet actually is ultimately powerless in preventing the impending murder of Linnet. It is Simon, in his continuing efforts to deceive, who has taken control of the narrative and herein allows Poirot, and the audience, the perception of Poirot's being in control while Simon is secretly intending to murder his wife. To this end, the newlyweds choose to ignore Poirot's advice at this point. Instead, the passengers all board the Karnak and begin a cruise down the Nile.

When the passengers disembark at Abu Simbel, Bouc's mother Euphemia proves to be more of a problem than he had anticipated in his desire to marry Rosalie. In the scene at Abu Simbel, Euphemia commands the attention, centrally located between the colossal statues with mirror images on the bases of the statues. With the camera angle shot from below, she is almost at an equal height with the massive statues (Fig. 9).

This low-angle shot indicates Euphemia's dominance, power, authority, and control over her son, Bouc. She controls his actions because she controls his finances, limiting his choices and thereby, unbeknownst to her, contributing to the terrible actions that follow for Bouc and his decision to steal Linnet's extravagant Tiffany & Co. yellow and white diamond necklace. The shot that displays the necklace has it positioned in the centre, thus foreshadowing its importance in the action of the film. It is displayed atop a wood and mother-of-pearl table, placed in the centre so that the two ends of the table also create a balanced design within the shot (00:32:22).

As the larger-than-life Euphemia walks towards Bouc in the scene, she is still shot from below and centrally located as opposed to Bouc who is very small next to these huge statues (00:47:15). The image demonstrates his powerlessness before her and sets the stage for what is to come when Linnet is subsequently murdered and Bouc steals her necklace.

When the passengers of the Karnak return to the ship, they all learn that Jackie has joined the cruise at Abu Simbel. Jackie and Linnet are given centre position and are again battling for control. Jackie is now winning. Linnet had tried to escape Jackie, but she has returned. Jackie appears confident and full of power, surrounded by wide open space (00:53:32). In contrast, Linnet is frazzled and upset (00:53:24).

While this article argues that Branagh often uses centrality to demonstrate power, this is an example of how his use of centrality is not limited to exclusively showcasing strength and power. In this case, the shot of Linnet is significantly more symmetrical than that of Jackie. Linnet faces the camera directly while Jackie stands at a quarter turn from the

camera, which enhances the sense of symmetry of Linnet's shot in comparison to Jackie's. However, the vertical lines that frame Linnet in the windows make it appear as though they are closing in on her and she is losing the battle. Thus, centrality in this case does not demonstrate her power but rather her feeling of being trapped in a bad situation that she cannot escape.

As this action takes place, Poirot watches from above, indicating his watchful eye and omniscient presence that sees everything. He is, again, centralized within a symmetrical set design above and around him. This also occurs in *Murder on the Orient Express* as Poirot observes everything from the outside, "watching, and he sees everything. No one can hide the truth from him" (Hamzah 67).

Onboard the Karnak, blocking becomes an element of symmetry in setting the stage for the confrontation that is to come between Jackie and Simon (Fig. 10). The symmetry of the set is emphasized by the multiple vertical lines of the boat windows and by the doors at the centre of the screen. The blocking further underscores the symmetry as Rosalie and Bouc move to either side with Jackie and Simon, coming together in the centre of the screen as the scene sets up the impending murder of Linnet. As Branagh describes it, "This edginess, this danger, this sense that lust will turn into something darker, means that hatred and murder are never far from the center of things" ("Design" 2:30:38). With Rosalie and Bouc, again like in Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts*, "the actors are absorbed into the set design, there to provide symmetry for the compositions and nothing more" as "Symmetry is all" (Lawrence 74).

Tensions run high as Poirot begins his investigation into the murder of Linnet, and the additional murders of Linnet's maid Louise (Rose Leslie) and Poirot's friend Bouc. Poirot's questioning leads to a confrontation with numerous characters accusing each other of the murders. This scene is filmed through the beveled glass on the doors, causing each character's image to be doubled, indicating the deception that these characters are all perpetrating as they try to cover up their guilt, not of the murder, but of their possible motives for it (Fig. 11). As Branagh states, "Sometimes, to play with the audience's sense in a thriller of what may or may not be the truth, it's useful to sometimes consider distorting the point of view" ("Commentary" 00:57:44).

Branagh also uses this method of showcasing the duplicity of the characters in *Murder on the Orient Express*. In the scene in which Hardman (Willem Dafoe) confesses that he has been lying about his identity and comes clean about his real reasons for being on the train, his confession is itself another lie. His character is not only two-faced, but is actually three-faced, covering a lie with another lie, and never revealing his true face until Poirot uncovers the truth (Fig. 12).

In the scene leading up to the confrontation between Poirot and the killers, whom he will now name, Poirot is again a man in control (1:44:20). He is again in the centre of the screen, the vertical lines of the doors and windows



Fig. 11 | Duplicity of the Characters, *Death on the Nile*, 1:33:37. 20th Century Studios, 2022.



Fig. 12 | Three Faces of Hardman, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:19:38. 20th Century Fox, 2017.



Fig. 13 | The Two Faces of Poirot, *Death on the Nile*, 1:53:29. 20th Century Studios, 2022.

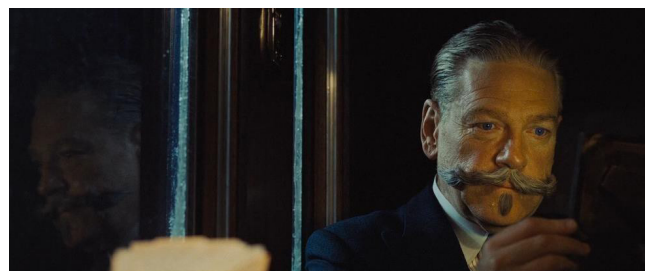


Fig. 14 | A New Poirot, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:21:45. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Poirot is along the dividing line for the rule of thirds because he is vulnerable and no longer the master in control of himself.



Fig. 15 | Poirot as Predator, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1:27:58. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

Branagh consistently uses elements of mise-en-scène to convey who wields power and control in a scene.

symmetrical, as are the ropes and boat railings on either side of him. Even Poirot is standing flat-footed, almost aggressively, with his weight evenly distributed on both legs. He is the authority and confident that he knows the truth about everything.

When Jackie pulls her gun and points it at him, Poirot is ready and does the same. Here, seen through the beveled glass, is a humanized Poirot, the two faces of the man, one the clever detective, cold and ruthless, and the other, the man in pain over the useless death of his dear friend Bouc (Fig. 13). No longer in the centre position, the shot follows the rule of thirds, with the two Poirots along the dividing lines, indicating his torn feelings as he battles with his pain.

This is similar to the image of Poirot, this “Poirot for a new generation” (“Art of Murder” 00:01:52), as he examines his photo of his lost love Katherine in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Here is a sensitive Poirot who cares deeply for others. He feels himself completely out of control of the case. No longer positioned in the centre of the screen, Poirot is split, one figure on the right and his reflection on the left (Fig. 14). He is uncertain and of two minds, unsure where to go next in his attempt to uncover the murderer. This is a condition that he is not accustomed to feeling.

The train itself is also used to reinforce how the situation is out of control, derailed and leaning to the side (00:48:48). This “beached whale that is the train” (“Commentary” 00:49:49), as Branagh describes it, is centralized in the frame, pulling focus to the train within the broken symmetry of the tunnel and the equal number of workers on either side of the track. Much like in the opening scene of *Death*

on the Nile, this shot is designed not to emphasize the stability of the tunnel, but rather to demonstrate the power and destruction of nature.

When Poirot uncovers the truth behind the murder of Ratchett (Johnny Depp), he assembles all the passengers outside in the tunnel along a table reminiscent of Leonardo DaVinci’s *Last Supper*. Like in the painting, there are thirteen suspects assembled here, arrayed down its length like the disciples of Jesus in the painting, implying that here, too, a traitor may be sitting among them (1:28:02). As Branagh says, “The idea was that somehow he’d seen it before in these Biblical terms. So now, here was the *Last Supper*. Judas was there somewhere” (“Commentary” 1:28:11).

Poirot has now solved the crime and he moves towards the culprits as they sit quietly, under his spell (Fig. 15). He is in control and he walks like a predator about to pounce upon his prey. As screenwriter Michael Green points out, “It is adversarial. It’s us versus them. It’s me versus this group of potential killers,” to which Branagh adds, “Well, me and the train versus this group” (“Commentary” 1:29:05). Branagh is at the centre of the screen, in the middle of the tracks, with the train behind him as support, backing up his conclusions because the train carries all the clues. This centrality makes Poirot appear aggressive and intimidating as he comes forward to unveil the killers.

In the final moments of the film, Poirot wanders alone down the interior length of the train. He contemplates the matter of justice and his own conscience. The interior of the train is an example of symmetry and Poirot is again centred in the middle, aware that he has power and control over all the lives of the passengers (1:43:02). As he moves down the train, he comes to the decision to lie to the authorities and to let the murderers go free.

In the beginning of the film, Poirot, as Branagh states, has the “idea that there’s right, there’s wrong, there’s nothing

in between [which] gives him some sort of absolute position, he thinks, but it's what sets up what's going to be the challenge to that position through the rest of the story" ("Commentary" 00:08:11). Poirot has been forced to come to a new revelation of his character, that there is not always absolute right and wrong. Poirot's desire for human beings to be better than the beasts is tested when he has to "confront the evidence that often they are not, including, in this case, where twelve beasts attacked a defenseless human being in a compartment on a train" ("Commentary" 1:29:05).

In the scene in which Poirot reveals to the passengers the decision that he has made concerning the murder on the train and those responsible for it, he is a changed man (1:44:00). As such, he is feeling a bit lost. Here there

is no symmetry in the image. The windows on either side of Poirot are not the same. Poirot is along the dividing line for the rule of thirds because he is vulnerable and no longer the master in control of himself. He is a changed man and, as Michael Green states, "He must learn to live with the imbalance" ("Commentary" 1:29:06).

This article thus demonstrates that Branagh consistently uses elements of *mise-en-scène* to convey who wields power and control in a scene through his choices of camera angles, framing, blocking, and costuming. In doing so, Branagh often chooses to break the rule of thirds and centralize his characters to showcase their actual or perceived dominance and authority for reasons that aid the storytelling process. ■

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