

The Pressure of Objects

Clutter and Class in Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the visual language of Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* (2019), critically examining Johnson's use of clutter and sparsity in the spaces occupied by Harlan Thornberry (Christopher Plummer) and Marta (Ana de Armas) to argue the occupied visual space of the film parallels its class divide. This analysis explores Johnson's use of clutter as a visual tension within the film, most prominently in the scene which plays out between Marta and Fran in the laundromat, where the stark lighting and extreme sparsity are visually unique in a film that otherwise litters its internal spaces with an excess of clutter. Careful analysis of the *mise-en-scène* of these objects reveals a consistent attitude towards class divide, a theme supported more broadly in the text of the film itself.

In *Knives Out* (2019), Rian Johnson returns to the murder-mystery genre of his first feature film *Brick* (2002), and like that work, *Knives Out* is illustrative of an evocative visual style. The film centres around the death of Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer), a wealthy author living in a bizarrely cluttered house, who names housekeeper Marta (Ana de Armas) as the sole inheritor of his estate instead of his family, setting in motion the film's winding plot and casting Marta as the prime suspect in the investigation into Harlan's death. In the film, Johnson utilizes contrast through visual density instead of light, separating it from *Brick*, which utilizes high-contrast light in the style of *film noir*. In this article, I suggest that the maximalist nature of the decor of the house, cluttered with an otherwise unaffiliated display of miscellany, is simultaneously satirical of the materialist mindset America propagates as a display of wealth and a visual element employed like high-contrast lighting to build suspense. Johnson elects to manipulate the *mise-en-scène* through the density of objects by contrasting the working-class figures of the film in relative

visual sparsity, highlighting the class tension present in the film. This tension has the effect of reinforcing Marta and Fran (Edi Patterson) with notions of objectification, and their characters are treated by the wealthy Thrombey family as materials to be exploited and discarded, rather than given the value inherent in their humanity.

The cluttered interior is correctly identified by critics as an important symbol of the movie's satirical effect, notably in Adam Nayman's review in *The Ringer*: "the Thrombey mansion is a marvel of macabre production design, and in its way, as symbolically and socioeconomically suggestive as the mansion in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*" (par. 6). Beyond this socio-economic impact, however, the visual impact of Harlan's manor is overwhelming and disorienting to the viewer, creating uncertainty regarding which objects contain meaning (Fig. 1). The viewer has a reflex to examine the elements of the film closely, an instinct which Johnson must disable through excess. This visual overload is further intensified by the presence of numerous sources of diegetic lighting which provide only enough



Fig. 1 | The Thrombey manor's maximalist décor in *Knives Out*, 00:01:19. Lionsgate, 2019.



Fig. 2 | Marta's aloof introduction highlights the film's class divide in *Knives Out*, 00:06:23. Lionsgate, 2019.



Fig. 3 | Marta in framed isolation at the will reading, amid the clutter in *Knives Out*, 01:10:59. Lionsgate, 2019.

light to muddle the visual image and make objects visible but not identifiable. The establishing shots of the interior are interspaced between smash cuts of closeups on various items which provide little context for the purpose of the room as a whole and give the viewer no time to focus. As a result, the viewer begins to filter out small details, a visual adaptation Johnson will later exploit.

These opening shots, meanwhile, establish a sense of place cluttered by consumption and possession. Yet, when Fran, the housekeeper, emerges carrying breakfast for Harlan, she is not wrapped in garish costume, but rather in perfectly pedestrian attire, making her stand out against the overloaded set (00:01:19). This visual juxtaposition creates a pattern of effect that Johnson will refer to repeatedly throughout the film, but also establishes the barrier of class present between the Thrombey family and the housekeepers.

This visual pattern is also utilized at Marta's introduction (Fig. 2) but with a critical difference in that, despite the visual density of this shot, Johnson anchors the viewer's gaze through Marta's plain sneakers, which seem illuminated against the otherwise dark background of this scene (00:06:23). Marta, an immigrant, and member of the working-class, wears suitably simple clothing, which underscores her separation from the wealthy place and wealthy people surrounding her. The visual highlight on her shoes reinforces this separation and acts as a subtle clue for the viewer as the plot of the film unfolds. The single speck of Harlan's blood on these shoes eventually becomes evidence of Marta's innocence, revealed by Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig) during the film's denouement. Marta's clothing comes full circle, and the anchoring of her plain white shoes in this scene is ultimately symbolic her innocence and by extension, her good character. However, the clutter of the



Fig. 4 | The interior of the laundromat, in obscuring high-contrast light, falsely heightens the tension in *Knives Out*, 01:36:59. Lionsgate, 2019.



Fig. 5 | Marta, at the laundromat, not observing the critical ash pile on the right in *Knives Out*, 01:36:34. Lionsgate, 2019.



Fig. 6 | The cluttered guard house also reflects notions of possession and wealth in *Knives Out*, 00:55:12. Lionsgate, 2019.

scene prevents the viewer from seeing clues correctly, and Marta's position as the deuteragonist, and her good heart, are obscured by the clutter.

The dynamic of wealth and power is also prominent during the reading of the will, where visual clutter also clues to the importance of class divide (Fig. 3). In this scene, visual lines separate Marta, who lingers at the door all but forgotten during the reading, from the family, who create a strong horizontal line of facing the attorney (Frank Oz) (01:10:59). Yet, a strong vertical element cuts through the clutter, visualizing Marta's connection to the will and the inheritance of Harlan's estate. The scene retains its sense of visual density, with the members of the family themselves providing additional visual clutter, but a link is also established in a way that arouses the suspicion of the audience, who sees Marta as alone and suspicious, deepening the tension of the film.

These sequences of clutter and contrast also work as a way in which Johnson subverts the viewer's desire in mystery films to look for clues by overloading the frame and making such observations extremely difficult. The effect is not unlike the use of high-contrast light, which, especially in works inspired by *film noir*, exaggerates and conceals. While lighting in these internal scenes has been subtly working to disorient the viewer with the aid of the visual clutter, sparsity is a key instrument in the film's visual vocabulary. Thus, when the setting of the film shifts pivotally to the empty laundromat (Fig. 4), Johnson substitutes clutter for high-contrast lighting to maintain the viewer's disorientation (01:36:59). The use of light and shadow as a means of obscuring the truth is a long-standing part of film, indicated by [add a job description: critic?] Robert Arnett as the defining visual element of *film noir* (12). Its employment at this critical moment maintains the tension of apparent

confrontation this scene provides. Yet, here the lighting is a false clue, as there is no antagonist present to confront. Cleverly, Johnson's earlier maximalist approach to visual density has encouraged viewers to filter out small details rather than focus on them, such that the viewer, along with Marta, miss the small detail of the ash pile (Fig. 5), a clue that would have cleared Marta's name (01:36:34). I contend that Johnson utilizes the visual contrast of clutter and sparsity to embed a clue in plain sight and have it ignored both by Marta and the viewer, subverting the expectations presented by a stark visual shift to high-contrast lighting.

The laundromat scene is also notable for its connection to the idea of class as generated in the maximalist aspect of the other interior shots of the film. While both the Thrombey manor and the security house (Fig. 6) are overflowing with clutter, reflecting the excess of wealth required to obtain and keep such numerous possessions, the laundromat's interior space is visually open and empty.

Fran's death in the laundromat, at the hands of Harlan's grandson Ransom (Chris Evans), is a device intended to frame Marta and invalidate Harlan's will. That this pivotal moment occurs in a laundromat is no accidental detail; laundromats are used almost exclusively by the working-class, for whom the film is advocating, a reading signaled by the absence of clutter which has indicated wealth and status in the visual vocabulary of this film. Both Marta and Fran are objects to Ransom's goal of enfranchisement, and it is in this lower-class space, starkly different from the other interior spaces, that Ransom seeks to discard both women, having used them to further his own goals. This callous abuse of the lower-class by the upper-class speaks to the heart of the film's thematic assertions, further acknowledged by the various failings of the other members of the Thrombey family, which caused Harlan to remove them all from his will. The visual style of the laundromat is juxtaposed against the Thrombey manor in a way that is reflective of the



Fig. 7 | Marta finding Harlan's approval in a less-cluttered frame in *Knives Out*, 02:04:08. Lionsgate, 2019.

dichotomous nature of the haves and the have-nots via clutter and sparsity, but also as a signifier of those who take advantage of others, and those who do not.

The conclusion reinforces the satirical effect of the film, as Blanc implies that Marta earned Harlan's inheritance through her good heart, and not through acting as a heartless consumer, like the rest of Harlan's family. The divide between those who consume and those who do not, drawn by class lines and filled in by clutter and space respectively, comes full circle in the final interior shot of the house (Fig. 7) in which Marta is displayed in a room in the manor, but absent is the pressure of objects. Instead, the focus is clearly on Marta, without tension, and a great deal of space is given to her presence. The visible clutter, symbolic of rampant materialism, has been displaced to the edges, and some of the sparsity of the laundromat has become present in the manor, reflective of the virtue of those who do not see others to their own end, and the change Marta will bring to her new home. ■

WORKS CITED

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