

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Time and Space as Social Hierarchy in Agatha Christie's Novel *Murder on The Orient Express* (1934) and its Cinematic Adaptation on *Murder on The Orient Express* (2017)**

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Abstract

This paper examines how time and space shows social hierarchy as a part of mystery in Agatha Christie's *Murder on The Orient Express* (1934) novel and its adaptation named as *Murder on The Orient Express* which was directed by Kenneth Branagh in the year 2017. Both novel and adaptation focus on investigating a murder, justice and social hierarchy within the confined space of the train. The novel is set in the luxurious Simplon-Orient Express which is an international train travelling from Stamboul (present day Istanbul) to Europe. There are 14 passengers on Calais Coach with different nationalities, classes and age. The novel shows how Hercule Poirot, the detective interview the passengers and reconstruct the mystery through clues and social hierarchies in a linear narrative. The film adaptation slightly shifts to psychologically driven narrative rather than focusing solely on solving the mystery. By comparing readers imagination, lavish visuals, cinematography, period details and so on, under the theoretical frameworks of the Production of Space theory and Adaptation Theory. This paper explains how both novel and adaptation portray time and space as social hierarchies in a confined space of the luxurious train interiors.

Keywords: Social hierarchy, cinematic angles, confinement, reconstruction, time, space, film adaptation

Introduction

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Mallowan (1890-1976) was popularly known as Agatha Christie. She was an English author known for her 66 detective novels. She was made a Dame in the year 1971 by Queen Elizabeth II for her contribution to literature. Agatha Christie has been called as "Queen of Crime". She was a writer during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction.

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Murder on the Orient Express (1934) is a mystery novel by Agatha Christie featuring the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. It was first published in the United Kingdom by the Collins Crime Club on 1 January 1934. The novel begins with Poirot's travel from Aleppo to Stamboul (present day Istanbul) where he receives a telegram to return to London. He books Simplon route Orient Express and the train is fully booked. There are 14 passengers on the Calais Coach along with 3 railway staffs. The strangers are brought together under one roof and all are linked together by one death.

The adaptation *Murder on the Orient Express* is a 2017 mystery film co-produced and directed by Kenneth Branagh (1960-present) a British actor and filmmaker. The adaptation grossed over \$351 million worldwide and received reviews from critics for the cast performance, screenplay and production values. The adaptation begins with the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot solves a theft at the Church in Jerusalem. Intend to return to London, Poirot aboard the Simplon route train named the Orient Express. There are 14 passengers and 2 railway staff. The characters names are slightly modified in the adaptation for modernization. An American Businessman named Edward Ratchett was found stabbed to death in his compartment. Poirot collects the evidences, reconstruct the clues and uncovers the mystery. The adaptation reinterprets the temporal and spatial elements through visual techniques and creates a new way to represent hierarchy.

The existing papers focuses on mystery techniques, characterization and justice. There is limited attention given to how time and space functions as social hierarchy. In both novel and its adaptation, the confined setting of Orient Express function as a mini society where class, privilege and power shape interactions among the characters. Examining the elements of time, temporal elements, space and spatial elements, this paper gives a deep understanding of how physical setting and time shape power relation and social identity. By comparing both novel and its 2017 adaptation, this paper compares the representation of temporal and spatial elements and evaluate how they shape social hierarchy.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs **Production of Space Theory** by philosopher **Henri Lefebvre**. The space is produced and constructed socially and through a set of human relations. Lefebvre argues that space is not a physical container where social life happens. Instead, the space is produced through social, political, economic and cultural process. Every society creates and organizes space according to its power structure and relationships.

In both novel and its adaptation, the Orient Express functions as a socially organized space. The compartment serves as a private space with secrecy and privilege. The corridor function as a limited space that observes and regulate the movement of the passengers. The dinning car functions as a common social space where passengers negotiate identities and social relationships. The train act as an active participant in constructing mystery, secrecy and social order rather than portrayed as the backdrop for the narrative. This theory analysis time and space and examines how spatial organization reflects power, class and social relations.

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This paper also employs **Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation Theory**. It emphasizes adaptation as cultural artifacts rather than merely derivative works. Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation should not be judged by how 'faithful' they are to the original work. Adaptations are creative reinterpretations that produce new meanings for different audiences and cultural contexts. An adaptation repeats elements of the original story but does not reproduce it exactly. Each adaptation offers a new perspective. "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 07). "The act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation;" (Hutcheon 08). Novels rely on narration and description. Whereas, film rely on visuals, sound, editing and performances. Adaptations reflect the cultural, historical and social contexts in which they are produced.

In 2017 adaptation, the film is not merely a copy of the novel but a reinterpretation. The film expands the role of Hercule Poirot and gives him greater emotional depth. The visual elements such as train interiors, cinematography and landscape create meanings unavailable in the novel. Certain scenes of Poirot are altered or added to suit cinematic storytelling. The adaptation reflects contemporary audience expectations for spectacle, character psychology, social order and visual storytelling. The temporal and spatial dimensions are reconfigured through visual flashbacks, panoramic landscape shots, expanded train interiors and cinematic reconstruction of past events. The novel presents past through dialogue and interviews. The adaptation visualizes memories and historical events that creates a different experience and perspectives of time and space for the audience.

Methodology

This paper adopts qualitative comparative analysis to examine how time and space shows social hierarchies in Agatha Christie's novel *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and its adaptation *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) directed by Kenneth Branagh. It is based on close textual analysis of the novel and visual analysis of the film adaptation. This analysis explores the ways in which time, temporal, space and spatial elements contribute to the construction of social relations and hierarchy.

This paper uses Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space to view space as a socially produced or construct shaped by power relations and social practices. Using this theory the analysis focuses on spatial structures like compartments, corridors, dinning car, train's interior and the snowbound setting. It also examines how these spaces reflect distinctions of power, privilege, mobility and social interactions.

This paper also uses Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation theory to analyze how the 2017 adaptation reinterprets and transforms the temporal and spatial dimensions of Christie's novel (1934). Limited amount of attention is given to the narrative time through flashbacks, memory sequences, visual reconstructions and the cinematic angles. The space and spatial elements are represented through snowy landscape, imagery, train interiors, camera angle/shots and camera perspectives. The comparative analysis helps to identify the continuities and the transformation between the novel and

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its adaptation.

Time and Space as social hierarchy

Time is used to sequence events, to compare the duration of events or the intervals between them. In literature time is a flexible narrative tool used to structure plot, distort reality and mirror human consciousness.

“A quarter past one. That was the hour of the crime” (Christie 58) is said by Poirot after examining the evidence. However, Poirot later questions whether this is the true time of the crime. This makes time itself part of the mystery. The precise time creates the impression of certainty but Christie later reveals that time can be manipulated.

The upper-class passengers often provide vague recollections. By contrast, the railway staffs are expected to know precise times because it is their work schedule. When Michel was interviewed “Now, Michel, I am going to ask you an important question. Where were you at a quarter past one?” asked Poirot. “I was at my little seat at the end- facing up the corridor” said Michel. (Christie 70-71). The control over time reflects their social positions.

In the 1934 novel the narrative is linear which is the most common form of narration where events are largely portrayed in a chronological order telling the events in the order in which they occurred. The flashbacks are minimal and mostly verbal. The flashbacks often confused with true narratives. But the concept relies upon a fundamentally linear understanding of the narrative.

“You remember the Armstrong case?” Poirot asked Antonio Foscarelli. “Yes, a very tragic affair” Antonio said. (Christie 128) Poirot questions Antonio and his response show general awareness of the case.

The characters remember past events during Poirot’s interviews and described through dialogue without any interruptions. The recollection of the Armstrong case cut all social boundaries on the train. Aristocrats and servant class all share memories of same tragedy. The time feels compressed as the whole story takes place within 36 hours like boarding, murder, investigation and resolution. Christie intertwines past and present using retrospective revelations.

The temporal shift relies solely on readers imagination. Christie uses psychological time to make the reader feel time is slower and more intense. “I make here a little table of chronological events.” (Christie 97) Poirot organize the events of a single night. The event occurred within a few hours but Christie pauses the narrative to expand the readers perception of duration and also to show Poirot’s methodical reasoning. The shift in focus creates psychological and reflective time where readers spend considerable time thinking the clues along with Poirot. Although the murder occurs during a single night, Christie gave many chapters to analyze minutes and hours from that night. When Poirot says, “It is a question of time.” (Christie 100) The reader is reminded that tiny temporal details can unlock the mystery. This cause readers to focus on earlier testimonies and slower the reading pace mentally. The murder is not a spontaneous act. “It took a long time to perfect our plan”(Christie 230) This reveals that the crime was the result of years of preparation after the Armstrong tragedy. The present crime is shaped by a long historical process. The common past of the characters overrides

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their class distinctions.

In 2017 adaptation the film follows nonlinear narrative elements which is a disrupted narrative where events are shown out of chronological order that does not follow the direct pattern of the events featured, such as parallel plot lines. According to Hutcheon's Adaptation theory, around 01:28:02 – 01:29:39 the film intercuts the present confrontation with visual flashbacks of the Armstrong tragedy and the murder conspiracy. This is the most significant temporal shift in the film. The film's movement between past and present shows that collective memory is powerful than class hierarchy. Through this temporal shift, the adaptation shows that the shared experience of loss creates a social bond that transcends the conventional divisions of rank, wealth and profession. The cinematic techniques strengthen the relationship between time, memory and social unity.

According to Hutcheon's Adaptation theory, the scenes are altered and modified to create cinematic tension. Time is manipulated by use of cuts between timelines to heighten drama and build suspense. The adaptation adds historical context and backstory that Christie just hinted in the novel. Around 01:39:02 – 01:41:18 the adaptations additional final dialogues of Poirot remain situated within the story's present timeline. Poirot's last thoughts and last words to the passengers is an example of psychological time. It evaluates the meaning of justice and considers the emotional suffering of the passengers. The narrative time slows dramatically. The temporal fragments are unified in the last scene. Also, Poirot's final judgement shows time and memory became more significant than social rank. The adaptation gave a humanitarian ending.

This shows how a shared past can temporarily dissolve traditional class boundaries and create a new social order based on collective purpose. The reconstruction of the timeline also challenges social hierarchy. The passengers of every class become equally subjected to Poirot's chronological scrutiny. Time functions as both an investigation tool and temporarily that levels social distinctions. In adaptation, the speech transforms the mystery from a question of criminal guilt into a healing process. Poirot recognizes a community formed through shared suffering. This shows how time and memory can transcend conventional social hierarchies through a common past and a shared hope for reconciliation.

According to Lefebvre's Production of space theory, the train in the novel act as a symbolic representation of social class and cultures. "The train, it is as dangerous as a sea voyage!" thought Poirot to himself with amusement. (Christie 13) In 1934 novel, the Orient Express is a contained claustrophobic space where the geographic setting between Istanbul to Calais is implied but not described in detail. "The Orient Express had started on its three-days' journey across Europe" (Christie 23) The 'Orient Express' was a luxurious international railway service used mainly by wealthy travelers, diplomats, military officers and members of upper classes. The phrase 'across Europe' emphasizes a transnational elite space connecting major European cities. The train reflects social privilege.

The interiors of the train include the compartments, dinning car, corridors and hallway are carefully explained to create mystery and hierarchy. The compartment is supposed to be a secure and

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private space. Here the boundary between private and public space collapses. The security associated with the private space is disrupted and the social distinctions became unstable. The physical layout of the train creates a puzzle of who could move where and when. The train's compartments and interiors feel symbolic as all social classes are brought together to show character dynamics.

In the novel the wealthy, entitled and privileged people occupies the First-class. The compartments show their social rank in the outside world. The corridors of the train act as a transitional space in the novel where the interactions between the classes happens. The movement of the wealthy are described as authority, power and control. Whereas the lower-class movements are limited. The dining car reveals the manners and tensions. Christie uses these spaces to heighten the suspense as the murderer's movements are traced within these spaces.

“All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other.” said Poirot. “.....Then perhaps, all these here are linked together-by death.” (Christie 24-25) Poirot here explicitly describes the Orient Express as a miniature society. According to Lefebvre's theory, the train is the condensed version of wider world. Initially, the train appears as hierarchical space. By the end it becomes a collective space.

In 2017 adaptation the compartments, corridor and dining car shows the class distinctions visually. According to Hutcheon's Adaptation theory, the luxurious interiors of the wealthy people are taken in wide shots to show privilege and the camera angles shows wealthy passengers in a well-lit spaces and opulent way. The less privileged people occupy the darkened or cramped spaces. The use of tracking shots and multiple perspective of the passengers shows who controls movement in the corridors.

In adaptation, Branagh uses overhead or Bird's-eye shots to show multiple space and perspectives at once. This visually resembles Poirot's summary of evidence and organizes many separate space into single perspective. These shots link different space together and show that the train is one interconnected environment. This allows the viewers to see several points of view in a short period. According to Hutcheon's Adaptation theory, the geographic setting of the snowy landscapes, tunnels, bridge mountains are filmed in a dramatic and cinematic way. The snowbound creates isolation and danger which is less described in the novel.

“Heavy banks of snow surrounded the train” Poirot woke and looked out. (Christie 37) The snow transforms the train from an elite world to confined world. According to Hutcheon's adaptation theory, the use of cinematic angle makes the train appear small and vulnerable. The immense white environment contrasts with the luxurious train interiors. The high-angle view from the top to bottom of the train stranded in snow shows loss of control, human insignificance and confinement within larger environment.

The close-up shots direct the viewer's attention to the escape route. The compartment is filmed with dim interior lighting, strong shadows and cold blue-white light entering from outside creates a

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mysterious atmosphere and emphasize the intrusion of external environment. As Poirot examines the window and compartment, the camera follows his gaze. The cinematic angles help to show multiple space at once. The lavish interior of the train shows class distinctions visually and vividly. Thus, creating suspense and mystery. To make the puzzle effective, Branagh uses selective framing to limit what viewers can see. This gives partial information to the viewers like Poirot. Different statements are presented separately and viewers rarely see a complete version of events until the final revelation. The time and space act as a puzzle piece rearranged by Poirot. The murder is reconstructed in conflicting timelines with the interviews, noise, seeing figures, clock, train schedule and alibis as clues. The timeline is fabricated by the passengers in both novel and its adaptation.

The novel relies on imagination and textual descriptions whereas the film relies on visual and spatial storytelling. The compartments, dining car and corridor are not just physical space or luxurious train interiors but act as symbolic arena of power and privilege. The compartments initially separate the passengers and later reveal their interconnectedness. The train's interior, cinematography and the investigation break their boundaries and reveals the shared moral purpose among the passengers. The traditional hierarchies collapse as the truth emerges.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the representation of time and space as social hierarchies in Agatha Christie's novel and its adaptation. By applying theories of Henri Lefebvre's Production of Space and Linda Hutcheon's Adaptation theory, this paper demonstrates that time, temporal, space and spatial elements functions more than just a narrative setting. They shape social relationships, power structure and character interactions. The analysis shows that the spatial elements of the Orient Express like compartments, corridor, dining car and the interiors of the train reflects distinctions of status, power and authority. The temporal elements like flashbacks, memories, interviews, faked evidences and reconstructed timeline/events contributes to the gradual revelation, identities and social connections.

This paper also shows that the 2017 adaptation reinterprets Christie's representation of time and space through cinematic techniques. The novel relies on dialogue and narrative description to convey temporal and spatial elements. The film adaptation visualizes the flashbacks, snowy landscape and the train's interiors to enhance the viewer's engagement with the narrative. Regardless of these medium-specific differences, both novel and its adaptation portray time and space as an important structure through which social hierarchy is organized.

This paper concludes that time and space operate as an interconnected social structure that shapes the narrative and the elements/events within it. By analyzing their representation between novel and its adaptation, this paper highlights the relevance of space, spatial, time and temporal elements in understanding the adaptation and social hierarchy.

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