

## SOLVING THE FORMULA: AN ANALYSIS OF MYSTERY STRUCTURE ON *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

Muhammad Sayyid Fathan Fadhlullah<sup>1</sup>, Zahwa Bilbina Putri Baheransyah<sup>2</sup>,  
Agung Dwi Nugroho<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, <sup>2</sup>Universitas Diponegoro.  
Corresponding E-mail: [sayyidfathan30@gmail.com](mailto:sayyidfathan30@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This article discusses Kenneth Branagh's film *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) through John G. Cawelti's popular formula theory, particularly in the context of the mystery genre. This study aims to examine how the narrative structure typical of the detective genre—consisting of the stages of crime, investigation, and resolution—is adapted in the medium of film. By utilizing Cawelti's theory, which emphasizes the combination of convention and innovation, this analysis shows that the film retains the main elements of the mystery formula while introducing aesthetic and moral variations that reflect contemporary values. The use of cinematic techniques such as temporal manipulation, limited perspective, and *mise-en-scène* enhances the audience's experience in following the investigation. Additionally, the film's theme of alternative justice adds a complex ethical dimension to Agatha Christie's classic narrative. This study confirms that *Murder on the Orient Express* is not merely a passive adaptation but a critical and relevant reinterpretation of the genre formula within the context of modern popular culture.

**Keywords:** Popular Formula, Film Adaptation, Mystery Genre, *Murder on the Orient Express*

### INTRODUCTION

The study of comparative literature places literary or cultural works as objects that do not stand alone, but as part of an intertextual network that crosses medium, cultural and historical boundaries. In the modern context, comparative literature not only compares texts between nations, but also observes the transformation of meaning when a work is transferred to another medium, such as film, theater, or visual arts. Comparative literature aims to understand the dynamics of aesthetic, ideological, and structural differences and similarities in works across mediums and cultures, thus enabling new readings that are relevant to the times Bassnett (2013). The study of film adaptations of literary works, such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, is a concrete



Content from this work may be used under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) licence. Any further distribution or adaptation of this work must maintain attribution to the author(s), the title of the work, journal citation, and DOI, and must be licensed under the same terms.

example of how comparative literature examines the process of translation and the reinterpretations that accompany it (Hutcheon, 2013).

Within the framework of popular literature, *Murder on the Orient Express* occupies an important position as a work that represents the mystery genre, with a distinctive narrative pattern. John G. Cawelti (1976), in his work *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, elaborates that the mystery genre has a structural formula that serves two purposes: entertaining and providing intellectual satisfaction for the audience through the pattern of crime, investigation, and resolution. This formula, according to Cawelti, combines convention (things readers already know and expect) with invention (new elements that refresh old patterns). The classic mystery formula always starts with a crime that shakes up social order (crime), followed by an investigation stage that utilizes clues, red herrings, and logical deduction, then ends with a mystery solving stage (solution) that restores order (Cawelti, 1976). Genres are not static categories, but are processes of cultural consensus and conflict through which a community negotiates meaning" (Mittell, 2004, p. 1). Genres are defined less by essential characteristics and more by the expectations created in the mind of the audience" (Altman, 1999, p. 14).

However, as noted by Kelleghan (2001) and contemporary scholars such as Scaggs (2005), innovations in this formula can expand the meaning of the genre, for example by blurring the moral boundaries between perpetrator and victim or by challenging conventional notions of justice. In the context of the film adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017), Kenneth Branagh's work is not just a reproduction of Christie's novel, but also a new interpretation that utilizes the language of cinema to amplify nuances of morality, psychology, and visual tension. Branagh, through 65 mm cinematography, detailed mise-en-scène, and an emphasis on close-ups of facial expressions, invites the audience not only to follow the plot of the investigation, but also to feel the ethical dilemmas that loom over each scene (Hamzah, 2021). Mise-en-scène includes aspects such as setting, lighting, costume, and the behavior of the figures. It helps create mood, direct attention, and define character" (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013, p. 112).

*Murder on the Orient Express* retains the basic structure of the mystery formula: a crime in the form of Ratchett's (Cassetti) murder triggers the mystery; Poirot investigates by interviewing witnesses, collecting clues, and uncovering red herrings; then the resolution of the mystery reveals that all the passengers are united in killing as a form of revenge for the Armstrong tragedy. However, Branagh enriches this formula by emphasizing the theme of alternative justice: formal law fails to prosecute the perpetrators of Daisy Armstrong's murder, so order is restored not by the country's legal system, but by the collective action of victims of injustice.

In comparative literature, such an adaptation is a form of palimpsest, where the new work dialogues with the old while asserting its own aesthetic identity (Hutcheon, 2013). Thus, analyzing the structure of the mystery formula in *Murder on the Orient Express* through a comparative literature approach and Cawelti's formula theory not only examines the extent to which the film is faithful to the classic mystery genre, but also how it negotiates with contemporary morality and justice values. This article aims to examine the application of the crime → investigation → solution structure in the film, highlighting Branagh's points of innovation that make this adaptation a moral reflection as well as an intellectual entertainment. The faithfulness model is reductive. The value of adaptation should be considered in its own right, not merely by its loyalty to a source text" (Cardwell, 2002, p. 21).

The structural approach of the movie follows a popular story formula: mystery exposition, clue gathering, tension escalation, and final twist. Modern narratological studies note that the film uses limited point-of-view techniques as well as temporal manipulation to withhold information from the audience until the climax. *Murder on the Orient Express* adopts a novel and unique structure ... creating a strange effect, by utilizing techniques of perspective and narrative timing to increase the element of speculation in the audience.

In addition, Cawelti's popular formula theory suggests that the success of mystery stories lies in the balance between familiar genre patterns and artistic innovation. Cawelti calls the mystery genre an "archetypal pattern" that fulfills readers' psychological needs while challenging their expectations. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the closed circle structure and presentation of multiple socially diverse characters create tension from beginning to end.

Stylistically, the movie uses the dramatic mode-presenting events like a performance, without direct access to each character's mind. This technique maintains fairness and allows the audience to try the same guesswork as Poirot. According to Story Grid, the heterogeneous characters further enrich the audience's emotions and engagement, as different social backgrounds increase the interpersonal complexity within the narrative.

Overall, the film blends classic genre formulas - closed circle structure, suspense, and ethical twist - with modern narrative choices through dramatic POV and cinematic aesthetics. This research aims to analyze how formulas such as Cawelti's are applied and adapted in *Murder on the Orient Express*, focusing on the narrative structure, suspense strategies, and moral relevance of the ending.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The 2017 film adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*, directed by Kenneth Branagh, serves as an insightful example for applying John G. Cawelti's formulaic approach to popular fiction, particularly within the detective genre. Cawelti's theoretical model highlights the interplay between established conventions and inventive elements in popular storytelling an interplay that is evident in both Agatha Christie's original novel and its cinematic retelling. This section presents the outcomes of a close analysis of the film, concentrating on how Cawelti's formula is reflected in the adaptation and how the process of ecranization the transformation of literary texts into film reshapes the narrative structure, character relationships, and thematic depth.

At the heart of Cawelti's mystery formula lies a set of familiar elements: the commission of a crime (typically a murder), a confined group of suspects, the presence of a detective, the inclusion of clues and misleading evidence, and a final resolution that reestablishes order. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, these components are preserved, with Hercule Poirot portrayed as the quintessential detective whose logic and moral integrity steer the investigation. While the film retains the essential plot framework of the novel, it introduces notable alterations in scene arrangement and visual narration, exemplifying what Cawelti describes as the "balance between the real and the imaginative escapist experience."

One notable observation is the streamlined treatment of characters and subplots in the film adaptation. As Aspriyanto and Hastuti (2019) point out, ecranization often requires omitting, adding, or modifying elements to meet the demands and possibilities of the cinematic medium. For instance, the film leaves out the character of Dr.

Constantine, thereby tightening the narrative and placing greater emphasis on Poirot's deductive reasoning. While this simplification may lessen some narrative complexity, it improves pacing and visual clarity, making the film more engaging for modern viewers.

Additionally, the adaptation incorporates new scenes and contemporary sensibilities. A comparative narrative analysis notes that the 2017 version adds sequences absent from the source text and highlights visual spectacle and emotional intensity. Although these additions can enrich the cinematic experience, they also risk diminishing the subtle tension and atmospheric precision of Christie's writing, leading to varied critical responses. This tension between remaining faithful to the source and meeting popular film conventions supports Cawelti's view that genre formulas must adapt over time, often mirroring contemporary cultural concerns and values.

The film's use of red herrings and deliberate misdirection illustrates another core aspect of the detective formula. The strategic placement of false leads and shifting suspicions sustains suspense and keeps the audience engaged—techniques central to both Christie's novel and its adaptation. Through visual cues, editing, and actor performances, the film accentuates these features, underscoring the genre's focus on solving puzzles and restoring social order. This aligns with Cawelti's assertion that mystery narratives serve the dual purpose of offering intellectual challenge and reaffirming moral and social norms.

Finally, the adaptation reflects broader trends in how popular literature is transformed for the screen. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, these shifts are visible in casting decisions and in the more nuanced portrayal of moral ambiguity, signaling a departure from the strict moral binaries of classic detective fiction toward a more complex ethical landscape.

This analysis reveals that *Murder on the Orient Express* consistently applies the classic mystery formula from its narrative structure, closed circle conditions, to its moral direction in line with John G. Cawelti's theory and contemporary narratologists. First, the narrative structure of the film follows the "six stage detective formula" outlined by the appearance of the detective, the crime and clues, the investigation, the announcement of the solution, the explanation of the solution, and the denouement (Cawelti, 1976) Hercule Poirot is dramatically introduced in the exposition, displaying the characteristics of an ingenious detective while immediately arousing the audience's interest. The murder on the train creates a closed space that accommodates all suspects, maintaining fairness while intensifying the audience's expectations of the investigation pattern.

Secondly, the film's narrative technique uses temporal manipulation and point of view to build suspense and emotional engagement. Christie uses "narrative perspective, narrative time and narrative subject" to create a unique effect in *Murder on the Orient Express*. This technique is translated to the big screen through flashbacks, Poirot's narration, and the deliberate sequencing of information, maintaining the mystery until the climax.

Furthermore, the movie supports classic genre fairness: clues are metaphorically given to the audience as much as to the detective, allowing them to speculate in parallel. Genette in his narrative framework mentions the phenomenon of anachrony (disruption of chronological order) as a strategy to maintain tension.

Furthermore, movies apply dramatic strategies in the presentation of characters and conflicts. In line with Cawelti, who sees the mystery formula as a combination of archetypal and conventional dimensions. *Murder on the Orient Express* blends social archetypes and ethical revelations. Each suspect reflects a different social stratum, composing a mental and moral mosaic that adds to the narrative complexity. The

inclusive and diverse character creations further enhance the audience's emotions and resonance. Another structural analysis highlights that the classic mystery genre falls somewhere between formulaic and experimental. Classic formulas can be modified to create innovations in structure, such as the incorporation of multimedia formats or non-linear narratives. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the movie features a moral twist that the collective murder is committed on ethical grounds which shifts the classic formula into the realm of social and moral reflection.

Finally, the film reaches a denouement that fulfills the psychological needs of the audience as Cawelti calls it: justice is served even through unconventional means (Cawelti, 1972). The solution is explained chronologically, completely, and fairly, thus providing closure and narrative satisfaction. Such an ending affirms the function of mysteries as a form of escapism as well as ethical reflection, demonstrating the renewed relevance of formulaic.

Overall, the findings suggest that *Murder on the Orient Express* successfully retains and refreshes the classic mystery formula of Cawelti's structure, Genette's narrative strategies, and the moral and social dynamics that make it an ideal case study in modern popular literature.

In conclusion, *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) illustrates Cawelti's formulaic theory by preserving key conventions of the detective genre while adjusting narrative focus, character development, and thematic concerns to fit the medium of film and the expectations of a modern audience. The film's combination of reductions, additions, and modifications highlights the evolving nature of popular genre formulas, supporting Cawelti's argument that such formulas both reflect and shape cultural values. This analysis enhances our understanding of the ways popular literature is reinterpreted through adaptation and how formulaic structures continue to influence the reception and development of genre narratives in contemporary media. Genre functions both as a set of industry conventions and as an audience expectation; it shifts depending on cultural and historical context" (Creeber, 2006, p. 7).

## CONCLUSION

According to John G. Cawelti, the film *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) is a classic example of how familiar literary tropes, particularly the mystery genre, might be adjusted and rewritten for the medium of film. Following the conventional pattern of crime, inquiry, and resolution, Kenneth Branagh's interpretation of the detective genre also incorporates visual elements, tempo, and a more complex moral perspective into the story. The emphasis on moral dilemmas and alternate justice reflects the shifting social values of modern pop culture. Using cinematic techniques including limited viewpoint, flashbacks, and closed circle surroundings, the movie builds narrative tension effectively while still letting spectators make predictions like detectives.

This study shows that the predictable structure of the mystery genre is elastic, not rigid, and can be applied to the surroundings and medium of the moment. Branagh perfectly retells Christie's iconic story as both enjoyment and a moral and societal critique, hence making the film relevant and intriguing for study in popular literature and media adaptation. Adaptation involves not merely transposition of a text, but also commentary and analogy—a process of re-interpretation" (McFarlane, 1996, p. 12).

## REFERENCES

- Altman, R. (1999). *Film/Genre*. BFI Publishing.
- Aspriyanto, Y., & Hastuti, E. (2019). Transformation of a novel *Murder on the Orient Express* into its film adaptation using ecranization study. *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra*, 19(2), 211–219.
- Bassnett, S. (1993). *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*. Blackwell.
- Bernstein, R. B. (1987). Charting the bicentennial. *Columbia Law Review*, 87(8), 1565–1624. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1122679>
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2013). *Film art: An introduction* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Branagh, K. (Director). (2017). *\*Murder on the Orient Express\** [Film]. 20th Century Fox.
- Cardwell, S. (2002). *Adaptation revisited: Television and the classic novel*. Manchester University Press.
- Cawelti, J. G. (1972). The concept of formula in the study of popular literature. *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 5, 115–123. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1314856>
- Cawelti, J. G. (1976). *Adventure, mystery, and romance: Formula stories as art and popular culture*. University of Chicago Press.
- Creeber, G. (Ed.). (2006). *The television genre book*. British Film Institute.
- Elliott, K. (2018). The theory of badaptation. In D. Cartmell & I. Whelehan (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to adaptation* (pp. 18–27). Routledge.
- Greco, J., & Williams, M. (2008). Detecting genre in crime fiction: Moral complexity in modern detective stories. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 41(5), 773–792. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00544.x>
- Hamzah, S. (2021). Confinement and duplicity: Mise-en-scène in Sir Kenneth Branagh's *Murder on the Orient Express*. *Mise-en-scène: The Journal of Film & Visual Narration*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.21900/msj.v6i2.921> (doi.org in Bing)
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Kelleghan, F. (2001). Mystery and suspense in literature. In T. Riggs (Ed.), *St. James encyclopedia of popular culture* (Vol. 3, pp. 123–125). Gale.
- Leitch, T. (2007). *Film adaptation and its discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Makinen, M. (2006). *Agatha Christie: Investigating femininity*. Palgrave Macmillan.