

## Twelve Angry People: Conflicting Revelatory Strategies in *Murder on the Orient Express*

The first time Sidney Lumet teamed with screenwriter Paul Dehn to adapt an English thriller for the screen, the book was John Le Carré's *Call for the Dead* and the style of the resulting film, *The Deadly Affair*, was, as Leslie Halliwell comments: "deliberately glum, photographed against the shabbiest possible London backgrounds in muddy colour."<sup>1</sup> Le Carré's complex, psychically tortured characters, gray moral ambivalence, and naturalistically detailed settings meshed well with the predilections of the director who would explore the pressures of urban life in such films as *The Pawnbroker*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, and *Prince of the City*. When Lumet and Dehn collaborated again, they had exchanged Le Carré for Agatha Christie, and the style of *Murder on the Orient Express* had been chosen by producers John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin as one of all-star cast glamor and glittering period detail. Many reviewers agreed with Paul Zimmerman that Lumet was out of his element in the plush, stylized ambience of the film: "But a rough, scrappy, hustling inventiveness, full of gritty textures, has always characterized his best work. He simply has no feel for high style"<sup>2</sup> After completing the film, Lumet himself admitted the stylistic difficulties it had presented: "I did *Murder on the Orient Express* because I love melodrama. That's all. I wanted to have fun. It turned out to be some of the hardest work I've ever done, because the piece was highly stylized."<sup>3</sup>

The stylistic differences involved not only *mise en scène* but significant variations in the concept and revelation of character. In Christie's novels, the efforts of the detective and the unfolding of the narrative produce gradual revelations of previously concealed information about characters. The process, moreover, is constantly circumscribed by the structural necessities of the mystery genre. As Charles Derry remarks: "Thus the omniscience is rhetorically selective in regard to which characters it can reveal as well as in regard to the comprehensiveness with which it can reveal them. Of course, if any character were to be revealed completely, he could no longer be a suspect."<sup>4</sup> In a Lumet film, on the other hand, very little stands in the way of a character's steady and full psychological disclosure, and the way characters reveal themselves and the factors that compel their revelations are crucial.

Lumet uses his characters' manifested behavior as a text between whose lines he probes for an authentic reading. His whole visual style, which stresses camera movement and editing that start with the distant and proceed to zero in on the intimate, invites the viewer to participate in the unveiling process. Nor is the process particularly

arduous. Once two or more characters settle in for a shouting match, the revelations usually come thick and fast; critics rarely accuse Lumet of being overly subtle. What Polito says of cops in *Prince of the City* applies to a majority of the director's neurotic, tormented protagonists: "In their hearts they want to admit their guilt."

Christie, on the other hand, has little use for psychologically complex characters. She writes in her autobiography: "At that time, the time of the 1914 war, the doer of evil was not a hero: the *enemy* was wicked, the *hero* was good; it was as crude and simple as that. We had not then begun to wallow in psychology. I was, like everyone else who wrote books or read them, *against* the criminal and *for* the innocent victim."<sup>5</sup> The secrets her characters conceal, in addition to criminal guilt, concern social identity. They really have different names, occupations, personal histories, or relationships to the other suspects or the victim than their initial testimony acknowledges. But even when the characters fulfill Poirot's prediction in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* that everyone in a murder investigation has something to hide, they are hiding actual facts, not the traumas that the secrets of the past may have wrought on their psyches. Their guilts encompass actual responsibility for improper acts, not the negative affective state that guilt in the psychological sense implies.

When Poirot puts his little grey cells to work on the suspects' stories in the novel of *Murder on the Orient Express*, he remarks: "The passengers have sat here, one by one, giving their evidence. We know all that can be known—from *outside*. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Our view as Christie readers is similarly extrinsic. David Grossvogel has observed that in Christie's world "the people in that landscape are as tautological as the landscape itself: an adjective or two are sufficient to call their identity to mind." Although the fact of the murder having been committed means that "the tautological evidence can no longer be trusted,"<sup>7</sup> the author provides little direct evidence of any other kind by which the "true" character can be known. Indeed, Christie's novels derive much of their narrative energy from the suspects' dissembling resistance to the sleuth's probing. While the innocent may sometimes explode under questioning, it usually serves the culprits to preserve a calm facade and to give away as little as possible. The author does not lead the reader toward the secrets, as Lumet does, but throws up smokescreens between the reader and the emerging clues.

Accompanying this dichotomy of revelatory strategies, however, is the fact that the narrative occasion of *Murder on the Orient Express*, with its crime on a snowbound train, springs from a type of situation that has attracted Lumet throughout his career: it concerns a disparate group of people under pressure confined within a limited space from which they cannot escape. From the sequestered jurymen of his first film, *Twelve Angry Men*, through Sol Nazerman in his caged-in office in *The Pawnbroker*, the military prisoners in *The Hill*, to the robbers under siege in a building in which they in turn hold hostages in *Dog Day Afternoon* and *The Anderson Tapes*, Lumet's characters have found themselves in a *mise en scène* that stresses enclosure. He frequently sets the action of other films, in which characters are not literally imprisoned, in windowless cubicles, jail cells, and courtrooms.

The confinement usually breeds hostility. Lumet's characters frequently pass their time in heated debate, and, like *Network*'s Howard Beale, are "mad as hell and . . . not going to take this anymore." While that film's Diana Christensen is not a very trustworthy spokesperson, her "I want angry shows" might well serve as Lumet's motto. As his actors go at each other verbally, his camera pans around them, regroups them in the frame, and rhythmically cuts from long-shot to close-up and back again, following the ebb and flow of a scene's emotional intensity. This technique may have originated in his early days as a director in live television, shooting one-set plays in cramped studios, but an affinity for tight places has remained a consistent Lumet signature.<sup>8</sup>

These tight places are pressure cookers for Lumet, designed to facilitate the boiling over of the divided emotions and repressed guilt and rage of his characters. Inner

conflicts are transmuted into interpersonal ones, and revelation serves to generate drama. While Christie often boxes her characters in as well, their essentially non-existent psyches and the extrinsic manner in which those characters are narrated render the close quarters more like a container of smoked glass which obstructs and distorts recognition of what is being revealed. The drama in Christie takes place in the encounter of text and reader, not in the encounter of character and character. Her books in general are short on action, consisting in large part of seemingly trivial conversation laden with clues, formal interviews with suspects, and lengthy exposition of the unravelled mystery. In *Murder on the Orient Express* the one murder occurs almost immediately—it is discovered on page 32 of the 198 page paperback edition—by which time the train and its passengers have become stuck in a snowdrift. Christie makes her characterizations even flatter than usual. Since everyone is in on the crime, there can be no safe probing into suspicious circumstances surrounding a suspect who will prove innocent in the end. The novel is divided into three sections whose titles demonstrate the lack of action: "The Facts," "The Evidence," and "Hercule Poirot Sits Back and Thinks." All in all, as Pauline Kael observed in her review, the film is adapted from "an unusually static novel."<sup>9</sup>

This novel, then, offered Lumet and his actors little more than a blueprint for their characterizations. If his film were to be at all successful, he would have to discover a way to make compelling what are in essence a succession of talking-head interviews and to flesh out a collection of characters who are mere building blocks for constructing Christie's complex surprise. As a self-acknowledged actors' director, famed for giving performers their heads to chew up the scenery, Lumet was not about to opt for the understated, oblique rendering of personality found in the text. The solution he and Dehn adopted involves transforming the Christie ciphers into familiar guilt-ravaged Lumet types and infusing Poirot's interrogations with the anguished combative energy (a staple of his films' *tete-à-tetes*) that later made similar sessions in *Prince of the City* so powerful. In general, Lumet heightens the confrontational nature of all the interrogations by stressing the cramped interior spaces of the train, frequently shooting from low or high angles, and packing several people so close together in the frame that the only way to avoid two-shots is to cut to more emotionally-charged close-ups. By doing so, however, he constantly threatens to expose the truth too soon, thus imperilling the puzzle that is so important to Christie. At the same time, the constraints of his source force him to cut off characters' self-revelations, leaving incomplete the psychological catharsis that so frequently occurs in his films. The revelatory strategies of both authors are thus compromised, and the creative strengths of neither shown to best advantage.

Alterations in the portrayals of three characters in particular, Hector MacQueen, Greta Ohlsson, and Hildegard Schmidt, reveal Lumet's hand. In the novel, Hector's single reference to Mrs. Armstrong is, "I saw Mrs. Armstrong more than once—she was a lovely woman. So gentle and heartbroken" (p. 196). Linda Arden later remarks, "He'd always adored Sonia—my daughter" (p. 196). From this scant evidence emerges the film's depiction of Hector as an "emotionally retarded," never-married neurotic whose obsession with the mother who died when he was eight has been transferred to "Mother" Armstrong. Poirot's excusing a "Freudian question" about Hector's love for his mother seems hardly necessary to establish the Oedipal dimensions of his character.

This sledgehammer psychologizing hardly improves on Christie's two-dimensional Hector, but the film's reshaping of the decidedly colorless role of Christie's Greta Ohlsson results in a splendid characterization. In both book and film, Miss Ohlsson appears initially as a Swedish missionary who has a limited mastery of the English language. But Christie, who may have introduced the latter detail to divert reader suspicion of Miss Ohlsson's having lived in America with the Armstrongs, does not mine its comic potential, as does the film's fractured interview. In the book we are

simply informed, "It transpired that she understood and spoke French, so the conversation took place in that language" (p. 78). But it is the film's second alteration in presenting Greta Ohlsson that typifies the Lumet touch. He portrays her as having become a religious fanatic who undertook missionary work among "little brown babies" after seeing a vision of Jesus, a vision that Poirot surmises sprang from her guilt over Daisy Armstrong's having been abducted while in her care.

The germs for the neurotic behavior Hector and Greta exhibit in the film are at least contained in the text of the novel. But the psychological twist given to Hildegard Schmidt's personality cannot even remotely be inferred from the evidence of the text. Often attired in mannish tweeds and neckties, with close-cropped hair, the film's Fraulein Schmidt is reduced to tears by Poirot's question about the maid Paulette's suicide, suggesting that she had conceived a lesbian attachment to the dead girl.

While not all the characters in the novel have been neuroticized to such an extent, Lumet does consistently raise the emotional temperature of everyone involved. Overall, the film's affective atmosphere is steeped in guilt and hostility, two emotions one might naturally expect in a tale of revenge and murder, and that one certainly anticipates in a Lumet film, but which are virtually absent from Christie's novel. As I have said, she generally has little interest in the inner lives of her characters; moreover, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, as Christie sees it, Ratchett's murder should generate little psychic guilt. The conspirators view themselves as righting a dreadful miscarriage of justice. As Poirot explains, "Ratchett has escaped justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt. I visualised a self-appointed jury of twelve people who had condemned him to death and who by the exigencies of the case had themselves been forced to be his executioners" (p. 192). Even though the conspirators have personally suffered at Ratchett's hands, the author always stresses their role as dispensers of justice, not as avengers. Nor do either servants or loved ones seem to feel that they might have prevented the tragedy.

On the other hand, from the film's opening montage, which illustrates the newspaper headline "Armstrong Household Turmoil: Staff Wakened but Helpless," the audience is made aware that the servants must be suffering intense guilt over their inability to save Daisy. Greta Ohlsson's vision that came "from five years" (i.e. directly following the kidnapping) "was not just a sign, it was punishment," and it stands for the feelings of complicity—not in Ratchett's murder but in his crime—that many of Lumet's passengers are experiencing. Likewise, while in the novel, when Hector MacQueen pretends to be Ratchett apologizing for summoning the conductor needlessly, he says: "Ce n'est rien, je me suis trompé." In the film the phrase is "C'est une cauchemar."<sup>10</sup> Even if the film's Ratchett is such a monster that he can tell Poirot with utter *sang froid* that the business from which he has retired is "baby food," Lumet will have his executioners credit him at least with guilty dreams.

If Lumet's passengers are wracked with guilt, they also burn with anger and a desire for vengeance. The film preserves Christie's concept that, as Col. Arbuthnot articulates it, "trial by twelve good men and true is a sound system," but as *Twelve Angry Men* early revealed, the director hardly conceives of juries as totally able to subordinate personal prejudices and rages to a dispassionate search for truth and justice. And he stages the murder, not as an anonymous execution in the dark, but as a ritual killing. Pierre Michel deliberately flips on the night light above the drugged victim, bathing the scene in an eerie blue haze that also bathed the kidnap scenes in the opening montage. Each of the passengers in turn plunges in the dagger after verbally dedicating the blow to the victims he most intensely cared for.

As Lumet's characters are made to reveal their emotions more than Christie's, so they tend to tell as much of the truth about themselves as they can, short of overtly incriminating themselves. When Poirot interviews the conductor, Pierre Michel, the man responds to Poirot's inquiry about his wife's death with the unnecessarily incriminating, "she died of grief brought on by the death of our only daughter—from

scarlet fever." Substitute "suicide" for "scarlet fever," and Michel would be telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth about his relationship to the falsely accused housemaid, Paulette Michel. While in the novel actress Linda Arden, Mrs. Armstrong's mother, has invented "Ms. Hubbard" entirely, in the film she is, when not using her stage name, indeed Harriett Belinda Hubbard, having remarried after the departure of Sonia Armstrong and Helena Andrenyi's father, Mr. Grunwald. Her repeated references to "my second husband, Mr. Hubbard," are therefore not lies, and only Mrs. Hubbard's caricatured, ugly American behavior is an invention.

Christie's characters occasionally give themselves away too, but in far subtler ways. We can best see the contrast in the respective portrayals of Poirot ascertaining that Cyrus Hardman was romantically attached to Paulette. In the novel, Poirot discourses on the charms of foreign women, and when Hardman complains that the sunlight on the snow has made his eyes water, Poirot knows that his sally has hit the mark by bringing tears to the distraught lover's eyes. In the film, Poirot merely hands him Paulette's photograph. Hardman, misty-eyed, immediately confesses: "It's Paulette, Paulette Michel. Now I'll stop pretending to be anything."

Most of these and the other changes Lumet has made can be justified by the differences between print and cinema. Literary subtleties often become obscurities as they flicker by on the screen. Christie's characters are far too flat and the novel too deficient in affect to provide enough dramatic substance to keep a two-hour film moving. In providing conflicts rooted in his usual preoccupations—claustrophobia, neurosis, intra-group angst—Lumet, however, substantially diminishes a paramount virtue of the novel: its presentation of a fiendishly intricate puzzle that challenges the reader with too many probable answers, all the while having a solution that no reader has anticipated. Because the trick played on the reader is that *all* the suspects are guilty, everything must be done to keep him from seeing them as being any more than a random collection of travellers united only by circumstance. When it is soon revealed that both the murdered man and his secretary had links to the Armstrong kidnapping case and, shortly thereafter, that another passenger was Sonia Armstrong's godmother, this illusion becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

Christie depends on three devices to block perception of the extent of the conspiracy. She first counts on the reader's familiarity with detective story conventions that dictate that some suspects must be innocent. She trusts that the reader will say to himself, as Poirot reports having done, "They can't all be in it." She secondly delays sketching in a complete picture of the Armstrong household at the time of the tragedy for as long as possible. Indeed, the Armstrong case itself is never mentioned until a quarter of the way through the book, when Poirot deciphers the burnt fragment of the last threatening letter Ratchett received. When he recounts the case to Bouc and Dr. Constantine, he mentions only Linda Arden in addition to those who died. We do not learn that Mrs. Armstrong had a younger sister until page 87. The nurse, governess, the vague "servants" are only considered when Poirot questions Countess Andrenyi for a second time on page 168. Christie thirdly plays up the international diversity of the passengers, making it seem unlikely that the members of such a polyglot group could possibly be linked in any way.

Lumet stresses the varied nationalities as well, having Pierre Michel greet each passenger in his or her native language and cutting frequently to views of the Stamboul station, which overflows with people, food, and merchandise of every conceivable country of origin. But he goes out of his way, from the outset, to emphasize the Armstrong case and its ramifications. Lumet's interest in group dynamics, in the varied reactions of human beings under shared, stressful circumstances, makes the film's major concern the far-reaching effects of a kidnap-murder on a family, its friends, and retainers.

This focus causes a radical restructuring of the narrative in regard to its revelation of the details of the case. Rather than dribble them out a fact at a time, as Christie

does, the film opens with the brilliantly designed montage sequence that intersperses newspaper headlines and pictures concerning the kidnapping with slow motion reconstructions of the crime and its aftermath. This sequence provides shadowy glimpses of a nurse bound and gagged, a cook leaning over the bannister, a manservant struck on the head, a chauffeur whose car is sideswiped by the criminal's vehicle, a secretary<sup>11</sup> accompanying Sonia and her husband. Still photos of the dead Col. and Mrs. Armstrong, Daisy, and Paulette stand in for those absent conspirators who loved them. Thus the viewer is never in doubt that the murder on the Orient Express will have some connection to these people and events. And once the fragment of the threatening note reveals the letters *aisy Arm* just before it flares out, fading the frame to red in exactly the way the last headline in the montage, "Daisy found slain," had done, he expects to identify Ratchett's killer by bringing one of those blurred figures into focus or finding a living avenger behind one of the still photographs of the dead.

The film, moreover, visually discourages its audience from casting only one or two passengers in the killer's role. The director shoots each of them boarding the train, dining with compartment-mates, and being interrogated in such parallel fashions that, despite the disagreements with each other they stage for Poirot's benefit, we respond, subliminally, to the suspects as a group rather than as a collection of disparate individuals from among whom only one guilty party will emerge. Indeed, the train itself, having so to speak absorbed them all into its being, is cinematically transformed into an image of their collective purpose. As it prepares to pull out of the station, cuts to its various working parts being activated reflect the different members of the conspiracy working together to set the murder plot in motion. The magnificent power of the steam locomotive, conveyed by a series of reverse tracking shots, forecasts their success; the glaring engine light and smoke rising ominously against the night sky at Vincovci reveal the beginning of the murderous activities. Increasingly low-angled shots magnify the train's sinister power as the deed is done. The train's stalling in the snowdrift stands for the danger of discovery Poirot's investigation poses. And his allowing the conspirators to get away with the crime coincides with the train being freed and rolling forward once more.

Clearly, from the moment the film's Poirot connects Dr. Constantine's observation that Sonia Armstrong was a kind of fairy godmother to Hector MacQueen to the presence of Sonia's real godmother, the Princess Dragomiroff, on the train, the detective suspects that all the passengers are in on the murder. He subsequently thanks Mrs. Hubbard "for playing your part," a double-edged remark aimed at the actress Linda Arden beneath the Hubbard charade. He comforts Hildegard Schmidt on the discovery of the conductor's uniform in her luggage with, "This could be your salvation and that of every passenger in the Calais Coach, including your mistress." His interrogations aim primarily at establishing how the various passengers would have fit into the Armstrong circle, not how any one of them, according to the evidence, might have committed the crime.

Just when Poirot has worked a passenger up into a state of revelatory hysteria, however, Lumet must allow that passenger to regain control before the whole truth has come out. Were Christie not so widely known and widely famed for whodunits with surprise endings, Lumet might have manipulated his narrative to reveal the secret earlier, as Hitchcock did with *Vertigo*. But it is Christie's generic formulas that must prevail in the film, and although Lumet's revelatory strategies create a tension between concealment and disclosure of the secret, few viewers unfamiliar with the novel would actually recognize the revelations for what they are. Nevertheless, the visual style and the structure of the cinematic narrative, all those things over which a director has control, indicate that Lumet is straining to narrate the plot as "theydunit" rather than "whodunit." He is rather careless in presenting Poirot's investigation of the all-too-numerous red herring clues. Therefore, the detective inconsistently checks some alibis and fails to seek corroboration of others; cares little about establishing the possible

access of each of the suspects to the murdered man's compartment, given that it was locked from the inside; pursues the handkerchief clue diligently but the dressing gown sporadically.

Any viewer, then, who is trying to make a case against any individual suspect, must be frustrated by lack of evidence. His frustration probably mirrors that of Sidney Lumet, who, from the evidence of his other films, would like to divulge the secret of the Calais Coach passengers early on and then, if he cannot escape the polished wood, chrome, and glass of Tony Walton's production design for a grubby cubicle in an urban multiplex, at least explore what his twelve angry people are up to behind their compartment doors when Poirot is not present.

Ina Rae Hark  
University of South Carolina

#### Notes

- 1 *Halliwel's Film Guide* (New York: Scribner, 1977), p. 180.
- 2 "The Labors of Hercule," *Newsweek*, 84 (December 2, 1974), 107.
- 3 Don Shewey, "Sidney Lumet: the Reluctant Auteur," *American Film*, 8, No. 3 (December, 1982), 30-36.
- 4 "Towards a Categorization of Film Narrative," *Film Reader*, 2 (1977), 112.
- 5 *An Autobiography*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977), p. 424.
- 6 *Murder on the Orient Express (Murder in the Calais Coach)* (New York: Pocket Books, 1940), p. 156. All references are to this edition and will be hereafter given in the text.
- 7 *Mystery and Its Fictions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) p. 44.
- 8 Graham Petrie, "The Films of Sidney Lumet: Adaptation as Art," *Film Quarterly*, 21 (Winter, 1967), 9-18, deals well with the cinematic explorations of restricted space in Lumet's early films.
- 9 *New Yorker*, 50 (December 9, 1974), 171-72.
- 10 The "cauchemar" in the novel is the possible explanation Poirot gives for hearing a loud thump on the murder night that everyone else claims not to have noticed.
- 11 In the book Miss Debenham is a governess, not a secretary. The film also changes the name of the valet from Masterman to Beddoes, makes Armstrong a colonel rather than a captain, and turns Bouc into a comic Italian named Bianchi. The end credits spell MacQueen *McQueen* and Arbuthnot *Arbuthnott*. I have utilized the novel's spelling throughout this article.