

Peter Framed

How Kenneth Branagh's new farce reinforces the old order

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, a film comes along that displays textbook examples of one cinema technique or another. Such a film is Kenneth Branagh's popular *Peter's Friends*, which takes place at a grand English estate where an ineffectual young lord throws a Christmas-week party for his old college chums ten years after graduation. The problem is that one is not sure if Branagh is aware of what textbook examples he is demonstrating, and therein lies a significant conundrum for viewers.

By "textbook examples," I don't mean those flamboyant technical tricks used for dramatic titillation alone, such as Alfred Hitchcock's minute-long crane shot gliding high above a crowded dance floor in 1937's *Young and Innocent* until it comes to rest, in extreme close-up, on the eyes of the orchestra's drummer.

I'm talking about those cues, clues and signs that work on a viewer's responses at deep psychological levels without the viewer necessarily being aware of them as they reinforce or unsettle the way the world presented on the screen is comprehended. One could say these signs make up subtexts that swim like shadows in the darkness beside the film's phantom lightship.

Several of these subtexts are evident in *Peter's Friends*. One involves the way Branagh uses the camera. Even when it is moving, the composition of each shot is classically centered. Peter's

baronial mansion, for example, is placed directly in the middle of the frame. So are the couples in bed, where first the lamps on the side tables and then the bedposts provide precise frames for the characters' actions.

Even the scenes in hallways are so meticulously composed that the walls flank a centered doorway through which a piece of action is shown. Such random examples illustrate a pattern of composition that occurs throughout the film.

FOR YEARS, film theoreticians have argued that such centering proposes an orderly world, not only projecting in the viewer's mind the stability of the status quo, but also denying the existence of any action beyond the frame.

In other words, centered compositions deny the validity of lives beyond the scene and focus on the characters before the camera as if they are not just of paramount importance but, indeed, the only lives worthy of the viewer's attention. On the other hand, scenes shot off-center with shifting compositions evoke a sense of uncertainty and of lives beyond those of the characters being photographed.

Similarly, the shenanigans of Peter's friends occupy the center of the film's narrative, but he is the character on whom the film focuses. Peter's significance is underscored by the fact that he is made the center of attention at the beginning and end of the story.

When shown among his chums, Peter is either leaning against a fireplace, looking down at them or standing a stair or two above them. Many times he is shot from below, which gives his presence a commanding aura. This accumulation of visual cues ensures that Peter is the film's main character, no matter how wishy-washy his character is depicted elsewhere.

In the end, these several subtextual signs leave the viewer with the sense that the neurotic, chaotic behavior rendered on screen is an anomaly, for the centered compositions and Peter's commanding visual presence project a world in which the aristocracy still rules and the Empire's foundation is still solid.

The projection of such order is necessary to the world of comedy. But it is not entirely clear that Branagh is aware that he is combining two antithetical notions here. Or is such mixing of subtextual and surface materials a final irony on his part?

One more word. Filmmakers have many times associated action beyond the frame with the working class, a group almost totally absent from British film, except to provide comic relief, before the 1940s. Peter's tight-lipped housekeeper and her son, the only servants on the estate, leave Peter and his guests in the den at the end of the film and stand on either side of the doorway, framing the scene within, as if their place were *outside* the concerns of the narrative.

Does Branagh mean by this visual strategy that he is upholding the antiquated British class system, or is he satirically commenting on its continued existence? I think that Branagh is a slippery fish trying to wriggle off the hook. *Peter's Friends* is a piece of fluff that says all is right with the world because at least the klieg lights never set on the British Empire.

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FILM



Friends in Focus: Peter Branagh (standing), Emma Thompson and Stephen Fry