

BOOK REVIEW

Classical Myth in Four Films of Alfred Hitchcock. By MARK W. PADILLA. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. xvii + 295. Hardcover, \$100.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-2915-0.

Mark Padilla's study on the role of classical myth in the movies of Alfred Hitchcock is an intriguing piece of scholarly work. Strongly embedded within the ever-expanding scholarship on the reception of classical antiquity in cinema, his book sets out to explore how mythological stories, symbols, motifs and archetypal themes influenced narrative structures and character developments in Hitchcock's films over a time span of ca. 25 years (1928–1951). This is a novel and unexpected reading of the British director's work, insofar as none of his films is set in antiquity, nor do any retell classical stories or deliberately refer to them. However, as Padilla argues in his excellent introduction, Hitchcock's use of ancient material in many of his films is of a much more subtle nature, (un)consciously incorporating mythical elements as building blocks into his screenplays and scenes. According to Padilla, this 'hidden' presence of classical myth stems from Hitchcock's maturation in early twentieth-century London, where education and culture were deeply imbued with classicism and neoclassicism.

Padilla organizes his mythic reading around four key-films in the directors' career: *The Farmer's Wife* (1928), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *Rebecca* (1940), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Through a careful selection of texts, sculptures, paintings and archaeological objects, Padilla meticulously deconstructs each of these films, and analyses how classical sources repeatedly shaped story patterns and character actions. Padilla hereby never tries to fit his reasoning into one fundamental source myth, opting instead for a more complex—and therefore more rewarding—interpretation: the comic tale of a widowed farmer hopelessly in search of a new bride in *The Farmer's Wife* is shown to intertwine The Judgement of Paris tale with Hestian symbolism and Dionysian themes (Chapter 1); the thriller story centered around a kidnapped girl and her parents in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* strongly relies on the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*, but also seems to incorporate the mythical figures of the Minotaur, Herakles and Theseus (Chapter 2); the psychological struggle of a

young woman in her new role as the second wife of an aristocratic widower in *Rebecca* takes its principal leitmotif from the Roman myth of Cupid and Psyche, as written by Apuleius in the second century CE, but Homer's *Odyssey* is revealed as another source of inspiration (Chapter 3); finally, the story of two men who accidentally meet on a train and start plotting a murder-swap in *Strangers on a Train* is in many ways reminiscent of the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, but seems enriched with related centaur and satyr motifs (Chapter 4).

Padilla's approach ensures a fascinating and entertaining read – and his mastery of both the ancient texts and Hitchcock's films is impressive – but a book of this nature will always require a leap of faith from the reader. Sure, the resilience of childhood experiences in Hitchcock's later professional persona is a valid thesis, and Padilla's specific focus on Hitchcock's upbringing within a classics-embedded milieu certainly deepens our insight into the genesis of the director's filmography, but some of the proposed connections at times betray a too positivist attitude towards the argument. For example, the comparison between the young woman's trouble in getting acquainted with the rules and customs of her new home (interpreted as a 'labyrinth' by Padilla) in *Rebecca* and one of Psyche's labors involving her sorting out various plant seeds from a big pile (173-174), seemed too far-fetched to this reviewer. Elsewhere, the exposure of Hitchcock to the ancient source material remains unproven. This is the case for the apparent parallel between a scene from *The Farmer's Wife* and a supposed Hestian scene on the so-called 'Splanchnopt Painter' *pyxis*, drawn by Padilla on the basis of Hitchcock's possible visit to the British Museum (where the object was displayed at the time) during the film's production. Still, even if the evidential value of such claims can be questioned, Padilla fully demonstrates the usefulness of Greek and Roman mythology in making meaning from Hitchcock's films from the perspective of reception.

In the end, Padilla has produced an exceptionally learned and informative study. He ultimately succeeds in illuminating Hitchcock's eclectic and arbitrary use of classical myth in his filmmaking process, while at the same time revealing a much neglected yet crucial aspect of the director's multi-layered film language. In doing so, he makes a strong case for the universality of mythical stories, as well as their everlasting narrative power in popular culture.

Each chapter is provided with an elaborate notes section, while the book includes a full list of Hitchcock's feature films, many black and white illustrations, an index, a bibliography and a useful appendix with summaries of the films discussed.

DIMITRI VAN LIMBERGEN

Ghent University, Dimitri.VanLimbergen@ugent.be