

Classical Association of the Middle West and South

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Session 10, 12:15-2:15 CDT

Section C: Reception Studies 3

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“Themes of Aphrodite and the Dog Star Sirius in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*”

URL to abstract:

<https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2020/abstracts/2065RearWindow.pdf>

Talk Outline

1. Hitchcock’s 1950s period with Paramount Studio and three films with the actress Grace Kelly.
2. Co-star James Stewart and *Rear Window* plot.
3. As part of the speaker’s continuing work on “the neoclassical Hitchcock,” Aphrodite/Venus operates as a structuring icon in the film via her roles in the Pygmalion myth, *The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, and, more broadly, in mythic aspects of the Dog Star, Sirius.
4. In *RW* preproduction, Hitchcock approached the filming of Kelly as an Aphrodite persona. John Michael Hayes, his screenwriter, was encouraged to work with Kelly in a Pygmalion fashion. Aphrodite/Venus was a common icon in commercial and art films of the period.
5. Hitchcock’s friendship with Hugh Gray, a classics-background writer of sword-and-sandal films in the early 1950s.
6. *The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* as narrative model for the new figure of Lisa Fremont.
7. Structural parallels between *The Hymn* and *RW*: see also “Mapping” below.
8. Lisa’s sexual femininity as response to the 1953 Kinsey Report, published by the Institute for Sex Research of Indiana University (see Elise Lemire).
9. Aphrodite and Lisa Fremont as adhering to the *aristeia* pattern of the *Iliad* (Brillet-Dubois).
10. Jeff’s and Lisa’s physical consummation of their relationship as an example of “a *Casablanca moment*” (for the term, see R. Maltby).
11. Sirius the Dog Star and its cultural meanings in ancient Greece
12. Sirius’ respective impacts on men and women
13. Sirius symbolism in ancient literature
14. Examples of Sirius symbolism in *RW*
15. Conclusion: Aphrodite provides a legitimate model for the new role of Lisa Fremont, while her Homeric heroism inoculates her character from the degeneracy of Dog Star sexuality.

Mapping the narrative structure of Brillet-Dubois onto *Rear Window*:

In the *Iliad*, the warrior’s narrative progression begins when (1) he is inflamed with the desire to fight; (2) he next arms himself; (3) he moves toward the frontline; (4) he meets his opponent in battle; (5) he fights him; and (6) he reflects upon his victory. In the *Hymn*, Aphrodite (1) accepts Zeus’ injunction to have sex with a mortal; (2) she dresses to seduce Anchises; (3) the goddess travels in the aspect of a maiden, in order to (4) confront him in his mountain hut, whereupon (5) she seduces him. Finally, and (6), she dominates the last part of the poem with an extended review of Trojan myth that contextualizes her triumph. In *Rear Window*, *mutatis mutandis*, Lisa (1) is passionate about Jeff, and (2) dresses to incite his masculine ardor; (3) she visits him on four successive days; (4) she repeatedly confronts Jeff on the topic

of marriage; and (5) Jeff ultimately capitulates and abandons his reluctance. In the movie's final scene, Lisa (6) is seen reflecting as Jeff sleeps.

Rear Window was made and released in 1954; directed by **Alfred Hitchcock** and produced by Paramount Studios; adapts the short story, "It Had to Be Murder," by **Cornell Woolrich** (1942). Filmed on an enormous Paramount set using a special lighting system; costumes by **Edith Hall**. Complex layering of sound including songs and jazz pieces. Set in Greenwich Village, NYC.

Alfred Hitchcock (born 1899 in East London, died 1980 in Los Angeles), director of 53 feature films in GB and USA. Highlights: 8 silent films in the 1920s; the 1930s "thriller sextet" including *The 39 Steps*; two Gothic films in the 1940s (*Rebecca*, *Suspicion*); "glamour years" at Paramount Studios in the 1950s; early 1960s horror films (*Psycho*, *The Birds*); last directed film in 1975 (*Family Plot*). Producer of the television series *Hitchcock Presents/The Hitchcock Hour* (1955-1965).

Grace Kelly (1929-1982); married **Prince Rainer III** of Monaco (1956); three children with him. Appeared or starred in 11 movies from 1951-1956, including *High Noon* (1952) with **Gary Cooper**, *Mogambo* (1953) with **Clark Gable**, and *The Country Girl* with **Bing Crosby** (won Oscar for Best Actress). Films with **Hitchcock**: *Dial M for Murder* and *Rear Window* (1954), and *To Catch a Thief* with **Cary Grant** (1955).

James Stewart (1908-1997). Starred in four Hitchcock films, including three in the 1950s: *Rope*, *Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Vertigo*.

John Michael Hayes (1919-2008), American screenwriter. Worked with Hitchcock on four films in the 1950s: *Rear Window*, *To Catch a Thief*, *The Trouble with Harry*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*

The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, a poem ascribed to Homer but is traditional, written in the form of the cycle of 33 surviving *Homeric Hymns* celebrated individual deities probably for festival occasions; dated late 8th or 7th century BC. 293 lines written in dactylic hexameter.

Zeus commands Aphrodite (aka Venus in Roman myth) to have sexual intercourse with the mortal Trojan hero, Anchises, who is summering cattle on Mt. Ida. She presents herself as a maiden, but is adorned for seduction; Anchises first resists suspiciously, but succumbs; afterwards Aphrodite discusses three Trojan myths to provide context to her visit, and announces their son would be Aeneas, whom Anchises will raise after first tended to by the nymphs.

Sirius, the Dog Star (Σείριος), meaning "glowing" or "scorching". The brightest star in the night sky. Part of the Canis Major (Greater Dog) constellation. The Greek associated its appearance behind the sun at dawn as a sign of the hottest part of the summer season, an appearance that could also degrade human health by making men dry and unsexual and women moist and hypersexual. The Dog Days may refer to how dogs alone would lie outside in such heat. Men may also become rabid under its influence.

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Hesiod, *Works and Days* (vv. 586, 611)
Aristotle, *Problems* (4.25.879a26-25).

Alcaeus, fr. 347 Campbell
 Apollonius, *Argonautica* ("dog faced," 3.286-98)
Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, myth of Dawn and Tithonus (vv. 218-238)
 Euripides, *Heracles Mainomenos*
 Horace, references Canidia in 5th and 17th *Odes*; *Satire 1*.
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