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Literary Adaptation on Screen: The Hours

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Stephen Daldry's award-winning 2002 film version of *The Hours* makes use of a brilliant screenplay by David Hare to adapt Michael Cunningham's novel of the same name for a cinematic audience, thus proving the "permeability of the borders between high and popular culture" (Chatman 269). Both film and novel use Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway as the substratum for a multifaceted narrative and celluloid framing of 20 th -century malaise—from Woolf's own manic-depressive battle with headaches and haunting voices, through a housewife's suburban entrapment in postwar America at mid-century, to the millennial angst of a homosexual artist battling the ravages of AIDS. *The Hours* has many aspects of postmodernism considering its intertextuality and interpersonation of literary styles. However, the historical figure of Virginia Woolf as its primary character and the three part narrative being a narrative of Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway(1925) signals the text as a 'modernist continuum'(Martin Halliwell).

All the principal characters confront, in different ways, the vacuous hours that threaten to engulf their psyches and asphyxiate their spirits. They take refuge from perilous hours of anxiety or boredom in the exhilarating sensations provided by those heightened "moments of being" described by Woolf in "A Sketch of the Past." (Suzette Henk) Cunningham riffs not solely on a single sourcetext, although Mrs. Dallowayis clearly the crucial intertext for his novel, but creates a work that exists in symbiotic interplay with Woolf's fiction and non-fiction (letters, essays, diaries), and her personal biography. That symbiotic interplay occurs at the level of form as well as plot. The prose style of *The Hours*consciously imitates Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, echoing resonant words and phrases from Mrs. Dalloway. "The echoes are not restricted to Mrs. Dalloway, but extend to other works in Woolf's *oeuvre* as Cunningham lovingly pastiches her writing style and aesthetic."(Julian Sander)Indeed, '*The Hours*' was Woolf's working title for her effort to develop and extend her short story 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street' into novel-length form (her diary entry for 30 August 1923) is used as an epigraph to *The Hours*.

The Hours moves between three different stories, separated in space and time but interlinked through the subject matter of Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf's novel focuses on a day in the life of Mrs. Dalloway as she prepares for a party at the West End of London while she contemplates on the anxieties and he sacrifices she has felt compelled to make. Cunningham's rendering of the story is rather different as it is inflected through three alternating perspectives and three different worlds: first, Woolf's struggle to write Mrs. Dalloway in dreary 1920s Richmond; second, the reading of Mrs. Dalloway by depressed Los Angeles housewife Mrs. Brown in early 1950s and third the acting out of Mrs. Dalloway by late 1990s New York literary editor Clarissa Vaughan.

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Adapted by dramatist David Hare, the film retains Cunningham's alternating perspectives, using well known actresses – Nicole Kidman, Julian Moore and Meryl Streep – to play the three characters. Despite wearing a prosthetic nose to play Woolf which made her virtually unrecognizable, Kidman was the star of the film, primarily because the writer's story more than third of the narrative space in Cunningham's novel and gives birth to the other two stories.

As examples of the intertwining of space and time of modernity is one aspect of Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film explores the temporal threads that connects three different moments(1923, 1951 and 2001), then the texts are also interested in the spaces, rooms and corners in which the characters live. There are a number of motifs that recur in each of them separately: flowers, yellow roses in particular; eggs being cracked for cooking; food thrown away or disregarded; two women kissing each other with a child a witness in both the cases, parties. In addition, the characters in various instances repeat dialogue lines—For example, we find Virginia asking Leonard, 'What does it mean to regret, if you have no choice?' and the same question being repeated by Laura to Clarissa. Again Virginia in her last letter to Leonard says, 'I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been' and before committing suicide Richard too quotes the same for Clarissa. Again both Virginia and Richard, ill and depressed speak of 'The Hours'. The lines that are repeated always originate with the character Virginia, either in her writing or her dialogue. Thus, the literary author from whose life and literary production the three stories take their cue is staged as a narrative origin. Here, the authorial have been developed into a meta-commentary that explicitly refers to the figure of the author of the literary source text on the basis of different conceptualisations of authorship(Karen Diehl).

Certainly the three tales reflect and blur into each other at times, but they focus on three aspects of writing, dealing in turn with the author, reader and fictional restaging. The film improves on the transitions in the novel by cutting between them when a certain image (such as fresh flowers) or a particular sound reverberates into another character's lives. This technique lends the film more fluidity then Cunningham's novel, with fast cutting providing a wave like motion that is developed in the water imagery of the film.

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A screenshot from the movie *The Hours*: Laura Brown's imaginaryoceanic engulfment.

The central tension of *The Hours* is to have meaningful relationships while also securing material independence and a place in which one can create: the hallmark of Woolf's "room of one own. This central tension is creative but also potentially tragic. At various stages in Cunningham's narrative we witness Virginia Woolf thinking her experimental novel into being; we also see Laura Brown, escaping from the quotidian *ennui* of her life by reading the novel; and in the 1990s sections, the implicitconnection between Clarissa Vaughan and her novelistic counterpart is made explicit: Richardjokingly calls her 'Mrs. Dalloway', forcing Clarissa to reflect: 'There was the matter of herexisting first name, a sign too obvious to ignore …'In the film's story of Clarissa, Laura speaks of the autobiographical novel her son Richard wrote. In that book, she was made todie. Within the reality of the filmic narrative, it is this son Richard that dies. The story of Richard and Laura thus follows the progression of Virginia planning her novel. In the writing of Mrs. Dalloway, the working titles of which was *The Hours*, Woolf considered making Clarissa commit suicide. Explaining her thoughts to her niece, she says: 'I was going to kill my heroine, but I changed my mind. [...] I'm going to kill someone else instead'. "Septimus's hallucinations are re-enacted in Richard Brown's terminal illness: shellshock and the traumatic aftermath of the Great War are translated into the trauma of the AIDS epidemic and its effect on individuals. Woolfkills the shell shocked character Septimus Smith letting Clarissa stay alive.
According to Suzette Henk, Woolf's own struggle against suicidal depression colours the story of Laura. "Cunningham's Laura Brown goes to a hotel, where she considers ending her life. In the film version of *The Hours*, the visual impact of oceanic engulfment during Laura's afternoon hotel adventure beautifully and powerfully conveys the urgency of her suicidal impulses. But unlike Septimus Smith, Laura is inspired to "choose life" by an auspicious reading of Mrs. Dalloway, a novel that engenders the kind of redemptive egotism requisite for her escape from suburban claustrophobia. Laura realizes that, like Woolf's Clarissa, she "loves life, loves it hopelessly" and feels reassured, through her bibliophilic tryst with Mrs. Dalloway, that she can find "comfort in facing the full range of options; in considering all your choices, fearlessly and without guile" (152)." According to Martin Halliwell, Laura is herself a manifestation of Mrs. Brown from her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" which constituted, in part, a manifesto for a new approach to fiction and which differentiated her own writing from that of Arnold Bennett, H. G.Wells, and John Galsworthy among others (1988 [1923]). – a seemingly ordinary character that is often overlooked by writers because they cannot discern her inner rich world.
Linear sequence is deliberately denied in *The Hours*. We begin with Woolf's ending as it were, her river suicide, but then we revert to a time in her life before Mrs. Dallowayhas even been written. According to Halliwell, "*The Hours*suggests a series of temporal and spatial layers that do not add up to the final cut or a definitive re-writing of Woolf's novel. Instead resonances and connections are made."Just before Richard commits suicide, he tells Clarissa, "I still have to face *The Hours*…*The Hours* after the party and *The Hours*after that." We later learn that Richard is Mrs. Brown's son whom she abandoned along with his sister and her husband shortly after she attempted suicide; but although Laura escaped to a new life in Toronto, she has to face "*The Hours* after that" and the guilt of leaving her son. There is some relief from the weight of time

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though. As the end of the novel, Clarissa thinks to herself that the consolation of being "devoured by time itself" is "an hour here or there where our lives seem against all odds and expectations to burst open and give us everything we have ever imagined." Even though time will come to obliterate these moments, the possibility of future epiphanies signals the end of Cunningham's novel which fuses together two separate worlds: Clarissa welcomes into her apartment Mrs. Brown, a fugitivefrom the past and voices the Woolfian words: " Everything's ready'.(Halliwell)

A screenshot from the movie *The Hours*: Richard Brown before committing suicide.

In this respect Cunningham's reworking of the themes of *Mrs. Dalloway* in a modern context might be felt to be wholly tragic in tone. But there is also a liberatory treatment of gay rights and politics at the heart of this novel. *The Hours* projects the interior world into two different characters separated by time and space – what Peter Brooker calls the 're-functioning" of the modernist author and the source text. According to Julia Sanders, "Cunningham achieves for his characters a freedom of relationships beyond the heterosexually prescribed 'norm' which was well beyond the reach of Woolf's own circumscribed community for all Bloomsbury's sexual experimentation. In Cunningham's version, Clarissa does not marry Richard, who is openly gay, but is instead coupled in a rich and rewarding relationship with Sally Seton; this relationship was only hinted at on a subterranean level in Mrs. Dallowayalthough it, of course, in turn reworked the intimate friendship between Woolf and Vita Sackville-West."

"The triple timeline of Cunningham's novel helps the reader to register the seismic social shifts that have taken place since Woolf was writing: the tense and contained kitchen kiss between Laura Brown and her neighbour Kitty serves as an indication of the containment of female sexual and social possibility in 1949, but in the 1990s sections of the novel the full potential for diverse relationships and friendships is realized."However, Suzette Henknotes:

> "Both novel and film arbitrarily situate Virginia Woolf's bisexual impulses in the scenario of her sororal affection for the more flamboyant Stephen sibling, Vanessa Bell. From an affectionate kiss shared with her vivacious and voluptuous sister, Virginia feels

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> inspired to portray the incipient, somewhat muted lesbian relationship between Clarissa Parry and Sally Seton. In Mrs. Dalloway, their budding female friendship would be eclipsed by Clarissa's ostensibly "safe" marriage to Richard Dalloway, a conservative member of Parliament. In contrast, Cunningham's Clarissa defines her sexual identity principally through her "stable and affectionate [lesbian] marriage" (H 97) to a long-term partner named Sally Lester—a relationship romantically overshadowed by Clarissa's youthful moment of passionate affection for Richard Brown, a gay writer with omnivorous appetites and youthful bisexual inclinations. Their liaison transpired in the Cape Cod village of Wellfleet in 1965, when Clarissa Vaughn's bedtime reading conspicuously included Doris Lessing's feminist classic, The Golden Notebook. From this inspiring text, she apparently managed to wrench a late-century script for personal liberation and the free choice of (homo)sexual identity."

According to her, "Such literary intertextuality would seem slightly ironic, insofar as Lessing provides a penetrating critique of western society's limitations with respect to traditional marriage, conservative politics, and cultural conventions of every kind, but she exhibits a glaring blind spot in her representation of homosexuality as a deviant, clichéd, and emotionally suspect life-style."

A screenshot from the movie *The Hours*: A passionate kiss between Laura and Kitty

The ending of Daldry's film is very different from that of the book, which according to Halliwell, stresses on the permeance rather than the transitory nature of time. At the end we are taken back to the film's beginning with Woolf's desperate walk to the river. Whereas the opening shot cuts away from the figure before she drowns, at the end Woolf walks all the way up to the river, her head slowly disappearing before Kidman's voiceover stresses the weight of time : "always the years, always the love, always *The Hours*." According to Martin Halliwell what the alternative endings of *The Hours* shows us is that in its both literary and cinematic forms,

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imaginative modernist adaptations are still possible. He says, "As a late modernist adaptation, *The Hours* suggests that just as Woolf's death is replayed so, paradoxically, she and the spectre of modernity are brought back to life." However, Suzette Henk notes that Hermione Lee complains in Virginia Woolf's Nose that both novel and film encourage their audiences to interpret Woolf's life backwards from her suicide and perpetuate tragic, distorted, highly sentimental and melodramatic portraits of the artist as a middle-aged woman. The film suppresses Virginia's "gleeful comedy" and "evacuates her life of political intelligence or social acumen, returning her to the position of doomed, fey, mad victim" (Lee 54-55). To an uninformed reader or spectator, it would seem that Woolf was a neurotic, hysterical authoress who killed herself immediately after completing Mrs. Dalloway; whereas, in reality, she remained relatively stable until her final psychological crisis in 1941. Hermione Lee complains, Woolf's "death has been simplified, or Ophelia-ised, by the film of *The Hours*, as the romantic immersion of a young woman with a very long nose in beautiful still waters, with music playing" (121). We see Nicole Kidman "slowly entering … the green, sun-and-shadedappled waters of a gently flowing river, to the accompaniment of birds calling and a pulsating, emotional score by Philip Glass"

Suzette Henk says, "Cunningham's Hours suffers, uncannily, from the author's reluctance to embed the "beautiful caves" of his characters' biopics, revealed through memory and flashback, into the dense historical reality of America in the second half of the twentieth century."

While many critics might want to argue upon it, one cannot deny "*The Hours* as Cunningham's gracious tribute to Virginia Woolf as lyrical author, modernist prophet, and spiritual guru to men and women of the 20th century" (Suzette Henk). Cunningham in an interview says, "One feels gratified that Daldry's cinematic adaptation called attention to Woolf's 1920's masterpiece and made it a best-selling paperback in America in March 2003. Reluctantly, I confess a personal preference for certain aspects of Daldry's film adaptation over the fictional text on which it is based."

A screenshot from the movie *The Hours*: Clarissa Vaughan buying flowers.

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