

## *THE HOURS* : Film as a Pedagogical Tool

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Thanks to the technological revolution of the last decade, i. e. , the advent of the DVD, the number of films, previously available only on video cassette, has vastly increased, providing teachers with a valuable new tool for teaching language, literature and culture.

This paper will illustrate some of the principal pedagogical opportunities afforded by the film medium, taking as an example *The Hours* directed by Stephen Daldry, scripted by the renowned English playwright Sir David Hare, and based on the novel written by Michael Cunningham.

The emphasis will not be placed on the opportunities for language learning and teaching, but will be restricted to the pedagogical aspects of reading the visual text and screenplay, and how to open up filmic texts to expose their respective underlying meanings.

The visual aspect of the film will be given more attention because, unlike the script which uses the explicit medium of words to express the author's intentions to the reader, the film depending on images and sound as much as words requires more work from the viewer to make sense of the director's creation.

It is precisely the latter exercise which always proves more of a challenge to students since visual literacy has not yet found a secure place in the school curriculum.

Although we live in a society dominated by images propagated by the mass media, where commercial cinema epitomized by Hollywood films has made deep inroads into the consciousness of most people, it is by no means the case that the majority of consumers can be characterized as "visually literate".

It has therefore become an urgent task for those responsible for educating young adults to rise to the challenge of the new technologies and shoulder the responsibility of preparing their charges for their future role as citizens, literate in every sense, thus enabling them not only to fulfill their civic duties, but also to lead lives enriched by literacy and a well-developed capacity for critical thinking.

The apparent reluctance of young people to spend time reading serious books, whether non-fiction such as history, politics and philosophy, or literature such as novels, short stories, drama and poetry, has often been commented on. Ironically, this worrying state of affairs provides a perfect opportunity for teachers to ameliorate the situation by using DVD technology in order to lead students back to literature and to the pleasures of reading and thinking.

As the quintessential art form of the twentieth century, film itself has a strong claim to be taken seriously as a subject of academic study, not only because of its significant social impact,

but also on grounds of its aesthetic qualities and its power to arouse emotion and stimulate thought. Thus the film medium is ideally suited to both fostering emotional intelligence and providing a rich array of subjects for thoughtful contemplation.

*The Hours* encompasses the lives of three women living in the twentieth century. Its wide-ranging themes of death and the value of life, choice and the limits of free will, AIDS and ageing, love, happiness, ennui and depression, freedom and responsibility, marriage, sexuality and gender, parent and child relationships, child abandonment, reading, writing, and the human need for creative expression, fact and fiction, and the role of literature in society, all presented within the peculiar framework of three juxtaposed life stories, make the film an ideal subject for a close study in the English classroom. As well as providing an opportunity for using English to ask and answer questions and engage in discussion, analyzing a film is an enjoyable and stimulating way for students to further their cognitive, emotional and intellectual development.

From a pedagogical standpoint, an additional merit of studying the film is that it is a self-consciously literary treatment based on a novel inspired by Virginia Woolf's life and her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The film also makes references to the eponymous 1997 film starring Vanessa Redgrave who, incidentally, is mentioned in the book along with Meryl Streep, who will later play the character Clarissa aka "Mrs. Dalloway" in the film *The Hours*. Thus the concept of inter-textuality can also be comfortably introduced.

Such cross-references and inter-textual games are inherent in the construction of the novel which follows a single day in the lives of three women in different places and time periods. During this one day, each of them makes a decision that will affect the rest of their life.

The film takes cross-referencing and inter-textual allusion even further than the book, making full use of the film medium's ability to highlight the parallelism in the actions of the characters by means of editing techniques such as cutting to create connections between the characters, parallel or repetitive action, the use of music and sound effects to create aural symbolism as well as providing a unifying soundtrack that underlines the connections between the three women.

Most importantly, the director makes full use of every advantage the film medium has over the written word to maximize the visual and aural impact on the spectator. The carefully calibrated choreography of the images creates montages rich in symbolic energy. The camera zooming in or out accompanied by music ratchets up the intensity of the image or situation, and produces a commensurate heightened emotional response in the spectator. Close-up shots emphasize or editorialize major themes, and play with images to establish or bring to the attention of the observant spectator the major themes of the film and a host of supporting symbolic detail.

Of course, the film medium also employs words. Although this is the domain where the written word reigns supreme, it does not necessarily mean that a film script need lack artistic merit. *The Hours* does, in fact, use a superior script with felicitous phrasing and memorable lines that are not found in the book. This distinction contributes to the clarity of the protagonists' motivations and decisions that are less obvious in the book. Dialogue is also used

as an editing device, serving as a bridge between scenes to stress the strange connections between people's lives and the "eternal recurrence" of the human drama.

Following the construction of the novel which tells three juxtaposed stories and shows the entwined lives of the two fictional characters by devoting each chapter to a different protagonist, the film's editing power greatly intensifies the parallelisms of the three women's lives and creates unifying connections between them, while perhaps producing a greater distance between the spectator and the film characters.

The result resembles the Brechtian technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*, meaning that there is some distancing of emotional identification between the spectator and the characters created by the peculiar construction of the film which gives the spectator more time and space to contemplate the behavior of the actors, ponder the significance of the images and continually re-evaluate our thoughts concerning the direction of the story and the overall meaning of the director's project.

This challenge to the spectator's cognitive resources does not mean, however, that an emotional punch is lacking since the themes of death and sexuality, especially lesbianism, schizophrenia, depression, alienation, personal failure, two suicides and one attempted suicide, all played out intensely by four gifted actresses and one actor, ensure that the sensitive spectator keenly feels the emotional turmoil that seethes beneath the calm of the characters.

The emotional tension exuded by the three women is palpable, and the force of this emotion felt by the spectator leads to the inevitable question that the screenwriter Sir David Hare asked Michael Cunningham, the author of the book *The Hours*: "Who are these people and how did they get like this?" (Cunningham / Hare). Our overwhelming need to understand generates a multitude of questions as the central themes are played out or spelled out in the dialogue, which demand our full cognitive and emotional participation in working out a meaningful and satisfying interpretation.

Thus the starting point for considering the film as a pedagogical tool is provided by the raw emotional power of the film treatment which relentlessly places demands on both the emotional and intellectual resources of the spectator. Researchers in the field of emotions and human psychology have recognized the importance of emotion in pedagogy for its power to promote memory and facilitate learning (Ekman and Davidson, 127-30), as well as stimulate creative thinking (ibid., 42).

*The Hours* is considered to be an "art house movie", which in the eyes of many people is not an appellation of approval, suggesting an "over-intellectualized" treatment, an elite viewpoint, thus lacking human warmth and ultimately incomprehensible to the majority. Likewise the proposition that the affective power of film aesthetics fosters emotional maturity and stimulates learning has not yet won over the conservative majority of educators.

However, the claims of radical educator Camille Paglia who argues that "art films are a superb educational tool to introduce students to foreign languages", and that they "dramatize the fleeting ambiguities and hypnotic compulsions of sexuality", seem to be an uncanny characterization of *The Hours*, especially her conclusion that, "Cinema is far more accurate about sex than is feminist theory." (Paglia, xxii)

One additional recommendation of the art film as a pedagogical tool is that it confounds the

expectations of the relatively unsophisticated majority of young students who have only been exposed to the tame conventions of the Hollywood “formula films”.

*The Hours* with its unusual construction of juxtaposing stories, complex time jumps, *tour de force* montages and edits involving graphic and verbal matches, visual puns, and intricately interwoven parallelisms and contrasts all supported by a cornucopia of symbolic detail, will not yield up all its secrets in a single viewing. Learning follows as a natural consequence of the emotions generated by “surprise, “the unexpected”, “the unfamiliar”, “the shocking”, “the incomprehensible” etc., because they are always accompanied by cognitive activity ( Ekman and Davidson, 202 ).

Watching a film like *The Hours* requires both visual literacy to fully comprehend its artistry and the creative ideas of the director, and also verbal literacy to appreciate the literary qualities of such a linguistically dexterous and sophisticated screenplay.

Specific points to be elucidated concerning the elements of visual literacy, or the grammar and syntax of the film might begin with an exposition of the film’s unusual construction. As the film proceeds, comments on editing and montage would reveal the purpose of the director’s creative decisions. But before discussing these devices and the plot, themes and characterization, mention must be made of the surprisingly dominant presence of the music played by orchestra, piano and string quartet.

As the credits roll we are shown a montage of the three main female protagonists as their day begins: Clarissa aka “Mrs. Dalloway” in Manhattan, 2001, Laura Brown in L. A., 1951, and Virginia Woolf in Richmond, England, 1921. Immediately, the piano music of the minimalist composer Phillip Glass accompanying the montage makes its presence felt and this outstanding soundtrack continues to play a major role in establishing the rich emotional palette of the film as well as making an important contribution to the development of our musical appreciation.

The repetitive melodies and relentlessly surging rhythms, arpeggios and scales of layered violins and plaintive piano carry the plot forward on a river of sound, punctuated by contrasting tense moments of silence when the dialogue takes over and our attention is focused on the words, the body language and the acute tensions of non-verbal communication.

This is music that demands to be listened to. It is not background music, does not sentimentalize or tell us when and how to feel. The haunting sounds may mesmerize but do not tyrannize us with their obtrusiveness, and their poetic, elegiac tone elicits the same attention from us as the images since the music helps us to follow the links between disparate scenes and aids in identifying emotions. Serene moments of calm leading to introspection can turn to turbulent, unfulfilled longing as the sounds surge forward, redolent of *Schicksalsmusik*, pointing to the violence of an inexorable fate that awaits in the future, like the River Ouse that would swallow Virginia Woolf in her final act of self-sacrifice.

The emotionally charged music of *Morning Passages* reinforces the impact of the opening montage, echoing the tormented inner lives of the three women. The single notes of Michael Riesman’s piano accompany not only the images, but also our attempts to make sense of the montage, guiding us toward a realization that, despite the fact that these women live in different times and places, and would appear to have no connection to each other, somehow

there is common thread linking their destinies.

The prologue to the action showing the suicide of Virginia Woolf, followed by the montage and the musical accompaniment, identify the genre as serious drama, thus instructing us how we must read the film.

Reading a film means first understanding how a film is edited to produce meaning. The montage sequence shows the three women waking in different ways and thus establishes our first insight into their characters. Virginia lies awake but already deep in thought; she rises purposefully to ready herself for the day but her pauses before the mirror reveal the unfathomable depths of her psyche. Clarissa wakes up sluggishly to silence the alarm, an allusion to the life of a modern Manhattanite ruled by time, then hurriedly gets out of bed to begin her busy schedule. She too pauses before a mirror, but only in a perfunctory manner, carefully avoiding any self-scrutiny. Laura sleeps late, fitfully. Next she takes a book and sits up in bed immobilized by the thought of having to face her family and slowly musters up the courage to present herself to the world. A woman who is so paralyzingly self-conscious has no need of a mirror. The fine acting brings out the subtle nuances of character in all three women.

The three life stories will gradually be pulled tighter together by means of the overarching soundtrack and editing techniques that allow each scene to segue smoothly into the next. The brilliant graphic match of flowers in a vase unite three scenes, establishing the tri-partite structure of the film, while at the same time alluding to *Mrs. Dalloway* whose famous first line is: "MRS. DALLOWAY SAID she would buy the flowers herself."

As Virginia Woolf sitting in her armchair verbalizes the concept of her novel which, will attempt to describe "a woman's whole life in a single day", we are shown scenes from the lives of the two other women, thus identifying the concept of the film with that of the novel.

Sometimes a verbal match unites scenes, as when Virginia Woolf finds the opening line for her new novel, Laura reads the line and Clarissa stands with the list of guests for her party. Thus the relationship of the three women begins to take shape: Virginia Woolf is writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Laura is reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and Clarissa is living *Mrs. Dalloway*. Another example is furnished by the scene where Laura tells her six-year-old son Richie that she is not going to do anything without him is followed by a fifty year time jump to Clarissa on the phone telling the dying poet Richard that he must come to the party. We discover only at a later point that little Richie and Richard are, in fact, the same person, and only at the very end will the lives of Laura and Clarissa intersect, occasioned by the death of the man whose love they both uniquely shared.

The fractured narrative of a rather simple tale comes to a final resolution, but every visual detail has some symbolic value which contributes to the thick texture of the film: the flowing waters of the River Ouse in the opening scene may symbolize the river of life bearing us along to our destiny, where we need "fear no more the heat o' the sun nor the furious winter's rages", the lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* that, acting as a *memento mori*, remind Mrs. Dalloway of the short duration of life's cares and pleasures and introduce the theme of death and mortality.

The gold wedding ring on the dead finger of the drowned writer remind us that "no (wo) man is an island", that to live in the world is to be connected; as Clarissa says, "Well? That's

what we do. We stay alive for each other.” ( *The Hours* : screenplay, 100 ) The ring reminds us of the enormity and finality of the rupture of a married couple who once shared a love.

The *leitmotiv* of cracking eggs that recurs throughout the film, may be a visual pun on “breaking eggs to make an omelette”, but the close-up shots like this may emphasize one of the main themes that results from an accumulation of details and moments: our mortal happiness and life itself is made of such small events, moments, hours. As Mrs. Dalloway observed, it is strange how insignificant comments like “I prefer men to cauliflowers” remain in the memory “when millions of things had utterly vanished.”

The moment when Virginia Woolf’s hand clutching a pen thrusts the nib with a “masculine gesture” purposefully into the inkwell introduces the idea of the writer as creator and shows the act of creation. The dialogue, a crucial element in the production of meaning in *The Hours*, highlights the phenomenon of human creativity, the impossibility of perfection, and inevitable, ultimate disappointment and frustration. Laura’s cake is the symbol of this conceit but it is Richard who voices the artist’s dilemma:

I wanted to write about it all. Everything that’s happening  
in a moment. The way those flowers looked when you  
carried them in your arms – this towel, how it smells, how  
it feels – this thread – all our feelings, yours and mine. The  
history of who we once were, Everything that’s in the world.  
Everything mixed up. Like it’s all mixed up now. And I failed.  
Whatever you start with, it ends up so much less. Sheer  
fucking pride and stupidity.

( *The Hours* : screenplay, 94/6 )

Thus the writer’s lament, but the film makes clear that all three women are artists in their own way, and that frustration and a feeling of failure is the human lot.

However, the human condition is not hopeless. We are all linked in some way to our fellow humans and live for each other. Everything that we do or say can have a consequence for us and for others. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* has a profound effect on Laura, perhaps saving her life and then inspiring her to make the fatal decision to leave her family to obtain the freedom she needs in order to keep on living. The message is clear: the world needs writers because books matter. They change and even save lives.

Clarissa, the Manhattanite Mrs. Dalloway, a representative of the modern metropolitan “emancipated” woman, a bourgeois lesbian who lives for others, not for herself, in thrall to her past life and memories, is so overwhelmed by the whirl of daily routine and all the accompanying trivialities of the social round that she has no time for introspection. Lacking self-knowledge she is incapable of slowing down in order to appreciate the moments of the day that reveal the “itness” or quiddity of human existence. Richard taunts her for her superficiality, her assiduous avoidance of looking deeply into the things that matter: “Oh Mrs. Dalloway, always giving parties to cover the silence...” ( *The Hours* : screenplay, 92 ). Clarissa is visibly wounded by this cruel barb dipped in the venom of truth, and this may even

have been the cause of her later breakdown, a delayed reaction to the bitter truth of Richard's reproach.

However, like her namesake in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she is liberated by the death of another; in her case, by Richard who combines the roles of Peter Walsh, the man from Mrs. Dalloway's past whom she can never forget, and Septimus, whose death frees the latter from thoughts of self-destruction. Richard's suicide like Virginia's is depicted as an act of love, a noble self-sacrifice for the freedom and happiness of another.

The repetitive patterns of behavior that occurred in the respective life stories, the suicidal thoughts, the attempts to "save" the loved one, the envy of another's fate, the sense of inadequacy and personal failure, the suicide as noble gesture, and most memorably, the three full-mouth kisses between Laura and Kitty, Virginia and Vanessa, and Clarissa and Sally respectively, each with its own mysterious motivation, express perhaps both the limited stereotyped range of human behavior and the ineffable inscrutability of the human heart.

Only at the end of the film, after having followed the lives of Clarissa and Laura, do we, like Clarissa, come to understand the strange twists of fate that have brought them together. Laura, whose abandonment of her family constitutes a particularly egregious offense in our patriarchal society, is identified by Clarissa's teenage daughter, Julia, as "the monster", and yet it is this young girl who is the first to find forgiveness in her heart, and on behalf of us all, she embraces Laura in gesture of reconciliation and understanding. Laura's confession of few words is enough to disarm our hypocritical or self-righteous instinct to censure, and shame us into humility before her heart-rending hurt:

It would be wonderful to say you regretted it. It would be easy. But what does it mean? What does it mean to regret when you have no choice? It's what you can bear. There it is. No-one is going to forgive me... It was death. I chose life.

( *The Hours* : screenplay, 288 )

Laura's confession and "benediction" coming after Richard's sacrificial suicide make it possible for Clarissa to wake up to herself and the love she had withheld from Sally for so many years. The meaning of their life stories are now coming into focus at last. Clarissa can let the past be, move on with her life, live for herself, her lover Sally and her daughter Julia. Like Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa finally understands that life is beautiful when we live and love life, and appreciate the smallest things, the memories of the past, the immediacy of the present, the dreams of the future. To be alive and to love, glorying in our brief existence, despite the silence and the loneliness of the mortal soul, is our only salvation.

Virginia Woolf's fictional words of farewell sum up the meaning of it all:

Dear Leonard, to look life in the face, always to look life in the face, and to know what it is, to love it for what it is. At last to know it. To love it for what it is. And then to put it

away. Leonard, always the years between us, always the years, always the love. Always the hours.

( *The Hours* : screenplay, 292/4 )

The sheer power of this film's high level of artistry, the quality of the cinematography, script and soundtrack will leave an indelible impression on all but the most insensitive and dulled brains. Inter-textual references to the novel *The Hours*, comparing the original novel with the film treatment, what was omitted and added, the film *Mrs. Dalloway* and, of course, Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, which was the inspiration for everything, can be brought into the lesson.

Apart from the fact that, after studying the film, the students will have acquired valuable insights into the art of filmmaking, the power of music and great scriptwriting, the real payoff and most gratifying result will be when those students, be they ever so few, will turn to Woolf's writing and discover the pleasures of reading great literature. In this way film can prove itself worthy of a place in academia as an essential tool of pedagogy. As the film *The Hours* shows, books can change lives, but then so can films.

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