THE HOURS: THE (FE)MALE GAZE?

ISABEL LOUSADA
VANDA DE SOUSA

Introduction

Our aim is to show that the literary convention (*renowned midday topos*) is translatable to the text of a moving image using the grammatical code and sign constructs of film text (Wollen, 1984) present in Virginia Woolf's novel (*Mrs. Dalloway* – 1996[1]). There, the convention in question is used in its most classical sense, in writing, and in the literary use of space, light, colours and movement. Adapted from Virginia Woolf's novel, Michael Cunningham's text *The Hours* (1998) maintains the classicism of the convention. However, the film *The Hours* (2002) suggests the affirmation of this same classicism but reverses the terms: underlying danger is transformed into a possibility of salvation and auspicious events, of the preservation of the soul, even if through death. Similar to the two literary texts on which it is based, the film employs the same elements (space, light, colours, and movement) to which we might add the scenography design (framework by opposing interior/women and exterior/men), framing emphasizing the *field* and the *off-field*, the *mise-en-scène*, and the soundtrack.

[1] *Mrs Dalloway* had its first edition on May 14, 1925, edited by Hogarth Press (owned by Virginia and Leonard Woolf), with cover art by Vanessa Bell; the first edition in Portuguese came to print in 1982, translated by Ricardo Alberty, edited by Ulisseia, we have used the 1996 edition, ed. Penguin Books.

The Midday Topos or *Noonscape*

The midday topos or noonscape are conventions of classical literature, reborn with modernism, which relate to the solar effects of midday and noontide inducing an event. In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus's encounter with Proteu suggests a good omen (Hoff, 1999). In a more classical use, it indicates danger (Hoff, 1990), as used in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf's novel addresses the issue of the preservation of the soul, basing its dramatic structure on the hour indicated, throughout the text, by the beating of the various clocks of London, which are used to structure the novel itself, not in chapters, but by marking the hour.

While aware of the danger in *the heat of the sun* (oppressive heat and indolence), the convention suggests a *locus amnoenus*. In the Woolfian text, the character of Clarissa Dalloway's follows the doctor's advice: *"at midday they disrobe"* (Woolf, 1996, p.35). She enters the house but does not realise that by putting the yellow hat on the bed, she is not out of reach of the *hubris* of superstition.

The literary convention of the *midday topos* is expressed in color, time, seclusion, suspension of oneself as regards place and mode of preservation. At noon, the sun stops for an instant, suspending time: it is the moment of abnormality, carelessness, error, madness, perdition, and delirium. It's the time of death or salvation.

The Hours – the novel(s)

According to Virginia Woolf's diaristic work, the novel begins by being named *The Hours*[2] that Michael Cunningham retrieves for his text, paying homage to Woolfian canonical text, *Mrs Dalloway* an account of one day in London – June 23rd, 1923. Having been ill and confined to her attic room for a long period, Clarissa Dalloway leaves that morning – at 10 o'clock, to the sound of Big Ben – to buy the flowers she will wear at the party that same night, in order to

[2] "(…). Pensam com entusiasmo no meu próximo livro, a que eu penso chamar *As Horas*. (…)". [They think enthusiastically of my next novel which I think I'll call *the Hours*] (Woolf, 2018, p.233).

promote the political career of her husband, Richard Dalloway. The splendid morning evokes memories of summer, when, at the age of eighteen, she chose to marry Richard in preference to Peter Walsh, for whom she had strong feelings. That same day, Peter Walsh in London, having returned from India, looks for Clarissa, introducing the *midday topos*. From this meeting, close to the fatal hour, doubts about her choice, about love, aging, identity and about the (un) happiness resulting from choices made throughout her life are renewed. It will be at the end of the day, upon learning of the suicide of the poet crippled in the war and unknown to her, that Clarissa appeases her soul (Wright, 1944). As she goes up to her attic room, seeing the old neighbour next door also climbing the stairs, light in hand, Clarissa resigns herself to the inevitability of being alive, of making choices. Life must be lived (Thakur, 1965).

Cunningham's novel *The Hours* revisits the Woolfian universe, recounting one day, in the year 1923, in Richmond, beginning with the character Virginia writing the book *Mrs Dalloway*, then switching to Los Angeles, in 1951, with the character Laura Brown reading the same novel on the birthday of her husband Dan Brown. The timeframe shifts once again to New York in 2001, to the day of the party in which Clarissa Vaughan (nicknamed Clarissa Dalloway) organizes a party commemorating the lifetime achievement award of the writer Richard Brown.

Through three female characters, in different epochs, but united by the same text, *Mrs Dalloway*, the novel *The Hours*, encompasses three female universes containing the same existential questions as those present in the Woolfian character, leading to three encounters at the fateful hour and the making of three life decisions.

The Hours – the film

The film makes use of a prologue, one might say a false *flashback*, to the suicide of Virginia Woolf and the suicide letter she writes to Leonard Woolf. Immediately it reveals a solution to the existential question which has guided the writing from

its origin – *Mrs Dalloway*, to Michael Cunningham's text, culminating in the film. Contrary to the book adaptation in the form of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), the film interlocks timeframes as an exercise in postmodern writing (Lyotard, 2003) which interweaves distinct temporalities and distinct dramatic nuclei, as if they were not temporally and spatially distinct, and interweaves three different plots making use of the writing of the mother novel as a dramatic component of union and explanation. It is an exercise in post-modernism, in its revisitation of a canonical text, with a fragmentary structure that values both spatial and temporal discontinuity, celebrating the narration as a consequence of images, apparent themselves, but freeing space for interpretation (Deleuze, 2006, pp.43-44). Film however is not a universal and primitive language, nor itself an actual language, before movements and processes of thought (pre-linguistic images) and views on these movements and processes – pre-signifying signs (Deleuze, 2006, pp.334-335). In this sense, the film experience of *The Hours* is paradigmatic, when it suggests a rupture of meaning and meaning systems, arising from each of the female characters, affirmed in a classic curve in three acts: Virginia, non-conformist; Laura, emancipated; Clarissa Vaughan, liberated.

First Act – Dawn

The film opens with Virginia dressed in brown. A close-up prevents the light from entering the scene, deepening the brown and beige that characterizes her. Through a voiceover we hear Virginia's suicide letter, as she comes into view, with the focus on her hands. Only then is her identity revealed. The light is obscured by darkness – fear – and when she is visible, the brown she wears becomes almost ochre, fulfilling the screen. The character is inside, perpendicular to the dark frame of the doorway. Clearly, in the interior space, the feminine juxtaposes the external space framed by the door which, through glass, allows a glimmer of light to enter – but does not even fulfil the function of lighting: to lighten. When she turns towards the door, the brown of her dress is even more striking,

darkening the interior space.

Virginia heads to the door, but her position and movements indicate the pressure of an obsession, reflected in the way she walks. Symbolizing the bold transition from interior to exterior, the camera draws away from the character, establishing a distanced *mise-en-scène* (interpreted as non-agreement); the camera follows her from a distance. Her brown coated figure blends with the greens of the vegetation and lends itself to a scene mediated by the dramatic weight of the character's *performance*. The light that outside would be expected is lost in this sequence and is already absent when Virginia reaches the River Ouse. From here the waters that appear brownish in unison with the clothes are invaded by grey, as the character enters with the intent of being swallowed up by the river. Submerged, the browns of Virginia's clothes almost fade into the waters, the earth, and the branches that envelop her and drag her inert body down, invoking Ophelia[3]. The prologue ends. The day begins!

The three feminine characters are surrounded by white light, which touches each of them, adjusting to the colors and light that represent them.

The three are seen as faces on their pillow, invoking the Woolfian motif of the hours, but also defining them by solitude: all are married, all wake up alone. The shots of their faces resting on each pillow mark the transition between space and time: Virginia goes to the washbasin, and lowers her face, but it is the washed face of Clarissa Vaughan that rises again, in a profusion of white orchids detailing the *décor*. There immediately follows the face of Laura Brown, linked to the book Mrs Dalloway, immersed in a profusion of greenery and foliage, the colours of which become a dominant scenographic feature in the *poesis*.

The scene defines the colour for each: brown for Virginia, white for Clarissa and green for Laura Brown. Similarly, the first act defines the dramatic structure. The women belong to the domestic interior. Introspection is reserved for the

[3] We refer to the work of Sir John Everett Millais – *Ophelia*, 1852, which represents the character Ophelia of the Shakespearean text *Hamlet*.

bedroom (each faces resting on its pillow), while in domestic life they lose their sense of self, being bound to their domestic routine. Clarissa leaves the flat to buy flowers, but we only see her briefly in public: we see her enter the florist's; we see her enter Richard's building; we see her in the hospital. Her presence outside is fleeting.

We see Virginia going for a walk, with Leonard's permission, but without enjoyment: she is immersed in the novel she is about to write. The three female figures are portrayed in a context that distinguishes them from the male characters. The men (with the exception of Richard Brown, the poet) make their entrance through the front, from the left to the right-hand side. The lighting and the rapidity of their movements are a metaphor for their freedom. Together with the men, two secondary female figures are treated in the same way. Clarissa's companion Sally and her daughter, Julia, represent two different forms of emancipation: the former is an affirmation of her own will and is granted a certain masculinity even in the way she dresses; the latter displays the emancipation representative of her generation. Both are allowed a touch of red in the clothing they wear, perhaps concealing a bold, doomed figure.

Notably, the canonically feminine characters remain in the space of domesticity, although each responds differently: Virginia is terrified of the maids; Laura feels uncomfortable at home because she feels uncomfortable in her role as wife, mother and housewife; Clarissa embraces two houses: her own and Richard's. Such a reading is expressed in the setting in which we find each of them: mostly standing, rarely seated, but in any of the situations framed by doorways (either interior, or at the front door), or in a window bay. The female protagonists Daldry chose to frame. The male (or masculinized) characters he attributes with the movement of entering from the exterior to the interior, in tracking shots which emphasize this movement as a sign of transgression. This language excludes the character of Richard Brown, whom we witness mostly seated, an integral part of the house, the exterior of which is only revealed when, sitting on the window sill, he drops into the light, to his death.

Second act – Midday, the yellow hour – of the non-removal of the hubris

In a warmer light now, at noon, the three women are exposed to danger and obliged to reflect on their choices, their life, their quest for happiness. Virginia is visited by Nessa (her sister) and her nephews. We witness her reflection on death, when her niece finds a dead bird, whose grave will be adorned with the yellow roses Virginia was carrying. With her face to the ground, reclining by the bird, Virginia knows that it is necessary to cross the waters when one dies, in an evocation of the Hades River. This is repeated when Clarissa is interrupted by Louis Waters (waters), and also in the case of Laura in the dreamlike scene where she decides not to commit suicide, rising from the waters that have already submerged her. Yellow relates to Laura in the color of the roses that Dan offers her first thing in the morning and which she contemplates before deciding to leave the house and rent a room in a hotel (where she will live out the dilemma caused by her reading) and, in the kitchen, Clarissa has difficulty to separate the yellow egg yolks from the clear whites.

While making a birthday cake for Dan, Laura is interrupted by her neighbour Kitty. She becomes aware that as a married housewife, mother of Richard and pregnant for the second time, she does not have the life she wishes for – she did not make the right choices.

While preparing a meal for the party, Clarissa is interrupted by Louis Waters who questions her obsessive caring for Richard Brown. He confesses to feeling a sense of freedom since separating from Richard[4].

Marked by the presence of yellow in each scene, the three characters are exposed to danger: they reflect on their choices, they reflect on their identity; they reflect on what happiness means to them. The three are aware of being alive.

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[4] "CLARISSA – anyway, it doesn't matter. It was you he stayed with. It was you he lived with. You'll see when he comes. He's still Richard. His mind wanders and he's in a lot of pain. But there's some constant quality. There's his Richard-ness.
LOUIS moves towards her, careful about what he wants to spell out.
LOUIS – The day I left him I got on a train and made my way across Europe. I felt free for the first time in years" (Hare, 2002, p.70).

All three are conscious of their unhappiness. They know that to be alive is to make choices.

Third act – Late afternoon

Virginia takes the risk of leaving her home. We encounter her on the platform at Richmond station. She wants to go back to London, but Leonard arrives and confronts her. In the heat of their argument the lighting is such that it accentuates the dominant browns; even Leonard seems impregnated by this colour.

In extremis, Laura postpones her decision to commit suicide. We see her at home with her son at her husband Dan's birthday dinner. Again, the lighting is sombre. After the semi-darkness of dinner, in conversation with Dan, the scene is again framed by doorways – Laura inside the bathroom, Dan outside. She is in shadow, while he is illuminated by the artificial light of the bedroom, the doorway between them. He asks her if she is coming to bed – she lies that she's just finishing brushing her teeth. What will her choice be – to resign herself or continue in her search for happiness?

The framing of female figures in doorways, in confined spaces, is most noticeable in Clarissa's scenes, most markedly in the shots of the deep elevator shaft in Richard Brown's building. Clarissa helps Richard prepare for the party. The narrative here relies on the intensity of the shots, in the absolute black of the elevator, at the entrance to Richard's chaotic house. The white for Clarissa's character appears as a huge plastic bag that she uses to collect the garbage scattered around the house, in sharp contrast to the darkness caused by the pieces of cloth that cover the windows. By trying to clear the windows, so that light can enter, Clarissa reverses the structure of the windows as feminine language. Sitting on the window sill, Richard states that keeping him alive is the only *raison d'être* she has in her life, and asks her to repeat how she went to buy flowers in the morning (an allusion to the Woolfian text – "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself"), recalling that they were in love at the age of

eighteen. Separated now, just friends, that's what life is all about. We stay alive because of others; we make choices. That's being alive. But is it what it means to be happy?

Climax followed by resolution – Night followed by dawn

Returning to the interior, to semi-darkness, to brown tones, Virginia informs Leonard that she has made a decision: the character of her new novel, the poet, must die so that others can live.

On the window still, Richard informs Clarissa that she will have to find a reason to live beyond keeping him alive. He lets himself fall from the window into the precipice as a silent scream that releases (her?) him through suicide.

Emphasizing the night and the interior décor, and reiterating the framework of the doorways, we learn that Laura is Richard Brown's mother, and that she decided to wait for her daughter to be born before leaving her family and getting a job as a librarian in Canada. As for Virginia, we know at the outset, from the prologue, that she committed suicide in the dark waters of the River Ouse.

Conclusion: *The Hours – the fe(male) gaze*?

The women portrayed here are confined to the domestic sphere. Whether it be 1923, 1951 or 2001, they remain walled in the interior space and almost identified with the door frames that support joists, mortar and stucco. The doors define a borderline within which the women are confined to a non-place they yearn to escape from and are prevented from having a life of their own (Porto, 1947).

Although linked to writing, they have no voice of their own and depend on male or masculinized figures such as Sally, Clarissa's companion. At a time of winning the suffragette vote, at a time of the post-war boom and at a time which survived the millennial bug of 2000, all of these women, the protagonists, are slaves to the social roles from which they cannot free themselves.

Virginia crosses the private space twice: chronologically, to seek inspiration by

going for a walk, but not without Leonard's permission; on the second occasion she leaves of her own will, to commit suicide, a step that she dares to take in a single moment of freedom, which also coincides with the annulment of his voice in the exercise of writing.

Laura crosses the private space once: to decide on her life. Pregnant, she remains a woman, wife and mother, in accordance with her social status. Only after the birth of her daughter she allowed herself to find a profession and gain her independence. But, as a librarian, she becomes guardian to the writing of others and mother of a renowned poet – Richard Brown.

Clarissa Vaughan has financial and professional autonomy, but she is the editor of someone else's writing. Her choice in life is to be the perfect hostess (Thakur, 1965). Apparently free to decide to abandon a heterosexual relationship, Clarissa finally meets Sally, a deeply masculinized female figure and within the canon of socially accepted behavior for men (she arrives alone at dawn, Clarissa being careful to have left a light on).

To whom then is granted the female gaze? Julia! Clarissa's daughter moves in the private and public sphere in an assertive way typical of those who know how to assume their choices and make themselves a promise of the future for women today. In Julia lies the threshold of hope for professional fulfilment, ensuring subsistence and freedom!

Three women protagonists, the architecture of three men: Daldry, Hare, Glass. And yet, the three women do not come to light through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). In short, six points of view capable of androgyny of mind and word: of life?

The Hours is the inexorable passage of time, which can be translated as the exhaustion of life itself, materialized by London clocks, reducing life to an equation in both writing and film, and translating life (also into a metaphor) by those hours, so discreet that only the last moment is perceived. Life's options are chosen, marked by blocks that are rites of passage, socially determined and sublimally accepted, without perceiving the real importance of the moment –

the tiniest fragment of time that decision requires, which defines the decision to rescue one's own life. Just as happiness does not begin – it is the happiness of each instant; life does not begin – it is the happiness of each instant derived from a fabric of choices. The instant is the breath of life which assumes the *midday topos* as light or darkness, perdition or salvation. The answer to the final question is left to the reader. *The Hours* – Can it be *the fe(male) gaze*?

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