

Unni Langås

Terrorizing Images and Traumatic Anticipation in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

1 Introduction

The cultural politics of AIDS have been like those of no other disease, Marita Sturken writes in her book *Tangled Memories*. It spawned an “epidemic of signification,” a proliferation of cultural meanings that parallels the medical epidemic, and it emerged at a moment in history when social groups were claiming political identities derived from specific shared characteristics – gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity. From the beginning, AIDS was associated with practices regarded as deviant, such as homosexuality, drug abuse, and sexual promiscuity, but since it also affected communities comprising middle-class professionals with access to a diversity of public arenas, discourses that were perceived as stigmatizing were intensely contested. In this “battle of representation,” media imagery played a crucial role by giving the deadly disease a face and a body. While, on the one hand, these images were meant to serve “well-intended” medical and societal information purposes, on the other, they portrayed people as vessels of disease and tended to dehumanize the patient. Photographs of a person with AIDS most often enhanced notions of the disease as a source of contamination and sexual deviancy, Sturken maintains, accentuating that starkly lit photographs underscored the symptoms of illness as being lesions, wasting limbs, and loss of hair (Sturken 1997: 145–152).

A similar critique of documentary photographs was put forward by Douglas Crimp, who, like Michael Cunningham, took part in the ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) movement and edited a special issue of the journal *October* (vol. 43, Winter 1987) on the AIDS crisis. In an article on portraits of people with AIDS, he critically assesses media photographs, and he characterizes the depicted bodies and their intended meaning in a way that discloses the complex cultural frame that conditions representations of AIDS:

[T]here is a deeper explanation for portrayals of PWAs [People with AIDS], and especially of gay male PWAs, as desperately ill, as either grotesquely disfigured or as having wasted to fleshless, ethereal bodies. These are not images that are intended to overcome our fear of disease and death, as is sometimes claimed. Nor are they meant only to reinforce the status of the PWA as victim or pariah, as we often charge. Rather, they are, precisely, *pho-*

bic images, images of the terror at imagining the person with AIDS as still sexual. (Crimp 1992: 130)

Crimp suggests not only that photographs of persons with AIDS are terrorizing but also that their “phobic” quality has to do with the connotative relationship between sexuality and an expected death. He assumes that the beholder will see a “grotesquely disfigured” body and associate its appearance with imminent death and sexual activity. Paradoxically, since he wants to object to this kind of representation, he nevertheless confirms the relevance of the chosen rhetoric, which doubtlessly tunes in with scare-enforcing and de-humanizing patterns of representation. Without going further into this problematic, which indeed is a recurrent issue in debates on the spectatorship of suffering,¹ I take Crimp’s ekphrasis as a useful guide into the complex dynamics between AIDS and its representations as well as the productive rivalry (*paragone*) between words and images in the U.S. context of responding to AIDS.

Most importantly, however, Crimp’s ekphrasis diagnoses an underlying terror that haunts experiences, representations, and interpretations of the epidemic threat. As such, it performs a powerful notion of being haunted; similar, I will argue, to the one that Michael Cunningham explores in his novel *The Hours* (1998). This was one of the most successful fictions of the 1990s that tried to come to terms with the AIDS epidemic. Both Crimp and Cunningham respond to the crisis by addressing cultural undercurrents imbued with phobic images of death and sexuality, but where Crimp’s activist rhetoric speculates around intentions, Cunningham’s intertextual composition instead explores historical resemblances and hints at consequences. *New York Times* critic Michael Wood, in his review of the novel, calls this interconnectedness “beyond allusion” and identifies correctly, I think, its theme as “the haunting of present lives by memories and books, by distant pasts and missed futures, by novels and poems to be read and written” (Wood 1998).

In the following, I will examine figures of haunting – texts and images – that saturate *The Hours* and show how it hovers between terrorizing images of the past and traumatic anticipations of the future. My point of departure will be a discussion of the “phantom” and the “specter” as two forms of ghostliness theorized in psychoanalytic and deconstructive scholarship on trauma in the years encircling Cunningham’s novel.

¹ Cf. Sontag 2003, Chouliaraki 2006, Butler 2009.

2 Figures of haunting

The term “hauntology,” coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Specters of Marx*, has proven to be a fertile rehabilitation of ghosts. Prior to his contribution, though, psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok published a re-working of Freud's Wolfman case study and suggested a new view of the phantom (*le fantôme*).² They were interested in transgenerational relationships and how the undisclosed traumas of previous generations might disturb the lives of their descendants even if they knew nothing about their distant causes. A phantom, in this conception, is the presence in the living ego of a dead ancestor who refuses to let the secrets of the past come to light. This phantom is a “metapsychological fact,” Abraham explains, but it does not seem to have any substance because “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham 1987: 287). Furthermore, he sees this mental gap as closely tied to Freud's concept of the death drive:

A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud's description of the death instinct. First of all, it has no energy of its own; it cannot be “abreacted,” merely designated. Second, it pursues in silence its work of disarray. Let us add that the phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization. (Abraham 1987: 291)

Be it a dead person, a mental gap, or a death drive, the phantom in this psychoanalytic framework haunts the living in its capacity of being a reminder or a return of past secrets. Derrida, on his side, inspired by Marx (“Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa – das Gespenst des Kommunismus”), also uses the word *specter* (*le spectre*) to designate the apparition of something that returns, but emphasizes, instead, the “waiting for this apparition” (Derrida 1993: 4). He writes, “The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming. The *revenant* is going to come” (Derrida 1993: 4). Hence, Derrida's specter is oriented toward what lies ahead, something that will happen but has yet to occur and thus, in its ability to haunt the present, gestures toward a nebulous future.

These two branches of the hauntological trend operate, in other words, with two related but different concepts of the ghost that are “to some extent incompatible,” as Colin Davis suggests (Davis 2005: 373). On the one hand, Derrida's

2 Cf. Abraham and Torok 2005.

specter is a deconstructive figure “hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate” (Davis 2005: 379). This approach does not see the secret of the ghost as a puzzle to be solved, but as an attentiveness to its voices from the past and the possibilities of the future. On the other hand, Abraham and Torok’s phantom is understood as a mental knot in need of treatment. It harbors a secret, but a secret unimaginable to reveal, although – or rather because – it is a source of disgrace and prohibition. “It is not at all that they [phantoms] cannot be spoken,” Davis writes, “on the contrary, they can and should be put into words so that the phantom and its noxious effects on the living can be exorcized” (Davis 2005: 378). In his view, Derrida’s specter and Abraham and Torok’s phantom have little in common, primarily due to – as I read him – the different use of their psychic insights within hermeneutic practices.

Without neglecting these epistemological differences, but recognizing literature as a discourse of its own, I will suggest reading *The Hours* as a third voice in the setting of this problematic. In its effort to stage the terrorizing climate from which it originates, and to address a situation of fear and cultural crisis, the novel unveils several strategies of verbalizing the experience of being haunted. One of them regards its temporal order, which is characterized by a narrative composition that is seemingly straightforward but still quite messy. The novel’s three storylines are certainly temporally fixed – in 1923, 1941, 1949, and sometime in the 1990s – but they nevertheless challenge the reader’s sense of chronology. The echoes forward and backward make events and narrated minds collapse into an indistinguishable no-time, and the personal ties between some of the characters resemble the kind of generational trauma that Abraham and Torok describe in their conception of the phantom.

A second strategy regards its intertextuality, which underpins a rhetorical composition – words and images – with a thematic relation to the experience of terror and trauma. In playing with the motifs, citations, and repetitive structures from Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and in referencing sources about her life, *The Hours* presents itself as a dialogue with the preceding text.³ There is also an intertextual link between Cunningham’s novel, Woolf’s novel, and Sigmund Freud’s essay *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) from 1920. Here, the idea of a human death drive, originally proposed by Sabina Spielrein (1994 [1912]), is suggested by Freud as a supplement to the

³ Integrated in the text are quotations from *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1920–1924* (1978), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume VI: 1936–1941* (1980). (Cunningham 1998, colophon page) In his “Note on sources,” Cunningham also refers to biographies, autobiographies, and letters as well as introductions to Woolf’s novels.

pleasure principle. Although Virginia Woolf did not read Freud until 1939, his work was well known among the Bloomsbury artists and intellectuals, and psychoanalysis became a main topic of discussion in the early 1920s (Lee 1996: 68, 383, 472). Woolf's depiction of a traumatized war veteran in *Mrs. Dalloway* is clearly inspired by debates on shell shock and war neurosis (Fassin and Reichtman 2009: 40–76), whereas in *The Hours*, Cunningham seems to have strengthened the allusions to Freud and his death drive concept in the suicide theme of both novels.

A third strategy regards the novel's flashforward techniques. Its contemporary scene, 1998, is interpreted with reference to history, but this implies not only a projection of current knowledge to past events but also an incorporation of the past as an anticipation of the future. There are scenes and situations in the text that can be identified as "traumatic moments," potent with a deep concern for the future. They foreshadow coming events through parallels, echoes and poetic images, and these figures of future apparitions resemble, I will suggest, Derrida's notion of a specter predicted as a coming return. In the following, I will analyze the novel's figures of haunting from three angles: temporalities, intertextualities, and anticipations.

3 Temporalities

The opening pages describe Virginia Woolf's suicide in 1941, as she walks into the river with her pockets full of stones. Like the bombers in the sky, her headache and the voices have "appeared again" (Cunningham 1998: 4) and she thinks that she has failed as an author. While perceiving the details in the landscape around her and encountering thoughts of her family, she rejects the option of staying alive and lets herself be taken by the strong currents in the water. The scene is not described as a tragic event, but rather as an understandable one from the point of view of a person who regrets the situation but does the right thing. It is followed by the real letter from Virginia to Leonard Woolf, in which she explains her act and tells him she loves him. The letter is remarkably characterized by repetition, especially by sentences starting with an "I": "I feel" – "I feel" – "I shan't" – "I begin," etc., and since she comments on her inability to write: "You see I can't even write this properly" (Cunningham 1998: 6), the letter's helpless, yet strong, rhetoric ties her act and state of mind to repetition. It is a regretful testimony of felt failures in the past and the present, but it also reveals a profound concern for the future of her husband. "I can't go on spoiling your life any longer" (Cunningham 1998: 6–7).

This prologue on Woolf's suicide mixes facts and fiction and makes the scene echo through other depictions of people in the novel on the verge of self-destruction. Without diagnosing Woolf as a traumatized person, the narrator contextualizes the event in a way that underscores its traumatic resonance for the surrounding world. The narrator follows her dead body, which is "borne quickly along the current" and "comes to rest against one of the pilings of the bridge at Southease" (Cunningham 1998: 7). A mother and a three-year-old boy are walking on the bridge; cars and trucks are driving over it; the clouds in the sky reflect on the water. The scene ends with an expressive emphasis on how the body interacts with its surroundings: "Her face, pressed sideways to the piling, absorbs it all: the truck and the soldiers, the mother and the child" (Cunningham 1998: 8).

One of the three storylines in the novel is about another mother and her child. Laura Brown is a housewife in Los Angeles, married to a WWII veteran, pregnant, and mother of the three-year-old Richie. The novel depicts one day of her life in June 1949, starting with her reading the first pages of *Mrs. Dalloway* in bed. It is her husband Dan's birthday and she decides to make a cake for him together with Richie. She knows already that this day will be difficult – she is pressed by a "nowhere feeling" and has "trouble believing in herself" (Cunningham 1998: 38). The beauty of the novel strikes her, but she is also confused by the thought of the brilliant Mrs. Woolf's suicide. While Laura struggles with her daily duties as a mother and housewife, and finds her birthday cake a failure, she is occasionally reminded of the author's suicide: "Virginia Woolf put a stone into the pocket of her coat, walked into a river, and drowned" (Cunningham 1998: 141). This image functions increasingly as a strong temptation against which she must fight.

Laura Brown permits herself a time-out from the house and the child for a few hours, and, having left Richie with Mrs. Latch down the street, she drives along the Pasadena Freeway, initially without any planned destination. In her perception, everything around her is permeated by pain, "the way etherized butterflies are pinned to a board."⁴ This escape from daily life is described in Freudian terms as a re-enactment of a dream, "as if she's remembering this drive from a dream long ago."⁵ She seems to be haunted by and forced to submit to

4 An allusion to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "Like a patient etherised upon a table."

5 In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes: "The study of dreams may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (Freud 1999 [1920]: 13).

a death drive. By driving away from home to an unknown destination, she repeats her own dream while using Woolf's self-inflicted death as her model.

In this chapter, the title of the novel – *The Hours* – points at a break from life, a few hours during which the person we read about desires a liberation that is simultaneously shadowed by death.⁶ The reader is left in suspense regarding the outcome of Laura's journey when she installs herself with her book in a hotel. Is she going to repeat Woolf's suicide, or will she return to her family? Her acts are controlled, calm, competent, but her reasons are obscure. She has left home and finds it necessary to lie to the receptionist about a husband on his way with their luggage. Laura acts as if she is not herself, as if her life is performed by another, an invisible sister, and her thoughts are drawn to possible other guests who may have committed suicide in the very same hotel room. As a dissociative maneuver, she creates her double in an invisible sister, and the image of other hypothetical suicides also heightens the atmosphere of trauma in the scene.

However, Laura survives, largely thanks to thoughts of the baby she is carrying. In fact, she survives all the members of her family, including the unborn little girl, who later in life dies in a car accident. Her husband Dan dies of cancer, and Richie, who eventually appears to be the poet Richard, takes his life by jumping from a window. Ironically, Laura, who is haunted by her own obscure drives towards escape and self-destruction, turns out to become the haunting ghost in Richard's life. At least that is how his friend Clarissa Vaughan sees her when she, on the last pages of the novel, receives Mrs. Brown in her New York home and learns that Laura left her family many years ago to start a new life as a librarian in Toronto. From Clarissa's point of view, Laura is a woman "in love with death," a woman "of dazzling charm," but also a "victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work," a "beloved" and a "traitor" (Cunningham 1998: 226).

The second storyline follows Clarissa Vaughan one day in June in New York at the end of the twentieth century. Her character and her behavior are conceptualized as a repetition of Clarissa Dalloway's one-day business in Woolf's novel. Clarissa Vaughan's earlier lover – the bisexual author Richard Brown, who calls her "Mrs. Dalloway" – has won a prestigious prize and she is preparing a party

⁶ "The Hours" was Virginia Woolf's original title for *Mrs. Dalloway*. In his second epigraph, Michael Cunningham (1998) quotes Woolf from her diary, 30 August 1923: "I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about *The Hours*, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment."

for him. Richard, who suffers from AIDS, is a parallel to Septimus Warren Smith, a traumatized WWI veteran who commits suicide by throwing himself out of a window in Woolf's novel.

Septimus and his Italian wife Rezia mirror the couple Richard and Clarissa in how the two worried women care for their husband and friend, while the men are unable to really respond to the women's compassion and love. Like Richard, Septimus has homosexual inclinations, suggested by his lack of desire for his wife as well as the close relationship with his friend Evans, who was killed in the war. Septimus's trauma is, to a large extent, explained as a preoccupation with the death of his friend, a death that he initially meets with a surprising lack of emotion. He is clearly numbed by the shocking experience and is unable to absorb it adequately. After his return home, he is haunted by intrusive images and voices in his head. He also shows typical symptoms of a traumatizing experience of time as the terrorizing events of the past turn up and violate his present, making him confused about where he is, and at what time. When watching a man wearing a grey suit in the park, Septimus mixes this perception with that of his dead friend covered by clay. He repeatedly says that he will kill himself, as if he wants to join his friend in death, and he finally carries out his intention.

Like Septimus in Woolf's novel, Richard in Cunningham's is in a state of trauma, but his background is different. He has not been to war or experienced the brutal death of a lover, but his childhood was dominated by an absentminded mother, Mrs. Brown, who left him for a few hours when he was three, an episode that we now must read as a prefiguration of her later departure for good. His condition is obviously very serious, and a telling symptom is his confused experience of temporality. "I seem to have fallen out of time" (Cunningham 1998: 62), he says, mixing up imagination and reality. The party is in the future, Clarissa tells him, when he thinks that he has already been there.

Another similarity between the two men is that Richard is also tortured by voices in his head. He associates the language of the voices with Greek, and thus echoes Woolf's novel where Greek is the language used by a sparrow that chirps "Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over" (Woolf 1981 [1925]: 24) while Septimus is sitting on a bench in the park. Joined by another sparrow, "they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words" (Woolf 1981 [1925]: 24), making Septimus think it is a message from the dead. Voices in the head are also symptoms of Virginia's headache as she is portrayed by Cunningham in *The Hours*. They seem sometimes to be "reciting text" (Cunningham 1998: 71), he writes, whereby he recites Woolf's novel: "A flock of sparrows outside her window once sang, unmistakably, in Greek" (Cunningham 1998: 71).

In the very tense situation that occurs when Clarissa enters Richard's apartment and finds him sitting on the sill of the open window, even she hears voices

in her head. Like a kind of *déjà vu*, the scene appears as if she is “witnessing something that’s already happened” (Cunningham 1998: 197). And of course, it *has* already happened, in Woolf’s novel, where Septimus throws himself violently out of the window, as if in protest against his doctor, Holmes, whom he despises for his ignorance of the severity of his situation. Richard, on the other hand, does not want to provoke, but lets his body fall down in front of Clarissa after having uttered the very same sentence with which Virginia Woolf ends her suicide letter to Leonard: “I don’t think two people could have been happier than we’ve been” (Cunningham 1998: 200).

The third storyline follows Virginia Woolf one day in a suburb of London in 1923. As I mentioned, it starts with her suicide in 1941, which Cunningham uses to prepare for the portrayal of a person with strong inclinations towards death. The plot of this part of the novel is centered in a short expedition that Virginia carries out after having first sent her housekeeper Nelly to London by train on a silly errand. Her pointless command is explained to be a result of Virginia’s incompetent way of dealing with servants, but it also functions as a prefiguration of her own intentional trip and desire to go back to London. Virginia’s plan from the outset is to let Clarissa kill herself, and, as a suicidal character, Mrs. Dalloway is designed by Cunningham as a projection of Virginia’s own desire: “Mrs. Dalloway, she thinks, is a house on a hill where a party is about to begin; death is the city below, which Mrs. Dalloway loves and fears and which she wants, in some way, to walk into so deeply she will never find her way back again” (Cunningham 1998: 172).

Another telling hint of Virginia’s obscure intentions behind the planned trip to London is the dying bird that her sister Vanessa’s children find in the garden. They bury the bird in a ceremonial act, and Cunningham uses this scene to project Virginia’s death drive onto the bird’s grave: “She would like to lie down in its place” (Cunningham 1998: 121). It seems as if this bird funeral instigates her escape, because she starts walking shortly after her sister and her children have left. She passes the grave and gets a “cemetery feeling,” which is not unpleasant, but “real,” and she feels the nearness of the “old devil” (Cunningham 1998: 165), which is the headache with its multiple faces and voices. She has meant to disappear for a few hours, and has bought a ticket, but in the end, she turns home again since the train does not immediately take her away.

Cunningham inscribes Clarissa Dalloway as an alter ego of Virginia Woolf. In his story, Virginia thinks of Clarissa as a suicidal character, a woman inclined to desire other women, but sensible enough to marry a man. However, Clarissa is also her opposite, her projection, a woman whose destiny she can outline. Conceptualized as a woman heading towards death by her own hand, she instead ends up as “exultant, ordinary Clarissa” who will “go on, loving London” (Cun-

ningham 1998: 211). In her place, someone else will die, “a deranged poet, a visionary” (Cunningham 1998: 211) – in short, Richard Brown. Thus, the fate of Clarissa Dalloway is like that of Laura Brown, who survives the death drive, thereby earning Clarissa Vaughan’s disrespect. And while Virginia Woolf, the author, dies in suicide, her invented heroine Clarissa Dalloway survives.

Like the metaphor of the city as a producer of hidden desires beneath the conscious surface, *The Hours* intertextually includes Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* as well as Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as productive intertexts that not only inform the novel’s plot but also strengthen its construction of trauma as return. Through his three female characters and their stories, Cunningham echoes Freud’s insight into the power of involuntary repetitive action, as well as his more daring idea of an unconscious death drive in human beings. In both Laura’s and Virginia’s cases, this death drive is inscribed in the fiction as impulsive journeys with an obscure intention, while in Clarissa Vaughan’s case she is the shocked witness to her friend Richard’s self-imposed death, which parallels the similar fate of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia Woolf’s suicide is prominently placed in the prologue as an unambiguous anticipation and therefore reverberates in the novel’s subtext, as if it were the unconscious drive of the novel itself.

4 Intertextualities

As a novel of returning images in a traumatic memory plot, *The Hours* plays with a variety of image descriptions and allusions. In his portrayals, Cunningham makes use of allusions to visual objects but invokes the ekphrastic genre differently than is traditional, where the text describes or comments on a painting, a photograph, or another work of visual art. Cunningham does not describe an art object but refers to it to make a vivid portrait of his character that is dense with art history and other connotations. I call this method of image inclusion “ekphrastic inversion.” For instance, Mrs. Woolf is, as the young Virginia Stephen, described as “pale and tall, startling as a Rembrandt or a Velázquez” (Cunningham 1998: 33), but in her mature days, she has “begun to look as if she’s carved from very porous, gray-white marble” (Cunningham 1998: 33). The difference between the two sisters is likewise underlined with reference to art: “If Virginia has the austere, parched beauty of a Giotto fresco, Vanessa is more like a figure sculpted in rosy marble by a skilled but minor artist of the late Baroque” (Cunningham 1998: 114). Today, famous art does not have to be described, because we have all seen mass-produced copies, and therefore the ekphrastic genre develops

functions other than detailed description, as here, where the works of art instead serve as objects of comparison.⁷

Clarissa thinks of Richard as a man who loves interpreting images: “The old Richard would be capable of talking for half an hour or more about the various possible interpretations of the inept copy of Botticelli’s Venus being drawn by a young black man with chalk on the concrete [...]” (Cunningham 1998: 19–20). Here, the reference to this classic picture can be read as a way of characterizing Richard not only as an art connoisseur, but also as a man with no racial biases and as an intellectual with goodwill for both street and non-professional art. The picture and its surroundings function as a characterization of him, not the other way around. Towards the end, when Richard is on the verge of suicide, he appears, from the blurred points of view of the narrator and Clarissa, like a statue by Giacometti: “He looks insane and exalted, both ancient and childish, astride the windowsill like some scarecrow equestrian, a park statue by Giacometti” (Cunningham 1998: 196). Connotations to the equestrian figure on the one hand and the anorectic body on the other help to create a complex image of the successful poet, the stubborn friend, as well as the abandoned child.

Another visual reference in the novel is to a movie being shot in Clarissa’s neighborhood in New York. On her way to the florist one early June morning, Clarissa passes a film team and thinks she recognizes a celebrity who looks out of a trailer door. It could be Meryl Streep or Vanessa Redgrave. We get no further information about the movie, but the two names point back to the film version of *Mrs. Dalloway* from 1997, where Vanessa Redgrave played the main role,⁸ and forward (from our point of view) to a then (in the 1990s) non-existent film that later became *The Hours*, a movie from 2002, where Meryl Streep played Clarissa; Julianne Moore, Laura Brown; and Nicole Kidman, Virginia Woolf.⁹ This integration of a movie team, which is introduced as an ordinary phenomenon on a New York street, works on two levels since, on the one hand, it locates the trauma theme in a cultural exchange context and, on the other hand, locates it as an implied anticipation. Nobody could know that a movie would be adapted and realized from the novel, and nobody could know that Clarissa’s part would be played by Streep, but the narrative arrangement of the novel, as well as its con-

⁷ James A. W. Heffernan writes in his chapter on modern and post-modern ekphrasis that the genre on the one hand has kept its basic features but, on the other hand, has changed, from “epic ornament to free-standing literary work” (Heffernan 2004: 138).

⁸ *Mrs. Dalloway* is a 1997 British film directed by Marleen Gorris, starring Vanessa Redgrave, Natasha McElhone, and Michael Kitchen.

⁹ *The Hours* is a 2002 Anglo-American film directed by Stephen Daldry, starring Meryl Streep, Julianne Moore, and Nicole Kidman.

struction of traumatic memory, involves a prefigurative scenario that implies an expectation of coming events.

A closer look at the narration of the characters' mental conditions will reveal a systematic representation of flashforward imagery triggered by painful experiences and memories. This technique not only exposes hopes and expectations in the fictive persons – it also conceptualizes trauma as an interrelation between past and future events. Little Richie is a good example of such aesthetics. In the 1949 chapters, he is described as a three-year-old boy who loves his mother but is very anxious about her movements. The scene where mother and son prepare the birthday cake for Dan is a strong anticipation of later events, and Richie's emotional response to his mother when he spills the flour and thinks he has spoiled the cake, is telling: "He looks at her in terror. His eyes fill with tears" (Cunningham 1998: 78). His frightened gaze at his mother not only reveals his fear of having destroyed the cake, it also hints at his mother's reaction and possible disappearance from him. A repetition of his response comes when Laura picks him up at Mrs. Latch's house: his face is "a miniature agony of hope, sorrow, and confusion," while she is "embarrassed by his tears" (Cunningham 1998: 190). As a flashforward, his terrorized eyes anticipate the later separation between them, his poetry, in which she appears as both beloved and despised, and finally his decision to commit suicide, which he explains as resulting from his failure, not mentioning which one, just: "I've failed" (Cunningham 1998: 199).

His line echoes Virginia Woolf, who in the suicide scene thinks of herself as a person who has failed. While she seems very certain about her decision to kill herself, Cunningham also lets her play with other options: "She imagines turning around, taking the stone out of her pocket, going back to the house" (Cunningham 1998: 5). As an author, he can do the same with his fictional character, Virginia Woolf, as she does with her character Clarissa Dalloway, namely, construct her mind. In the 1923 chapters, Woolf's mind is occupied with plans for the novel she is about to write, and she foresees that her heroine will not only "take her own life" (Cunningham 1998: 69) but also have a female lover. The death motif and the lesbian motif are tied together in a flower image that has the character of an ekphrasis, of a described still-life. The girl – Clarissa's love – will in Virginia's thoughts "scandalize the aunts by cutting the heads off dahlias and hollyhocks and floating them in great bowls of water, just as Virginia's sister, Vanessa, has always done" (Cunningham 1998: 82). This image of "decapitated flowers floating" (Cunningham 1998: 83) may be read as an anticipation of Virginia Woolf's floating body after she has drowned but is, at the same time, a flashback, because this scene has already been narrated. Shortly after, in the same chapter, she observes how her servant Nelly "takes a turnip from the

bowl and cuts off its end with a practiced flick of the knife” (Cunningham 1998: 86). Nelly would gladly have slit her throat, Virginia thinks, because of the silent fight between them; the decapitated flowers are simultaneously and unequivocally attached to Virginia and her death.

Even Laura Brown has “failed” (Cunningham 1998: 144). This is what she thinks when driving along the freeway. Her intentions are seemingly not motivated by past experiences but by the book she is reading, *Mrs. Dalloway*, which fills a gap in her present life. The story occupies her mind and creates an illusionary world in which she shapes her alter egos – first, an invisible sister, then, a ghost. However, while there is no singular moment or evident cause in the past that might explain her actions, one important clue to her dissatisfaction is clearly related to her neighbor, Kitty, who is unable to have a child, probably because of uterine cancer. The dormant emotions between the two women become manifest when Kitty tells Laura about the imminent hospitalization, whereupon they embrace and nearly kiss each other. Also, in Laura’s case, death and latent lesbianism are therefore metaphorically intertwined, and the near-kiss functions as a reminder of this intimacy when Laura later imagines how she can go on living.

Back home, where numerous nights as a wife await her, she projects her future as a mental image prompted by a quote from Woolf: “It might be like walking out into a field of brilliant snow. It could be dreadful and wonderful. *We thought her sorrows were ordinary sorrows; we had no idea*” (Cunningham 1998: 205). After her return, in the chapter where she very reluctantly goes to bed with her husband, the metaphoric analogy between death and lesbianism invokes an image of the floating body similar to the one we have seen earlier, only now it is empty: “She might, at this moment, be nothing but a floating intelligence; not even a brain inside a skull, just a presence that perceives, as a ghost might” (Cunningham 1998: 215). This ghost imagery turns up towards the end of the novel when Laura visits Clarissa after Richard’s death, when Clarissa thinks of his mother as a “victim and a torturer who haunted Richard’s work” (Cunningham 1998: 226). She is now identified through Clarissa’s point of view as “the ghost and the goddess in a small body of private myths made public” (Cunningham 1998: 221).

Like Laura, Clarissa carries ambivalent memories of romantic kisses and one fatal near-kiss. Her relationship with Richard has been very intense and she recalls a scene thirty years ago: “Richard had called her Mrs. Dalloway, and they had kissed” (Cunningham 1998: 98). However, since Richard loves Louis too, Clarissa struggles with the triangular situation, and the happy moment of the past is overshadowed by a subconscious thought of death: “What lives undimmed in Clarissa’s mind more than three decades later is a kiss at dusk on a patch of *dead grass* [...]” (Cunningham 1998: 98, emphasis mine). Her present

life is nevertheless filled with remorse for a kiss she did not return, and she still imagines what a possible common future with Richard would have looked like: “How often since then has she wondered what might have happened if she’d tried to remain with him; if she’d returned Richard’s kiss on the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal [...]” (Cunningham 1998: 97). The memory of this near-kiss is revived again in the suicide scene, when Clarissa sits on the ground with Richard’s body in her arms and would have confessed to him, had he been alive, how she left him at a street corner in favor of an ordinary life. She would have asked for forgiveness for shying away from “kissing him on the lips, and for telling herself she did so only for the sake of his health” (Cunningham 1998: 203). The dramatic shock of his suicide is foreshadowed in Clarissa’s mental recollection of kisses and rejections, and again the novel conceptualizes trauma in the span between haunting memories and frightening anticipation.

5 Anticipations

The Hours is perhaps first of all a precarious concern for the future due to AIDS, and its flashforward imagery serves as a main aesthetic strategy in its understanding of the contextual state of crisis. In her article on the two novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*, Kate Haffey focuses on the exquisite moments and the temporality of the kiss. She refers to recent discussions of the kiss between Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton in Woolf’s novel and claims that this kiss is being interpreted three times in *The Hours*. Among queer theorists, the kiss in Woolf has been read as “a moment that temporarily interrupts her inevitable movement towards marriage and reproduction” (Haffey 2010: 137), in other words, towards conventional heterosexuality. Haffey takes a somewhat different position when she points at the unexpected forms of temporality that emerge from the kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway*; she reads *The Hours* as a text that, in its different representations of the kiss, reveals another temporality at work, “a temporality that does not press on towards closure or conclusion, but that moves in strange and unpredictable ways” (Haffey 2010: 137).

A main argument in Haffey’s reading of the moments in *The Hours* is that they represent a certain relation to the future. The three kisses that she analyses are the one between Laura and Kitty, between Clarissa and Richard, and between Virginia and Vanessa in the kitchen when Vanessa visits her sister in Richmond. In each case, Haffey emphasizes the moments not only as cuts in the flow of time, but also as embodying an implied attitude to coming events. According to Haffey, Laura’s kiss represents a moment of forgetting the future, of, instead, living in the present, enjoying the desire for Kitty. Clarissa’s kiss takes her back

in time to a moment where the future had not yet been decided, where the feeling of “anything could happen” (a quote from *Mrs. Dalloway*) is “a feeling of not knowing the future” (Haffey 2010: 154). Virginia’s kiss echoes a moment in her childhood; it breaks “through the barriers of time and collapses the distinction between the child and the adult” (Haffey 2010: 156). In various ways, these kisses posit the woman in her present situation, but simultaneously resist teleological narrative and chronological temporality. Instead of anticipating a heterosexual future with courtship, marriage, reproduction, etc., the kisses in *The Hours* are moments, Haffey writes, “where we linger, celebrating not the possibility of a scripted future but the soaring hope of the moment itself” (Haffey 2010: 159). Haffey’s focus on the moment and the significance of temporality in the construction of queer identities opens interesting perspectives, and her emphasis on the future is pertinent. However, what her focus misses is the trauma, which indisputably belongs to the novel’s construction of temporality. Many of the “exquisite moments” are in fact characterized by images of the future that are not always unexpected, repressed, or consciously forgotten, but instead projected from a memorized moment of the past.

One such moment is the scene where Clarissa Vaughan, in her first chapter, walks out to buy flowers and meets an old friend, Walter Hardy, on the street. After she has invited him to the party, her thoughts go to Richard, when he was ten years younger. If Richard had not declined, they could have been arguing about “Hardy and the quest for eternal youth, about how gay men have taken to imitating the boys who tortured them in high school” (Cunningham 1998: 19). And if Richard had seen the windblown plastic bag that billowed against the white sky, he would have wanted to talk about the bag, Clarissa imagines, and how it “will blow into the Hudson and float all the way to the ocean, where eventually a sea turtle, a creature that could live a hundred years, will mistake it for a jellyfish, eat the bag, and die” (Cunningham 1998: 20). In both cases, Clarissa’s thoughts are not only triggered by memories of the past but are also metaphorically connected, first with future life (a dream of eternal youth, a hundred-year old turtle), second with trauma (boys who tortured them in high school, the turtle eating the plastic bag), and third with death (the turtle dies). Moreover, this imagined story about the floating plastic bag unequivocally resembles Virginia’s dead body when she drifts away after her suicide.

In addition to the kisses, other exquisite moments are, in my opinion, isolated temporal islands where the characters can hide from future concerns. In their connections to the past through memories and intertextualities, they systematically foreshadow coming events through parallels, echoes, and poetic images. Maybe past and present moments are imbued with lust, warm emotions, and

happy feelings, but they are seldom free from undercurrents pointing at a frightening future.

The image of a historic city with layers of deceased people turns up in both Clarissa Vaughan's and Virginia Woolf's storylines to act as reminders that influence the senses of present life and that throw shadows onto the future. Echoing Sigmund Freud's rhetoric of the archaeological work of the psychoanalyst, Clarissa sees Manhattan as a place where "you would find the ruins of another, older city, and then another and another" (Cunningham 1998: 14). She imagines how the dead are buried under the cement and the grass that she walks over, while she, at the same time, notices a singer, a roller-skater, a lunatic, and men who offer drugs. Confronted with the AIDS disease, Clarissa envisages future life, but not without including past and present suffering: "Even if we're further gone than Richard; even if we're fleshless, blazing with lesions, shitting in the streets; still, we want desperately to live" (Cunningham 1998: 15).

The way in which Michael Cunningham reinvokes *Mrs. Dalloway* points at recognized similarities between the two epochs and their existential threats. The shellshocks of the past and the idea of a death drive constitute the novel's interpretation of an era troubled by deadly disease. Returning images and traumatic anticipation are basic elements of the novel's cultural constructions of trauma, and the intertextuality to Woolf works as a model for how the current crisis can be addressed. Clarissa Dalloway survives, and so do Clarissa Vaughan and Laura Brown in *The Hours*, but the future itself does not appear so healthy. The narrative strand in both novels ends happily. In Woolf: "It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was" (Woolf 1981 [1925]: 194). In Cunningham: "'Come in, Mrs. Brown,' she says. 'Everything is ready'" (Cunningham 1998: 226). However, the ghosts of the past prevail and throw haunting images into the future.

Works cited

- Abraham, Nicolas (1987) "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," *Critical Inquiry*, 13.2, The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis (Winter 1987) (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), pp. 287–292
- Abraham, Nicolas and Maria Torok (2005) *The Wolf Man's Magic Word. A Cryptonymy*. Translated by Nicholas Rand, foreword by Jacques Derrida (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press)
- Butler, Judith (2009) *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso)
- Chouliaraki, Lilie (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage)
- Crimp, Douglas (1992) "Portraits of People with AIDS," in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge), pp. 117–133
- Cunningham, Michael (1998) *The Hours* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux)

- Davis, Colin (2005) "État présent. Hauntology, spectres and phantoms," *French Studies*, Vol. LIX, No. 3, pp. 373–379
- Derrida, Jacques (1994 [1993]) *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge)
- Fassin, Didier and Richard Rechtman (2009) *The Empire of Trauma. An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Freud, Sigmund (1999 [1920]) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works by Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press)
- Haffey, Kate (2010) "Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*," *Narrative*, 18.2, pp. 137–162
- Heffernan, James A. W. (2004 [1993]) *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)
- Lee, Hermione (1996) *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus)
- Sontag, Susan (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
- Spielrein, Sabina (1994 [1912]) "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being," *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 39.2, pp. 155–186
- Sturken, Marita (1997) *Tangled Memories. The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press)
- Wood, Michael (1998) "Parallel Lives. A Novel that Echoes *Mrs. Dalloway* Features Virginia Woolf as a Character," *The New York Times*, 22 November <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/22/reviews/981122.22woodlt.html>>
- Woolf, Virginia (1981 [1925]) *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book)

