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Popular modernism: representations of modernist literature in popular culture

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Chapter 4

Truth: Virginia Woolf's Last Letter

The pressure of reality on us is always varying, as Stevens might have said: the fictions must change. Since we continue to “prescribe laws to nature” – Kant’s phrase, and we do – we shall continue to have a relation with the paradigms, but we shall change them to make them go on working. If we cannot break free of them, we must make sense of them.
--- Frank Kermode (1967: 24).

During the first decade of the 21st century, Virginia Woolf’s oeuvre, especially her book *Mrs Dalloway* (2000 [1925]), gained an unexpected new readership. Not because her novel was selected for *Oprah’s Book Club*, as happened to Faulkner and Tolstoy, but because of the release of the film *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002). The film is an adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* (1998), in which he takes Virginia Woolf’s life and writing as inspiration for a multilayered story about artistic endeavour, failure, love and madness. Shortly after the film came out, Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway* was marketed with stickers on the cover saying, “As featured in the film *The Hours*. Starring Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf.” This promise is highly deceiving: *The Hours* does not feature *Mrs Dalloway*, and neither is Woolf the protagonist of the novel, which prospective buyers might believe if they are unaware of Woolf’s novel. It seems as if the label is meant for Cunningham’s book, in which Woolf in fact is one of several protagonists. Instead of literary accuracy, the label shows that Woolf, through Nicole Kidman’s performance of the tormented writer, has become known to a large public, lifted from the framework of academic studies of high modernism, while her status as an exemplary modernist author is simultaneously reinforced.

Since the emergence of the novel in the early eighteenth-century, “realism” has been the defining criterion on the basis of which the genre differentiates itself

from earlier prose writing. In *The Rise of the Novel* (2000 [1957]), Ian Watt argues that the first novels, for instance by Richardson and Defoe, were innovating because they dealt with everyday human experiences for the first time, rather than taking their plots from mythology, history, legend or previous literature (14). In other words, realism meant that the authors described truthful events, which conformed to experience. While this was innovating in the eighteenth century, and the novel was named after the novelty that was attached to it, it soon became the norm: the novel was expected to represent the moral and social facts of the world.

Modernist literature, in contrast, has become known for its critique of the belief in objective representation. In Stephen D. Dowden's words: "Principally, [modernism] is a reaction against the quixotry of dogmatic realism, against the positivistic optimism that narrative fiction can really be the impartial reflection of reality" (1986: 11). In two of her most anthologized essays "Modern Fiction" (2003 [1919]) and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1966) Woolf attacks realism, arguing that the novelist should no longer attempt to describe the world as objectively as possible.¹⁴⁵ Instead, Woolf holds, the novelist should be "concerned with the spirit" (1984: 147). However, she does not repudiate all realism, but tries "to achieve a more authentic engagement with the real than *realism*, so called, could possibly attain," as Jeff Wallace formulates it (2007: 19).¹⁴⁶

In this chapter, I focus on the different understandings of realism that the novel and the film convey. Aware of the construction of reality, Woolf was interested in capturing the flux of association in the perception of her protagonists, moving from thought to memory, connecting the present with flashbacks. In *The Hours*, Cunningham, in turn, captures the flux of his own associations regarding the novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Sometimes, he mirrors Woolf's style of writing and frequently refers to events in the novel as well as in Woolf's life. Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film are particularly relevant for my study because, on the one hand, they contribute to the portrayal of the distinguished modernist author Virginia Woolf, suggesting they paint an accurate, if fragmented, picture of her authorship. On the other hand, both the book and the film turn modernist writing and reading into

¹⁴⁵ Beckett concurs with Woolf, defining the idea of objective representation as "the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art" (1965: 76).

¹⁴⁶ Wallace also observes that Woolf seems to conduct a silent dialogue with the Jamesian aesthetic, which he develops in his credo as a novelist "The Art of Fiction" (2001 [1884]).

their central theme, according to which truth is always something elusive, dependent on subjective interpretation. Especially the novel makes Woolf's thoughts on literature and its relation to reality into a central theme, evoking questions about truth, representation and knowledge.

Cunningham quotes several sentences from Woolf's work, including a version – historically incorrect – of the letter that she wrote before she committed suicide. The title “The Hours” is a quotation as well: it is the title Woolf used for *Mrs Dalloway* as she still worked on her novel. Besides his use of the original title, Cunningham attempts to trace the originating moments of writing, indicating another understanding of truth as intertwined with origin. The connection between truth and origin goes back to early Greek thought. Plato (428-348 B.C.E.) defended the relation between truth and origin in his famous theory about true and original forms that he develops through his allegory of the cave.¹⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger also points out that the Greek term for truth (*alètheia*) means “unconcealedness of beings,” showing us that our understanding of truth is related to an understanding of originating; of coming into appearance, as being “unconcealed” (1975: 51).¹⁴⁸

When Woolf argues against truthfulness, she alludes to traditional realistic fiction, for instance in her essay “How Should One Read a Book?” (1960: 235) or in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in which she poses the questions: “What is reality? And who are the judges of reality?” (1966: 325). In “Fictionality and Fields of Reference” (1984), Benjamin Harshav addresses the question if one can speak of truth in relation to fiction. He argues that truthfulness is convincing in fiction as long as the frame of reference is coherent. In arguing this, Harshav responds to John Searle's distinction between “fictional” and “serious” utterances. According to Searle fictional utterances are “non-serious:” “For example, if the author of a novel

¹⁴⁷ For Plato, literature could only present illusion; it was far removed from truth and thus could not contribute to an honourable life. See Plato's *Republic*, in which he develops his theory of mimesis (2001: 49-80).

¹⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, in turn, has famously critiqued the connection between truth and art. His relativist perspective on truth has influenced many philosophers and recurs often in postmodernist theories. Nietzsche believed that the idea of truth is a human concept that can only teach us something about human thought, not about the world outside thought. The idea that we can unveil the world is a wish that can only bring us disappointment. According to Nietzsche, artists, in contrast to thinkers, do not wish to give up their comprehension of the world as an erroneous, coloured creation of the human intellect; they rather believe in their illusion than attempting to reveal it. See *Human, all too Human* (1995 [1886]).

tells us that it is raining outside he isn't seriously committed to the view that it is at the time of writing actually raining outside" (1979: 60).

Harshav comments on the limitations of this argument. He argues that the commitment to the truth of a proposition that Searle analyses can also function within a fictional "Internal Field of Reference" that a novel constructs. A work of literature constructs its own reality:

Hence, when the author of a novel tells us that it is raining outside, we must assume that he *is*, indeed, "seriously committed to the view that it is ... actually raining outside," though not "at the time of writing," but *in the frame of reference he is speaking about* (1984: 232).

Realist literature can portray an imagined family; yet, it will still be realistic if the internal frame of reference is coherent and matches the frame of the external world. Something is realistic as long as it *could* exist or happen in the real world. The question remains whether one could call modernist literature realist according to this definition, and whether modernist literature, with its interior monologues, corresponds to a coherent exterior? Probably not, because the assumption that such an objective reality exists is questioned by modernist literature. Consequently, as we will see, Woolf considers our request of fiction that it shall be true to conform to a faulty expectation.

The effects of truthfulness that I study in Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film mostly concern historical references. Here, I make use of Brian McHale's analysis of standards for historical fiction in comparison to postmodernist fiction (1987). His categorization of the use of historical references in different genres allows me to analyze how the references in Cunningham's novel function and what kind of truth or reality effects are at play. Studying the portrayal of modernist literature in contemporary media, one has to be aware of the fact that the presentation of a historical period often tells us more about our present day manner of perceiving the world than it does about the period that is represented. Frans F. J. Schouten offers a striking example with regard to movies based on historical themes:

King Arthur is presented as a knight in magnificently shining armour which was unknown in his day. But as this is the image imposed on the audience by movies, television, novels and comic books on knights, it has to be presented that way. Otherwise, the image presented to the public would not be perceived as reliable (1995: 26).

As I will try to demonstrate, Daldry's portrayal of Woolf is also frequently historically incorrect; yet, those mistakes actually contribute to the realist totality of the film, or to use Harshav's terminology, to the coherence of the frame of reference.¹⁴⁹

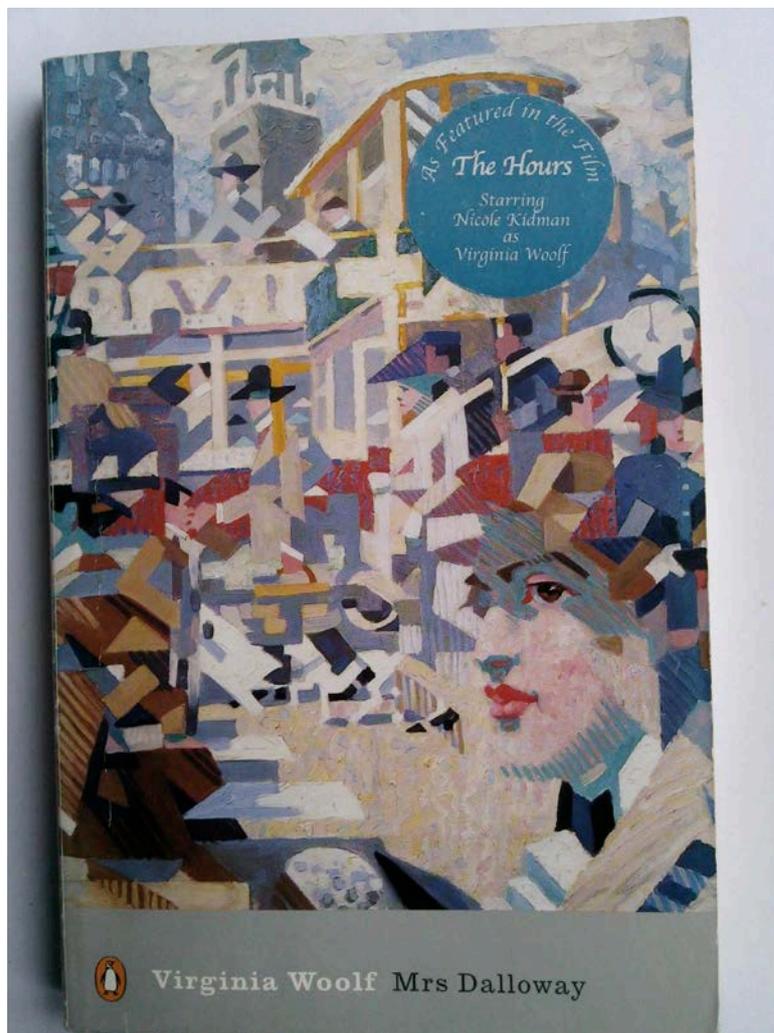
Conventions and expectations of historical accuracy are arguably stronger in the case of film than in literature. For instance, Woolf's fans commented on the incorrect representation of Woolf in the movie. These reactions can be found on the Internet: Woolf is depicted as too pathetic, too self-involved, and her politics are ignored. Film fans also discuss the effect of the prosthetic nose that was put on Nicole Kidman to make her look more like Virginia Woolf. However, those reactions were overshadowed by the ample critical appraisal the film received.

Rather than indulging the discussion about the truthful or incorrect representation of Virginia Woolf, I study the ways in which the film solicits what Mieke Bal calls a "realist reading" in contrast to a "textual" reading (2006: 216-246). Pictures and texts are usually approached in different ways, because they are viewed as different media rather than different modes of reading. However, Bal argues that both texts and pictures can be read in both a realist and a textual manner. Moreover, for Bal, a "text" does not necessarily consist of words. Besides novels and poems also drawings and paintings can be read discursively (2006: 25-59). Although the film *The Hours* appears to enforce a realist reading, Bal's concept of textual reading allows me to analyse how precisely a lack of information creates a representation that is historically wrong while contributing to the construction of a truthful picture for the viewer (2006: 216-246).

Through a discussion of the various quotations of Woolf's last letter in Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film, I show how the image of the modernist

¹⁴⁹ For a discussion of historians's expectations of film as a representation of the past see Robert Brent Toplin's "The Filmmaker as Historian" (1988).

author is easily connected to cliché's concerning madness, genius, writing and suicide. I argue that on the one hand historical references in the novel and the film contribute to the suggestion that the portrayal of Virginia Woolf is truthful and realistic, and on the other hand how historical material in itself should never be trusted as proof of a certain reading, since what is associated with it lends it its significance. Cunningham's novel, *I wish to show*, moves between the realist genre of historical fiction and the postmodernist mockery of the genre; meanwhile, modernist writing, especially that of Woolf, is presented as the most genuine expression of individuality that is possible.



Modernism in Postmodernist Fiction

Cunningham's book relates three stories about three women of different generations, who are all connected through Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The first is Virginia Woolf herself in 1923 and 1941. The second is Mrs. Brown, who is reading *Mrs Dalloway* in 1949, as she plans her husband's birthday party.¹⁵⁰ The third is Clarissa Vaughan in 1999, a lesbian, who plans a party to celebrate that her good friend, the poet Richard who is dying of AIDS, has won a major literary award. The experiences of these women all mirror situations in *Mrs Dalloway*.

The story of Woolf's book takes place during one day, similar to Joyce's *Ulysses*, during which different characters meet; some by coincidence, some without even noticing each other on the street, yet others because they are invited by Mrs Dalloway for her party. All these characters seem connected, not just because they physically move through the same space, but also because of their wandering minds, thinking about their past, their memories and the expectations of life they used to have when they were young. In the novel, the world, limited to one day and one city, appears fragmented; it falls apart in different, sometimes contradictory, experiences of the same time and place. Hence, the questions that are central in this book concern the relation of the subject to the world. If we follow McHale's definition of the modernist dominant in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), these questions can be described as typically modernist: they concern the interpretation of the world and the place of the individual in it (9).¹⁵¹

In contrast, the narrative of *The Hours* is spread out over three generations. Although the epistemological questions of *Mrs Dalloway* are present in *The Hours* as well, they are now stretched out, not only in time, but also across three different environments. Unlike *Mrs Dalloway*, in which the characters are connected through their proximity in time and space, in *The Hours* the characters are connected through their relations with the book *Mrs Dalloway*. Hence, the only real

¹⁵⁰ In the essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1924), Mrs. Brown is the name that Woolf gives to the ordinary woman who sets a challenge to all novelists.

¹⁵¹ For a discussion of the distinction that McHale makes between the modernist and the postmodernist dominant and its relation to the postmodernist idea that "language does not have the capacity to refer or to describe adequately" see Ernst van Alphen's article "The Heterotopian Space of the Discussion on Postmodernism" (1989: 819), in which van Alphen reviews, among other books, McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*.

connection between the protagonists is a text, a piece of literature. This self-reflexive nature of the book, in which the relation between fiction, language and reality is at stake, makes Cunningham's novel into a postmodernist book. Moreover, the subjective and cognitive questions of the protagonists also concern the larger structure of the book, which one can define as the metafictional level of the novel. The epistemological questions of *Mrs Dalloway* thus transform in *The Hours* into questions that McHale defines as ontological (1987: 11).

The novel is also postmodernist in the sense that it is thoroughly intertextual. Cunningham not only deploys ample references to Woolf's oeuvre, but for instance also to contemporary film. For example, he mirrors a scene from Woolf's novel in which Clarissa Dalloway sees a car stop, in which someone famous is seated, by repositioning it in the present time. Cunningham describes that Clarissa sees a door of a trailer open and a famous head emerges: "Clarissa cannot immediately identify her (Meryl Streep? Vanessa Redgrave?) she knows without question that the woman is a movie star" (27).¹⁵² In his adaptation, Daldry reacts by letting Meryl Streep play the character of Clarissa. Vanessa Redgrave, in turn, plays Mrs Dalloway in Marleen Gorris's film adaptation *Mrs Dalloway* (1997), a fact of which Cunningham must have been aware.¹⁵³

In the parts that describe Virginia, the truthfulness of the portrayal is largely a result of Cunningham's use of specific historical references.¹⁵⁴ In classic historical fiction, incorporating facts within a fictional narrative is a constitutive part of this genre; provided that the historical material and references to real persons conform to certain standards. McHale spells out those standards in order to study how postmodernist novels relate to them. The first standard is that

historical realemes – persons, events, specific objects, and so on – can only be introduced on condition that the properties and actions attributed to

¹⁵² In the scene that Woolf describes, passers-by speculate whose face they have seen: "Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? (15)."

¹⁵³ Pointing out intertextual references, Meryl Streep also is the actress in Spike Jonze's film *Adaptation* (2002), in which she is the author Susan Orlean, who wrote the *Orchid Thief*. In relation to this, when Meryl Streep appears in the film *The Hours*, in one of the first shots one can see a white orchid in a vase in the background, obviously referring to *Adaptation*.

¹⁵⁴ When I use only the first name "Virginia," I refer to the fictional Virginia Woolf as she appears in the novel *The Hours*.

them in the text do not actually contradict the “official” historical record (1987: 87).

The difficulty with this condition, McHale continues, is that one can always question which version of history is regarded the official one. However, with regard to Woolf’s last letter, there is little uncertainty about which one of the two was her actual last letter. In this sense, Cunningham violates the historical record by using the wrong version, as we will see below. Obviously, *The Hours* is not what one would call a classical historical novel; simultaneously, however, Cunningham uses facts from Woolf’s life, which does suggest a degree of historical truthfulness.

According to McHale, this is not unusual. He writes that some postmodernist novels in which historical persons appear “adhere to the classic paradigm of constraints on the insertion of historical realemes,” while other postmodernist novels stand in contradiction with that paradigm, as they merge fiction and the fantastic (89). In his novel *Specimen Days* (2005), Cunningham merges fiction and the fantastic by having the prophetic figure of the poet Walt Whitman appear in different periods. In *The Hours*, his use of historical material does not become fantastic; at first sight the story seems to conform to facts.

Cunningham makes use of what McHale calls the “dark areas” of the historical record. Those dark areas are the times and places on which the official record has nothing to report. McHale writes that some “historical novels treat the interior life of historical figures as dark areas,” as, for example, Tolstoy did in *War and Peace* (1865-69) where he describes Napoleon’s inner world (87). Cunningham also uses this method, especially when he describes how Woolf’s mind wanders while thinking of writing. In the interior monologues in *The Hours*, Woolf’s style of diary writing is mimicked, threading up sentences with frequent use of dashes and semicolons in the way Woolf used to do, which gives the fictional voice of Virginia an intertextually authenticated reality: we hear Woolf thinking as we know she writes in her diaries. Virginia’s preoccupation with writing and different subjective perspectives in *The Hours* shifts to the meta-question of the relation between text and history.

The last letter that Woolf wrote and that Cunningham quotes is both a textual referent and a historical object concerning the facts of Woolf’s life. The

quotation of the letter has a different value compared to the other texts. Yet, even this letter is embedded in other texts that influence its meaning.

Some might object that the various modes of truths and the copious amount of intertextual references conflict with truthfulness; truth, after all, is not a multilayered construction but reality. Below I discuss the myth of wholeness that is part of the conventional understanding of truth. Additionally, I analyze how Cunningham's selection of the first version of Woolf's last letter and his focus on the originating moment of Woolf's writing suggest a belief in the truth of original and unedited material. Valuing authentic material seems in contradiction with the postmodernist deconstruction of the foundations, on which concepts as origin and authenticity are based. This paradox of a focus on original material and a complexly layered intertextuality characterizes *The Hours*.

The First Last Letter

The Hours begins with a description of how Virginia Woolf, in 1941, walks towards the river Ouse to drown herself. At home, her husband Leonard Woolf finds the letter that she has left for him. At this point in the story, Cunningham quotes a real letter by Virginia Woolf. Yet, it is not the historically correct last letter that Virginia left for Leonard to find. In the biography *Virginia Woolf* (1996), Hermione Lee explains that Woolf wrote *two* versions of her suicide note – she was so used to endlessly rewrite her work that even her last letter was submitted to the procedure. The first version is dated “Tuesday,” and is probably written ten days before the day she committed suicide. The letter that she left for her husband on the day that she went out and drowned herself, Friday 28 March 1941, resembles the first in many respects, but is not identical to it.

Possibly Cunningham chose to use the first version because he also uses the first version of the title of Woolf's book *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Hours*. Or, perhaps it was simply because the first letter is longer and more coherently written, which makes it fit better in the structure of the novel. Using a letter that is written by Woolf herself, though not the version of the text that Leonard Woolf has actually found,

the novel deploys historical material to create a reality effect, the suggestion of truth within a fictional framework.¹⁵⁵

This is the letter that Cunningham quotes:

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going

mad again: I feel we can't go

through another of these terrible times.

And I shan't recover this time. I begin

to hear voices, and can't concentrate.

So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have

given me

the greatest possible happiness. You

have been in every way all that anyone

could be. I don't think two

people could have been happier till

this terrible disease came. I can't

fight it any longer. I know that I am

spoil your life, that without me you

could work. And you will know.

You see I can't even write this properly. I

can't read. What I want to say is that

I owe all the happiness of my life to you.

You have been entirely patient with me &

incredibly good. I want to say that –

everybody knows it. If anybody could

¹⁵⁵ Roland Barthes wrote an essay with the title "The Reality Effect", (1989), in which he argues that details described in a fictional story that seem superfluous create an effect of the real by means of connotation. The connotation "this is real" becomes the denotation, the only thing that matters. Following Barthes's theory, one must be able to make a division between functional descriptions and superfluous descriptions. In *Reading Rembrandt* (2006), Mieke Bal points out that such a division creates a hierarchy between narrative events and other elements (230-31). Bal therefore does not approach the seemingly superfluous details as "descriptions." Descriptive details are, according to Bal, too much contaminated by their opposition to narrative events to stand outside hierarchy. Bal prefers to approach descriptive details as elements *within* narration (231).

have saved me it would have been you.
Everything has gone from me but the
certainty of your goodness. I
cant go on spoiling you life any longer. I dont think two
people
could have been happier than we have been.
V.¹⁵⁶

This letter starts with an explanation: the certainty of her going mad again, the explanation of her suicide. She is specific about it: “I begin to hear voices, and cannot concentrate.” This could be read as a clear cause for her suicide. Hence, this first version suits the narrative of Cunningham’s book better than the historically proper second letter, in which a clear reason for her suicide is lacking. However, Cunningham also re-frames, and thereby transforms, the signification of the letter through the connections between this letter and the other narratives of *The Hours*.

In each of the lives of the three women suicide is an important theme. Clarissa Vaughan’s friend and former lover commits suicide. Mrs. Brown decides to commit suicide, but then changes her mind and leaves her husband and four year-old child. Virginia ponders whether she will make Clarissa Dalloway die at the end of her party, or whether she will make someone else die. In any case she is convinced that someone should die in her book. For each of the characters the psychological collapse under the strain of conventions and the fear of madness is connected with a death wish. By placing Woolf’s last letter in this context, her suicide becomes part of the larger theme of *The Hours*.

In the actual last letter that Woolf wrote and left for Leonard Woolf to find, her fear of going mad is left out, or only described as “this disease”:

Dearest,
I want to tell you that you have
given me complete happiness. No one
could have done more than you have done.

¹⁵⁶ This is the letter as Hermione Lee prints it in Woolf’s biography. Lee has reproduced Woolf’s letter as it looked on the page, copying Woolf’s punctuation, misspellings and line-breaks.

Please believe that.
But I know that I shall never get over
this: & I am wasting your life. It is madness.
Nothing anyone says can persuade me.
You can work, & you will be much
better without me. You see I cant
write this even, which shows I am right.
All I want to say is that until this
disease came on we were perfectly
happy. It was all due to you.
No one could have been so good as
you have been. From the very
first day till now.
Everyone knows that.
V.¹⁵⁷

The beginning of this letter can also be found in the earlier version, moved towards the end: "What I want to say is that I owe all the happiness of my life to you." However, to open the letter with the "happiness" that she has known, instead of her fear of madness, sets a different tone. It is not just "her" happiness, but also the happiness that Leonard has given her. In this letter, she places him at the centre of her life, whereas in the early version she seems absorbed by the fear of losing control of herself, the fear of madness. The only madness that she mentions in this letter is the madness of wasting Leonard's life.

The real last letter suggests that the fear of destroying their shared happiness is a crucial part of her decision to commit suicide: "I am wasting your life. ... You can work, & you will be much better without me." Comparable sentences can be found in the earlier version as well, for example: "I cannot go on spoiling your life any longer." In the version that she wanted Leonard to find, she omitted all parts in which she focuses on herself, in which she expresses her fear of

¹⁵⁷ This is, again, the letter as Hermione Lee prints it in Woolf's biography. Again, Lee has reproduced Woolf's last letter as it looked on the page, copying Woolf's punctuation, misspellings and line-breaks.

herself, her fear of the loss of her ability to read: "I feel certain that I am going mad again: ... So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. ... I cant fight it any longer. ... I cant read."

The parts of the earlier version that she left out in the shorter, later version, explain her suicide better than her intended last letter. Her intended last letter is more like a final love letter, ending a relationship, but not necessarily her life. In *The Hours* Cunningham concentrates primarily on Woolf's writerly thoughts and less on the happiness of her life with Leonard. In this regard the earlier version suits better in his portrayal of Virginia's mental condition. Moreover, *The Hours* is also a book in which almost every character is either bi- or homosexual. In the context of these homosexual relationships, Woolf's last letter suddenly seems conventional in a heterosexual, romanticised way; the first version suits the general theme of the homosexual loves in *The Hours* much better. Hence, the earlier version is more appropriate for the internal frame of reference of this particular novel.

In addition, the first version is more fitting because of Cunningham's attempt to pursue the origin of her writing in relation to Woolf's suicide. Following the logic of causality, the letter that was written earliest should come closer to the origin of her suicide. Cunningham starts his book with the ending of Woolf's life and then moves back in time. The book traces possible reasons for the end of her life in the starting moment of her writing. It suggests that her wish to die can be found in her way of writing. However, just as the beginning of a book is never unambiguous, the cause for a psychological condition or a death wish is never unequivocal. As writing consists of a back and forth movement, as the waves of the sea, in which the first movement, forwards or backwards, cannot be traced, the true motive of Woolf's suicide cannot be found in one or the other reason.¹⁵⁸

In *The Hours*, creation and death go hand in hand. As I mentioned above, all characters are confronted with a wish to die: either of themselves, of a friend, or of a fictional character in the book that Virginia is writing and that Mrs Brown is reading. Yet, the book is about artistic creation. The novel not only demonstrates

¹⁵⁸ In the film this back and forth movement of the writing process has been neglected. Lee comments on the representation of Woolf's writing in the film: "I wish the idea of 'creativity' didn't consist in an inspirational flash, of the first sentence leaping to the novelist's mind, shortly followed by a whole book. (Woolf took about three years, drafting and redrafting, to write *Mrs Dalloway*, and the first sentence she started with wasn't the first sentence she ended up with.)" (2005:55).

that the origin of writing always is a construction one makes afterwards, but also that the route taken to the origin is more important than the origin itself. Similarly, by using historical material, the novel shows that this material is never original or true in itself; what is associated with it lends it its significance. A similar argument can be made about the making of the modernist canon. With Cunningham's novel and Daldry's film, Woolf's status as one of the most important modernist writers is reaffirmed and is brought to the attention of a larger public, previously unfamiliar with Woolf's work.

A canon is always in transformation, influenced by critics who have their own standards. As I mentioned in the introduction, Hugh Kenner, for example, makes the rather contrived division between writers belonging to International Modernism and writers, like Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner, who, according to him, were no more than voices from a certain province. Though most of his work takes place in Dublin, James Joyce should be interpreted as an International Modernist, because he refers to all kinds of world literature (1989: 40). Moreover, International Modernist literature, according to Kenner, was written in English, implicitly dismissing Robert Musil or Marcel Proust. Kenner's choices reveal how random and manufactured a canon is, and that a writer or novel never naturally belongs to a canon, or is a modernist work in itself. What becomes associated with it gives it its status and place. Cunningham's book and the film adaptation reassert Woolf's place in the modernist canon and make the canon of modernist literature gain in popularity. Furthermore, Cunningham's intervention of moving Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* to contemporary New York shows how restricted it is to exclude Woolf from so called International Modernism, as if her books would only reach out to a small group of English cultivated readers, as Kenner seems to suggest (1989: 37-42).

Cunningham's route towards the imaginative origin of writing gives the historical material a particular narrative meaning. The truth of the historical document, Woolf's letter, becomes part of a fictional truth that is itself a product of a complex structure of references, among which are both historical references and fictional ones that are internal to the narrative. On the one hand, the real letter confers an apparent truthfulness on the story. On the other hand, precisely this truthfulness dissolves in the story that appropriates the meaning of the letter and

gives it a fictional truth that better fits the narrative. If one can speak of fictional truth, then this truth is revealed by laying bare the complex structure of references that are hidden beneath the layer of the apparent narrative. It seems a paradox that the truth should be complex and constructed, but this is precisely where the poetic value of literature comes in.

Bal also engages with the apparent paradox of a constructed truth with regard to her distinction between realist and textual reading. Each object can be read both in a realist or a textual manner, and ideally the two remain in continuous dialogue with one another (2006: 217-246). To read a text in a realist manner does not mean that the text belongs to the genre of realism or that it is written in a realist manner. The opposite also counts: a text belonging to the genre of realism can be read in a textual as well as a realist manner. Below I argue that the film adaptation of *The Hours* invites a realist reading. Yet, the structure of the film and its particular relation to reality can only be revealed by a textual reading.¹⁵⁹

The Incoherent Whole

The film starts with a close shot of a fast streaming river, followed by a close-up of hands tying a waist belt around a coat. Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) has put on her coat, goes out and closes the door behind her. Kidman's voice pronounces the words of the letter that, in the film, Virginia's husband will find almost immediately. While the letter is read out, one sees a hand writing, alternated with images of Woolf walking through the garden and high grass, towards the river. Only after one has seen Woolf walking into the river, the film title appears, and the different actresses in the different periods are introduced by images of each of them waking up.

The periods are specified shortly before each protagonist is introduced. Virginia Woolf wakes up in "Richmond, England, 1923." Her suicide, which has just been shown, was dated as "Sussex, England, 1941." Almost twenty years lie between these days. Yet, Virginia Woolf hardly looks any older when walking

¹⁵⁹ With Barthes's distinction between writerly and readerly texts in mind, as introduced in *S/Z* (2002 [1969]), Cunningham's prose might be considered to be writerly, whereas the film returns the novel to readerly realism. Barthes attributes the different characteristics of readerly and writerly to the texts; surprisingly so, in view of his well known emphasis on the reader. Bal's distinction, however, regards a difference of reading: a difference of framing through which any text could appear as writerly.

towards the river than when she is waking up in the sequence of 1923. Because one does not notice any physical or facial change, the dates do not seem to have any effect. By avoiding the signs of physical aging, the film produces a virtual, but effective coherence.

In that way, the film overlooks the details that do not fit in the assumption of totalilty, a manner of representing and reading that Bal calls “realist.” Bal argues that a realist reading is lead by a convention of unity: the reader reads coherence into the reality that is found in the picture or text. Instead of a realist reading, which implies blindness to possible lacks, Bal promotes a textual mode of reading that allows for constant activity, a shaping and reshaping of sign-events. More precisely, she promotes the confrontation between the two modes of reading that produces a critical reading that should help us avoid the unifying fallacy (2006: 222-223).¹⁶⁰

Just after Virginia has woken up and has washed her face, she goes to her room to start writing. Again a close-up of her hand is shown: the hand picks out a fountain pen from a cup with several pens. Virginia sits down, thinking visibly, lights a cigarette and starts writing; another close-up of the pen dipping in ink. This connection between the different moments of writing, the first taking place in 1941, the latter in 1923, glues them together and gives the narrative a consistency that is not substantiated by the course of the life of the author. Although the images of the writing hands suggest continuity, the meaning of the different close-ups also point to textuality in their capacity of signs of writing. Bal argues that such signs point

at the irreducible gap between signifier and signified that Ferdinand de Saussure insisted on, and that triggered Jacques Lacan’s sharpest reworking of Saussure’s semiotics. Signs like these, signifying their suggestion of meaning and meaning’s deceptiveness at the same time, cannot be recuperated under any of the more usual categories of the sign (1990: 517-518).

¹⁶⁰ Although Bal’s distinction between “textual reading” and “realist reading” concerns her reading of Rembrandt’s painting “The Toilet of Bathshebah” (1654) and a sketch sheet by Rembrandt, I venture to stretch the different modes of reading that Bal develops to the moving image.

Woolf's visualized writing creates the impression of a coherent narrative and points at the constructedness of this impression by simultaneously signifying the deceptiveness of the apparent meaning; emphasizing the inevitable construction involved in written narrative. In other words, following a realist reading, the sign of writing unites the divergent periods of time and suggests a causal relation among them, while from a textual perspective the sign points to the construction that should cover up a lack.

If the film had shown the difference of age in Woolf's appearance between 1941 and 1923, the considerable jump in time would have been visible. It would have fragmented the narrative and made spectators wonder what happened in the years between the writing of *Mrs Dalloway* and Woolf's suicide. The correct portrayal of Woolf's ageing would have ruined the unity of the narrative and thus also the possibility of a realist reading, which can only succeed if it finds a causal continuity. Hence, the lack of information has to be covered up to create a unity that can convincingly convey a portrait. A fragmented portrait would leave open too many questions to be convincing, and would not be considered truthful.

This is the paradox of realist reading: the convention of unity that it exerts produces a constructed truth that is necessarily artificial and fictitious. On the one hand, the titles with the years and the places where the stories take place, suggest authenticity and historical reference. On the other hand, these dates become mere signs of historicity, while being superfluous in relation to the actual time in which it takes place. Harshav also argues that an unclear date is a clear mark of fiction. An accurate historical reference would give the day, the month and the year. If the precise date is not mentioned, the day itself is "floated": "This device indicates that the fictional time and space, however closely located in relation to the real world, is somehow suspended above it, has its own, 'floating' coordinates" (1984: 244). Daldry made use of this floating time reference to create a coherent narrative, which creates the impression that *Mrs Dalloway* was the last book that Woolf wrote; that she committed suicide just after finishing the book; and that she died when she was in her forties. In reality she was nearly sixty.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ In the collection of essays on biography *Virginia Woolf's Nose* (2005), Lee comments on the misrepresentations of Woolf's life in the film, and the mistakes it produced. She writes that "a

In addition, as the first image of the writing hand shows the hand of a woman who is writing her suicide letter, writing becomes a sign of suicide. The film suggests that if Woolf had not been a writer, she would not have committed suicide. The film presents a causally integrated unity, in which Virginia's occupation with literature and writing functions as the explanation for her madness and suicide in conforming to the cliché of the tortured, mad genius. In sum, though the film offers incorrect information, suggesting that Woolf was working on *Mrs Dalloway* shortly before she killed herself, the film succeeds in creating a realist portrayal.¹⁶² It succeeds in doing this precisely because it does not conform to the more complicated reality of Woolf's life. Below I analyse how sometimes reality is shaped by misquotations.

(Mis)quotations

After the prologue of Woolf's suicide, the three protagonists of *The Hours* are introduced as they are waking up, as I indicated above. Yet, before the images of each woman lying in bed in the morning, the partners of the women are shown, each as they return from an early morning errand. This beginning immediately specifies their domestic situation, the sharing of a household with a caring partner, who gets up early. The film foregrounds this family aspect, the aspect of being a wife of someone, more emphatically than the novel does. In that way, the film appeals to another element of *Mrs Dalloway* than Cunningham's book does. Whereas Cunningham's novel emphasizes the style of interior monologue, the different truths at play, and homosexual love, the film foregrounds one of the most critiqued elements of *Mrs Dalloway*: the protagonist being a "Mrs," who supports her husband, haunted by far less intellectual questions than Woolf.

short review of the film, on a website called filmcritic.com, read: 'Mentally ill author Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) is on suicide watch in 1920s England as she pens her novel *Mrs Dalloway*' (55). Lee also mentions other incorrect historical references, such as the houses in which Woolf lives, which are much too grand and elegant, or Vanessa Bell, Virginia's sister who is a painter, but in the film is "absurdly posh, a high-society lady one couldn't possibly imagine picking up a paintbrush" (53). Also according to Lee, Nicole Kidman appears "too young for the mid-forties author of *Mrs Dalloway*, let alone for the fifty-nine-year-old who kills herself" (54).

¹⁶² The text Woolf was truly working on just before she died was in fact "A Sketch of the Past" (1976 [1939]), in which Woolf describes her childhood memories, reminiscences that contributed to her feelings of unease and her fear of madness. "A Sketch of the Past" thus would be the correct textual background or context for her suicide, not *Mrs Dalloway*, which she wrote twenty years earlier.

In the film, Woolf's last letter is inserted in this context. The same letter is used as in the book. However, in the film the letter is shortened. What is printed in bold is left out in the monologue in the film:

Dearest,

I feel certain that I am going
mad again: I feel we cant go
through another of these terrible times.
And I shant recover this time. I begin
to hear voices, and cant concentrate.
So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have
given me
the greatest possible happiness. You
have been in every way all that anyone
could be. **I dont think two
people could have been happier till
this terrible disease came. I cant
fight it any longer.** I know that I am
spoilng your life, that without me you
could work. And you will I know.
You see I cant even write this properly. **I
cant read.** What I want to say is that
I owe all the happiness of my life to you.
You have been entirely patient with me &
incredibly good. **I want to say that -
everybody knows it. If anybody could
have saved me it would have been you.**
Everything has gone from me but the
certainty of your goodness. I
cant go on spoilng you life any longer. I dont think two
people
could have been happier than we have been.

V.

The text has likely been shortened to suit the length of the opening sequence. Nevertheless, it changes the letter in a significant way. The three fragments that are elided concern Woolf's mental health. In the first fragment, Woolf mentions the "terrible disease," which refers to the nervous breakdown that she was going through at that moment, and from which she had been suffering before. "I can't fight it any longer," she writes. In the past she has recovered from attacks of mental illness, but this time she fears she will not be able to recover. The disease not only makes her fear that it will destroy her as well as their joint happiness, but also that it will disturb her ability to write and read, as she specifies in the second part that is skipped: "I can't read."

If one isolates "I can't read," as is done by omitting it in the film, it does not seem to give much crucial information. But if one knows how essential reading was to Woolf's life, these three words convey panic as well as fear. Whereas for some the act of reading may serve as a diversion, for Woolf, reading, like writing, was at the heart of her life. It does not seem a sentence that can easily be left out -- if any sentence from a suicide letter can be skipped at all.

The last fragment seems to repeat what she writes just above: that she owes all happiness of her life to Leonard. However, this fragment is the most stuttering, or the least fluent, of all sentences: "I want to say that -- everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you." The agony that she must have felt is visible in the word order. "I want to say that -- everybody knows it" shows that she wants to say something, which she considers to be superfluous on second thought, because everybody already knows it. She is reducing herself to silence in the name of "everybody." In this sense, it is a self-destructive line: she want to say something, but assures herself that it is not worth mentioning; everybody already knows it. Alternatively, one can read it as emphasizing the point that she wants to make, as though she has to convince herself of the truth of her point of view: everybody knows it, so it must be true.

She continues: "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you." In all the fragments that are omitted, mostly so in this last sentence she appears helpless, at the end of her resources. She states that she "cannot fight it any longer,"

then she claims that what she wants to say is something that everybody already knows, and finally she writes that *if* anybody could have saved her, it could only have been Leonard. She could not have done it herself.

The fragments that are omitted in the film might seem the most repetitive and perhaps the least comprehensive parts of the letter, which for the rest is written in a clear style. Yet, the anguish that speaks in these sentences seems crucial for her last message. Precisely those are the most self-absorbed and show the state of her panicking mind. Taking the context of the film into consideration, the stories of the three women of different generations who all struggle to find happiness in everyday life, the abridged letter suddenly suggests that her suicide is a sacrifice for Leonard's happiness; or, for the happiness that they used to share and that should be ended rather than destroyed by another episode of mental disease. In contrast, the elements that indicate that she *herself* could not bear another of those attacks are decisive for the novel. For the film they would confuse the achieved unity. This apparently small difference indicates the difference of emphasis between the film and the book. The film is a portrayal of three generations of women who are presented as victims of convention, marriage, family life and every day life. That Woolf would sacrifice her life for the happiness of Leonard suits the melodramatic and sentimental style of the film, which has a lot of shots of tear-filled eyes, and in which each of the women collapses in the role of "loving wife" or "care-taker."

That a seemingly slight disfiguration of the letter produces an entirely different meaning was already shown when Woolf was found in the river Ouse and newspapers printed parts of her letter in 1941. On 18 April she was found by a group of teenagers. Leonard Woolf went to identify her body. The day after, Leonard attended the inquest and presented the various suicide notes that he had recovered to the coroner. In the biography *Virginia Woolf* (1996), Lee writes about this inquest: "The coroner read out some of the 'Tuesday' suicide note, misquoting it, and interrogated Leonard as to the order of events" (764). During the next week the reports in the newspapers replicated the coroner's misquotations: "I feel I am going mad. I cannot go through these terrible times. I hear voices and cannot

concentrate on my work.” Furthermore, the report quoted: “I cannot fight any longer. I know I am spoiling your life. You have been perfectly good to me.”¹⁶³

A remark by the coroner was published as well: “We all knew her and her writing, and a responsible person like her must have felt the period of the war and the general beastliness of things more than most people, and it probably brought on a recurrence of the old trouble” (765). In these quotations, the following mistakes were made (the words in bold have been left out):

I feel **certain** that I am going mad **again**. I **feel we** cant go through **another of** these terrible times. **And I shant recover this time**. I **begin to** hear voices and cannot concentrate [“on my work” was added].

I cant fight **it** any longer. I know **that** I am spoiling your life, **that without me you could work**. [In the newspaper these words are followed by: “You have been perfectly good to me”, which is a summary of her sentence: **You have been entirely patient with me & incredibly good.**]

The first words that are elided mainly concern time-related terms that indicate her fear of the return of her madness: “certain”, “again”, “another of” and “I shant recover this time.” When these specifying words are left out, the sentence becomes general. Moreover, in Woolf’s letter the “terrible disease” echoes the “terrible times” that she mentions at the beginning of her letter and that she described as “another of these terrible times.” When “another of” is left out, as is the case in the newspaper report, “these terrible times” seem to refer to the horror of wartime. Hence, her suicide becomes more realistic: it becomes something to which people can relate because it regards the shared condition of the wartime. Furthermore, the omission of the word “it” in the sentence “I cannot fight **it** any longer” adds to the impression that Woolf’s desperation was caused by general malaise. “I cannot fight any longer” expresses a less particular weariness than “I cannot fight *it* any longer”, in which “it” refers to the “terrible disease.” In combination with the remark that Woolf “must have felt the period of war and the general beastliness of things more

¹⁶³ The reports with the misquotations appeared in, among other newspapers, the *Sussex Daily News* and the *Southern Weekly News*.

than most people,” the report created the impression that Virginia Woolf was a “war casualty.” Lee writes that

On 27 April, the wife of the Bishop of Lincoln wrote an outraged letter to *The Sunday Times*, responding to the report of the coroner’s remark about feeling “the general beastliness of things more than most people.” “What right has anyone to make such an assertion?... He belittles those who are carrying on unselfishly for the sake of the others... Many people possibly even more ‘sensitive’ have lost their all and yet they take their part nobly in this fight for God against the devil. Where would we all be if we listen to and sympathise with this sort of ‘I cannot carry on?’” (766).

The woman who wrote this responds to the report of the coroner, but thinks she is responding to Woolf’s supposedly last words. This shows how even a small omission can cause a great misunderstanding. The misunderstanding becomes a good example of how realism works: it reaffirms what we already think we know.

Clearly, the reaction of the wife of the Bishop of Lincoln was based on the misquotation that caused a misinterpretation, not only by her but also by many others. Those misinterpretations on the one hand show how precarious it is to represent historical material, and how closely *accuracy* is related to *truth* when representing original material in another context. Yet, on the other hand, there is no such thing as a single proper representation, or a proper context. The woman’s reaction is the result of a misquotation; however, the coroner had read Woolf’s original letter and was the first to present the misinterpretation. The assumed causal relation between the misquotation and the misinterpretation was started by an inverted causality: in the case of the coroner, his initial misinterpretation of the original material generated his misquotations.

Woolf on Reading

Apart from writing, reading is a central theme in Cunningham’s novel. Not only because one of the main characters in the book, Mrs Brown, is reading *Mrs Dalloway*, and because Clarissa Vaughan, as an editor, is a professional reader, but foremost because the whole book is an account of the way in which Cunningham

reads Woolf's work as well as life. His account of her way of *writing* is simultaneously an account of his way of *reading* her work. Perhaps, then, the historical frame of reference is dominated by the (inter)textual frame of reference, as Cunningham's novel echoes Woolf's style of writing and as the book reflects on the historical reality insofar it is mediated and constructed through Woolf's work.

In "How Should One Read A Book?" (1960 [1932]), Woolf writes that the only advice one can give about reading is to accept no advice. Yet, after she has said this, she does talk about reading and of what we expect of books:

Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices. If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning. Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice (1960: 235).

When Woolf writes that we expect of fiction that it shall be true, she refers to the expectation that fiction mirrors reality: the truth of realism. Woolf's wish to banish the preconception of truthfulness and instead try to become the author is exactly what Cunningham does: *The Hours* can be read as an attempt to become the author Virginia Woolf while she is writing *Mrs Dalloway*. Cunningham has thought about that book almost constantly since the first time he read it in high school, as he confesses in an interview at the NYS Writers Institute (April 18, 2001). Yet, when one tries to become the author who is as wellknown as Woolf, one can no longer read the text as unbiased as Woolf would prefer. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, biographical information often frames and predetermines the manner in which one reads a book.

Cunningham has the fictional author Richard comment on this at the moment his oeuvre has just been rewarded with a major literary prize: "I got a prize for my performance, you must know that. I got a prize for having AIDS and going nuts and being brave about it, it had nothing to do with my work" (63). Richard expresses a fear that many writers feel: that their books are read because of circumstantial influences or biographical exposure, not because of their literary

talent. One can never quite say whether a book is praised because of its literary achievement or because the book appeals to a social interest or need. The reasons for applauding a book are never pure. Or, at least, there are no standards that can be applied to judge the purity of reader's motivations. Literary prizes, such as the Nobel Prize, are often lead by political interests, rewarding books written by minorities or authors from dictatorial states. Yet, this does not mean that those books are badly written or do not deserve a prize. This is the complex sociological truth of literature, in which literary standards cannot be isolated from other contexts.

When Woolf was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, at the moment when she had realised that it would become a novel, she wrote in her diary on October 14th 1922: "I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side – something like that." As Elaine Showalter quotes in her introduction to the *Mrs Dalloway* edition of 1992, Woolf also wrote in her notebook on 16 October 1922 : "Mrs D. seeing the truth, SS seeing the insane truth" (1992: xxvii). The sane truth of Mrs Dalloway and the insane truth of the poet Septimus Smith are paralleled by the truths of Clarissa Vaughan and Richard in *The Hours*. When Richard complains about the prize, Clarissa replies that the prize "has everything to do with your work" (63). This is *her* truth. Clarissa's opinion then represents the "sane truth" and Richard's the "insane truth." What makes *The Hours* fascinating is that the insane truth is a very sane truth as well.

In offering his reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, Cunningham is not only led by biographical material about Woolf, but also by his own personal and social framework, through which he reframes the story of her book. He foregrounds homosexual love: manifestly in the chapters on Clarissa Vaughan, who is living with her partner Sally and nurses her homosexual friend Richard (in Woolf's book Richard is the name of the husband of *Mrs Dalloway*); latently in the other chapters, in each of which a kiss between two women occurs. This recurring kiss is also an intertextual reference to *Mrs Dalloway*, in which a kiss takes place between Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton, for whom Clarissa felt "what men felt" (34).

In *The Hours* various kinds of realism are at play within a fictional framework. First, it is written in a realistic style: Cunningham appears committed to the truth that functions within the frame of reference that he is speaking about.

Second, Cunningham portrays three different social milieus in three different periods of time, which follow a truthful depiction comparable to the principles of realism. Third, there is the truth of history: Virginia Woolf is a real person, who wrote *Mrs Dalloway* and did commit suicide in 1941 by drowning herself in the river Ouse. This is the realism that, according to McHale, belongs to historical novels, as well as of complexly structured postmodernist ones. Fourth, Cunningham makes use of streams of consciousness, the modernist technique *par excellence*, through which he portrays truthfully how reality is perceived subjectively. Fifth, there is the truthful account of Cunningham's reading: a truth that is simultaneously personal, thoroughly intertextual, and coherent across the framework of the two corresponding novels. This is where the modernist aspect of the novel moves into a postmodernist framework, creating a meta-fictional structure by its intertextual references. Thus, as Woolf wrote about combining the sane and the insane truth, the novel *The Hours* mixes historical truth with realist, historical, intertextual and personal truth.

Waves

After the "Prologue," in which Woolf's suicide is narrated, all chapters of *The Hours* have one of three titles: "Mrs. Woolf", "Mrs. Brown", or "Mrs. Dalloway". The first "Mrs. Woolf" chapter starts as follows:

Mrs. Dalloway said something (what?), and got the flowers herself.

It is a suburb of London. It is 1923.

Virginia awakens. This might be another way to begin, certainly; (29).

It is the beginning of the day, Virginia awakes, and thinks of a first line for her novel about a certain Mrs. Dalloway. Cunningham describes how Virginia's literary ideas come into being and transform. The process of creation, even the moment of inspiration, is immediately lost only to return in a different form. Virginia thinks: "This might be *another* way to begin" (my Italics). It is not "the" way to begin, but "another" way to begin, which signifies that she already has been thinking of other opening sentences before this possible beginning. After the thought, she falls

asleep again and dreams that she floats through a park. She wakes up to find that the first line she was thinking of is now gone:

Virginia awakens again. She is here, in her bedroom at Hogarth House. Gray light fills the room; muted steel-toned; it lies with a gray-white, liquid life on her coverlet. It silvers the green walls. She has dreamed of a park and she has dreamed of a line for her new book – what was it? Flowers; something to do with flowers. Or something to do with a park? Was someone singing? No, the line is gone, and it doesn't matter, really, because she still has the feeling it left behind. She knows she can get up and write (30).

The beginning of the day coincides with the process of beginning a new novel. One can read it as a beautiful descriptive, imaginative passage about the idea that writing comes from involuntary memories, sudden impressions or flashes of thought that disappear and reappear; a very modernist idea, as we have seen in chapter one. However, I am curious not only about Cunningham's portrayal, if it confirms the image of the modernist author, but also about the first level of meaning, in which a partly fictional Virginia is portrayed in relation to Woolf's writing. In other words, the beginning of the novel "signifies" through its relationship with published texts by Woolf, and this signification pertains to an intertextual truth construction, to use a distinction that Michael Riffaterre makes between meaning and significance in his article "Syllepsis" (1980).¹⁶⁴

The narrative of *The Hours* contains many clues that lead to Woolf's work. Several of those are clear links to *Mrs Dalloway* or the essay "Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown," while other clues are perhaps not created consciously by Cunningham, found simply because one cannot help thinking of Woolf's work and writing while reading *The Hours*. I would like to bring the passage above, in which the beginning of a day is fused with the beginning of a new novel, in dialogue with a passage by Woolf about yet another beginning, that of Woolf's life, at least insofar as she can remember it. It is a passage from "A Sketch of the Past" (1976 [1939]), a text she

¹⁶⁴ With the term "syllepsis" Riffaterre refers to Jacques Derrida, who in his book *La Dissémination* (1972) prefers to use the trope "syllepsis" with regard to Mallarmé's poetry. Riffaterre explains that the trope "consists in understanding the same word in two different ways at the same time, one being literal or primary, the other figurative (629)."

was working on shortly before she committed suicide. In this autobiographical text, published after her death in *Moments of Being* (1976), Woolf attempts to recollect her first childhood memories. The first memory she describes is one of flowers on her mother's dress: "[I] can still see purple, red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose" (64).

In the fragment by Cunningham, Virginia also remembers a beginning with flowers: "Flowers; something to do with flowers." When Cunningham wrote the passage, he of course knew that *Mrs Dalloway* begins with the sentence: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." It is this sentence to which he refers. Yet, describing Virginia as remembering an image of flowers the book seems not only to connect with the first sentence of *Mrs Dalloway*, but also with the other text in which she writes about remembrance and flowers. In *Fictional Truth* (1990), Riffaterre calls such intertextual references the "unconscious truth," which he distinguishes from referential truths that concern the formal features of fiction. For Riffaterre, the unconscious of fiction pertains to a hidden level of the text. In psychoanalytic theory the unconscious often is understood as a hidden truth behind appearances. The unconscious of the text should, however, not be confused with the unconscious of the writer or the reader. Riffaterre defines the unconscious of the text as the intertext: the references and significations that are part of the text but that are repressed by the surface of fiction that is dominated by the main narrative. He writes that "the intertext is hidden like the psychological unconscious and, like that unconscious, it is hidden in such a way that we cannot help finding it" (86).

I prefer not to define the intertextual relations as unconscious, since this metaphor suggests that it holds clues necessary for a true understanding of the text. Such an unconscious could be interpreted as the origin of the text. Instead, I argue that the emphasis on the originating moment of Virginia's writing, of the new day and her awakening, signifies that the origin is always already lost in the complexity of the intertext, in which the traces of what came first and what followed are thoroughly entangled, moving back and forth like waves. Cunningham seems to search not only for the origin of Virginia's writing, but also for the reason for her suicide. Precisely through his search, however, the novel shows how the truth of an origin is always a construct that is created afterwards.

After Woolf has described her first memory of the flowers in “A Sketch of the Past,” she goes on to recount her second memory:

that will lead to my second memory, which also seems to be my first memory, and in fact it is the most important of all my memories. If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands on this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind (65).

The beginning of *Mrs Dalloway* mentions flowers as well as waves: the two objects of Woolf’s first memory. After the first sentence of *Mrs Dalloway*, in which she says “she would buy the flowers herself,” the freshness of the morning air is described “as if issued to children on a beach” (3). This freshness reminds Clarissa of other memories of morning air that she compares with waves as well: “the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave” (3). In *The Hours*, Cunningham describes a possible way of coming into existence of these first sentences of Woolf’s novel. He chose to let the sentences arise as Virginia is just waking up, falling asleep and awakening again; a pattern that resembles the withdrawing and returning movement of waves, just as in Woolf’s second memory.

In my first chapter, I argued that the state of falling asleep, waking up and lying half asleep can be read as a typical modernist metaphor for the moment of creation. Irrespective of the question whether the authors have been aware of intertextual connotations, Woolf’s and Cunningham’s description parallel Proust’s description of Marcel as he is falling asleep in the beginning of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, a falling asleep that eventually also shades into his awakening. Marcel, just as Woolf in her first memory and as described by Cunningham in *The Hours*, is half awake, half sleeping, following a logic of daydreams in which dream images merge with awake thoughts. I have argued that such a beginning could be read as an answer to the question, How to begin writing? Begin by falling asleep; by relinquishing rational control and letting dreams and thoughts merge. This

conforms to the modernist paradigm that writing can never be fully controlled; that fiction should follow involuntary threads of thought.¹⁶⁵

Woolf's first memory, the base on which the bowl of her life stands, cannot be such a steady base, since she describes it as her *second* memory, "which also seems to be [her] first memory." Just as the first beginning of writing can never be traced, one's very first memory is perhaps the second one, or maybe the seventh, twentieth or hundred thirteenth memory, or somewhere in between the first and the following ones. Recounting her first memories Woolf writes that she heard the waves breaking: "one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two." In this description, it is not clear which sound is heard as "one" and which as "two"; it describes a rhythm rather than an order. If one listens long enough, one could start hearing: "two, one, two, one, two, one." Although one and two suggest succession, it is not important which one comes first. When one hears waves breaking on a beach one hears rhythm, not order. Similarly, the first memory on which the bowl of her life stands is her second memory, or her first, or her second. This movement of the sea and memory is mirrored by the movement of falling asleep and waking up, which also reflects the process of writing, in which ideas come, are dismissed, come back, are written down, and crossed out, as by "a splash of water."

The bowl "that one fills and fills and fills," described as an image of life, can also be read as a metaphor for the writing process: an idea serves as the base, on which the bowl of the book stands, which one fills and fills and fills, until it spills over and one starts refilling; as one starts deleting and rewriting after having been writing for a while. In the beginning, in which Cunningham describes how Virginia thinks of a possible first sentence for her book, not a bowl is filled but the room: "Gray light fills the room; muted steel-toned; it lies with a gray-white, liquid life on her coverlet. It silvers the green walls." The adjectives that Cunningham uses – gray, steel-toned, gray-white, liquid – belong to water, more particularly to the sea. Though Cunningham describes the light that fills the room, one sees and almost hears the sea "sending a splash of water," as Woolf writes. In Cunningham's novel,

¹⁶⁵ The chapters about Mrs Brown and Mrs Dalloway in *The Hours* also begin in the morning: Mrs Brown is just waking up and Mrs Dalloway has just gotten up.

Virginia's fictitious memory and the liquid light in her room fuse with the image that Woolf describes as she recounts her first memory of hearing the sea.

In *Mrs Dalloway* the waves of the sea are a recurring image in the associations of several characters in the book. Apart from the freshness of morning air, waves are associated with the sounds in the city of "humming traffic, rising and falling" (62), as well as with the acceptance of life and its ups and downs: "So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all'" (43). The recurring association forms a metaphor for the flowing structure of the book. The way in which the thoughts and lives of the different protagonists are connected resembles a rhythm of waves that move along, slightly touch, merge and push each other forward.¹⁶⁶

The image, or sound, of the endless breaking of waves, can be read as the fruitless search for one's true first memory, or as the mistake of believing in a true origin of a work of art, a first version of a text. However, Cunningham's focus on the originating moment of writing, as well as his choice to use the first version of Woolf's last letter and the first title of her novel, appear to confirm the belief that the unedited, raw material of sketches and drafts hold a truth that disappears when it is rewritten and reshaped. However, one can justifiably wonder whether there have not been even earlier versions of the suicide note, considering Woolf's habit of rewriting. One could even ask, with Derrida in mind, whether any letter may be called original, since writing always already is a process of re-writing, repetition, and reconsideration. One may find traces of these letters in her novels or diaries. In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf writes that her mother said about her first marriage that she had been "as happy as it is possible for a human being to be" (89), for example. The sentence resembles what she writes to Leonard Woolf in the first version of her suicide letter: "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been." Woolf's choice of words is recognisable because she repeats similar formulations in her oeuvre.

¹⁶⁶ *The Waves* is also a title of a later novel by Woolf, in which she presents the voices of six characters, exploring individuality, self and community.

To Conclude: Self-reflexive Thoughts on Truth

At certain junctures, Cunningham lets the protagonists in the book discuss fiction and truth. For example, Clarissa Vaughan and her friend Louis comment on the book by their mutual friend Richard. Louis thinks the book is about Clarissa:

“He hardly even bothered to change your name.”

“That isn’t me,” she says. “It’s Richard’s fantasy about some woman who vaguely resembles me.”

“It’s a damned weird *book*.”

“So everybody seems to think.”

“It feels like it’s about ten thousand pages long. Nothing happens. And then, *bam*. She kills herself” (129-130).

The interpretation of the character’s identity in Richard’s book clearly depends on the reader. One could view this conversation as if the characters are talking about the novel in which they appear. The woman then simultaneously refers to Clarissa Vaughan and to Virginia. Alternatively, the conversation could be about the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, whose protagonist is also called Clarissa, whom Woolf was thinking of having die at the end of the novel. Through this exchange, Cunningham expresses his awareness of his appropriation of Woolf’s life and thoughts: his portrayal of Virginia is his fantasy; she is not Virginia Woolf; she is a fantasy about a woman who vaguely resembles Virginia Woolf.

In the film, this conversation is rendered slightly different and hence self-referential in a different way:

“I thought you were meant to do more than just change people’s names. Isn’t it meant to be fiction? He even had you living on the 10th street.”

“It isn’t me.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You know how Richard is; it is a fantasy.”

Louis interprets names as signs that point to reality. Not only the names of persons, but also of streets. On the one hand, he finds it ridiculous to base a character on a

living person, even make her live in the same street. But on the other hand the changing of the street name would not suffice. He says: "I thought you were meant to do more than just change peoples names." Louis reads in a realist manner, projecting his own reality onto the story, projecting Clarissa Vaughan on the character. For him fiction cannot be about a reality he personally knows. However, for Clarissa the same book depicts a fantasy. These are two conflicting readings that in a textual reading can communicate just as the characters in the book do, but in a realist reading one of the two perspectives has to dominate.

In the novel, reality and fiction merge. Not only with respect to content, but also in the style of writing and narrating, which comments on the topic of writing and reading throughout, thus asking for reflection on writing at the moment of reading. In the film, this self-reflection on the medium is not as emphatically present. The representation of writing does not suggest reflection on the way the film is narrated. Indeed, writing in the film consolidates the constructed consistency. As McHale argues, modernist subjectivism and epistemological doubt form the beginning of radical ontological questions that mark postmodernism. In this sense, Cunningham takes up the thread where Woolf left it. The film, in contrast, seems to make a loop, returning to realist narration. That development cannot be explained as a form of radicalisation or continuation of the modernist-postmodernist pursuit, but rather as a form of nostalgia. Perhaps the contemporary popularity of books and films that are based on true stories can be viewed as a nostalgic desire for the wholeness of truth that realism delivered before modernist and postmodernist works unmasked this wholeness, as being full of lack, contradictions and false construction.