

## ADJUSTING EMOTIONS/LINGUISTIC ADAPTATION: CINEMATIC MULTI-PERSPECTIVES ON *THE HOURS*

*Sara Corrizato, PhD*

*Giada Goracci, PhD*

English Studies Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures  
University of Verona, Italy

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### Abstract

As the terms themselves suggest, *linguistics* is the study of the human language, *literary criticism* includes the evaluation and the interpretation of literary texts and *film studies* foster the critical analysis of films and TV shows. Since written texts and audiovisual products are considered the mirror of the society to which they belong, the relevance of the three disciplines as possible analytical approaches to decode and understand society both anthropologically and culturally, is fully acknowledged in the academic world. Abandoning the conventional idea according to which linguists, literary and film critics have to work in separate environments, however, can promote a fertile intellectual dimension, in which a multi-leveled approach of analysis can be developed: film adaptations of literary texts, for instance, can encourage several eye-opening interpretations.

The present paper analyses Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and Virginia Woolf's masterpiece *Mrs Dalloway* as examples of multi-perspective texts. While not exhaustive, the study fosters a cross-cultural approach to film adaptation especially focusing on emotions and the way they can be transported into cinematic representation.

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**Keywords:** Linguistics, literary criticism, film studies, *The Hours*, emotions

### Introduction

In the quote taken from Allen F. Repko's *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*, the main aim of selecting the so-called multidisciplinary approach is clearly explained: scholars' choice to prefer a multifaceted method of analysis that could take into consideration the heterogeneous, even contrasting, investigative approaches offered by different disciplines can bring eye-opening results in studying and examining complicated issues. In fact, as Taylor Huber and Morreale (2002) clarify, "each discipline has its own intellectual history, agreement and disputes about subject matter and method" (2) and, therefore, a cooperative involvement of two or more of them can contribute to carry out a complete and diversified research. In the light of these considerations, universities and research centres all over the world have recently chosen to follow the multidisciplinary method, allowing many new analytic perspectives to flourish: to name but a few, the cooperation between science and technology, engineering, and mathematics, or the fusion of technologic findings with medicine, ecology or economics have contributed to make innovative and challenging studies spread<sup>124</sup>. In the humanistic field multidisciplinary has

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<sup>124</sup> The cooperation between science and other disciplines, both technical and humanistic, is a relatively new approach developed in the academic areas through post graduate curricula and PhD programs: the application of science and also the use of computers (computational science) are nowadays essential to business and research. In many cases, indeed, scientists, engineers or economists can model and solve complex problems around us with innovative analytic paths which take into consideration the intermingled

been accepted too: among the several examples the connection between philosophy and biology, anthropology and economy, law and literature are the most popular cases<sup>125</sup>.

### **Linguistics, Literature and Cinema: a mutual relationship**

Acknowledging the effectiveness of this multi-method analysis, the need to narrow the apparently non-reducible gap between literature and language has become an interesting area of research among scholars. Yet in 1960 Cannon, citing Wellek and Warren's work, highlights the importance of the linguistic analysis in the process of understanding literature, specifically poetry. According to what the two comparative literary critics explain in their masterpiece entitled *Theory of Literature* (1948), in fact, the analysis of literary texts must be based on two perspectives that they called *extrinsic* and *intrinsic*. With the first term they focus on all those elements living outside the text, e. g. the author and the cultural background; whereas the second adjective includes linguistic parameters, such as phonetics, prosody and rhythm of the language used. Both categories, according to Wellek and Warren are essential to fully understand the literary work. Thus, they aim at abandoning the idea that sees the two disciplines as two autonomous entities, but they suggest to study literature through linguistics. In the second part of the twentieth century, besides, Lester (1969) makes readers aware of the fact that linguistics plays a crucial role in the process of understanding literature offering two reasons: firstly, considered words and sentences as the *skeleton* of literary texts implies the need to know and understand language to interpret literature; secondly, language is seen as the unique means the writer has to create the text, therefore readers has to be familiar with the author's means of communication if they want to decode what he has written (366).

In this regard, De Beaugrande (1993) points out that language "is not merely something that people learn to produce and receive, but something that mediates most other modes of learning" (444), and, therefore, it can be thoroughly essential in the case of analyzing and comprehending literary texts. Following his perspective, what he defines the *traditional contrasts*, which see linguistics as an abstract, descriptive and theory-based system, whereas literature as a concrete, evaluative and practice-centered artifact (423), can be overcome promoting an innovative approach to both disciplines based on the cooperation between literary theory and discourse analysis. Used as an umbrella-term, as the author explains, the expression *literary theory* abandons the idea according to which literature has to be considered only as something *written*, but it includes the study, criticism and contextualization of the literary work within its situational and socio-cultural context (435). On the other hand, the conventional concept associated with linguistics has been revised too: following the approach offered by discourse analysis linguistics becomes a dynamic and interactive system (432) which can be easily melted with literary theories connected to a specific written work. As explained above, an interdisciplinary method that can take into consideration the multiple perspectives of analysis given by both disciplines is doubtless successful in discovering and conceptualizing the object under examination.

Along with literature and linguistics, the interest of the academic world has fostered the inclusion of audiovisual materials in the multidisciplinary areas of research: given their complex structures, indeed, TV shows and films need a multi-level method of analysis to be

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society that is always on the move. For a more detailed description and contextualization of multidisciplinary approaches developed in the second part of the twenty century see "The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity" (2012) edited by Frodeman, Thompson Klein and Mitcham.

<sup>125</sup> Many are the examples of Universities and research centres which foster the interdisciplinary perspective: the Department of Language and Literature of the University of Verona (Italy), for instance, is developing a cross-curricular path that aims at getting and keeping in relation literature and law, literature and medicine and literature and science (for a complete and detailed explanation see Carpi 2003, 2005, 2012).

fully understood. In considering these products, Freddi and Pavesi (2005) draw attention to the fact that the language spoken in films is inseparably linked to the situational context – depending upon the plot itself, the setting and the exact moment in which the characters are interacting – and the socio-cultural context<sup>126</sup>, being deeply influenced by historical and cultural factors. Moreover, in any audiovisual product language and images are mixed together to create meaning in the environment to which they belong, as in the case of source culture, and in which they are imported, that is target culture. Using Díaz Cintas' (2008) words, what the academic world “is witnessing is the emergence and settling down of a new medium (audiovisual) as opposed to traditional ones (paper). Mono-dimensional (printed) documents are some-how becoming multi-dimensional (audiovisual) programmes (90). Given the complexity of audiovisual material, a multidisciplinary approach seems, therefore, an optimal solution to decode and understand audiovisual products. As Zabalbescoa (2008: 28) aims at highlighting, in fact, TV shows and films include several parameters that work together to bring them to life: first of all, the audiovisual structure is based on two general factors: non-verbal and verbal means. The former consists of music and visual effects (audio components), the picture and photography (visual components), and the latter encompasses dialogues and the sense of hearing (audio components), written words, and the ability to read them while sequences run one after the other (visual components). According to his explanation, filmic structure is composed by two types of signs and two modes of communication that combine to create four types of signs: audio- verbal (words spoken), audio-non-verbal (other sounds), visual-verbal (writing) and visual-non-verbal (other visual signs). The author also highlights the audience's role in contributing to develop the audiovisual product: users become interlocutors having an active participation in the process. They are, indeed, part of the lymphatic system of audiovisual products as they actively use their eyesight and hearing to internalize the heterogeneous text (26). As a consequence, all the elements taken into consideration by Zabalbescoa are complementary and equally important, therefore, a precise investigation of stills, sounds and words has been required.

In the light of these observation, the analysis of an audiovisual product can be more complex in the case when the TV show or the film is inspired by a literary work: as a matter of fact, all the parameters that have to be taken into account when an audiovisual product is studied have to be associated and decode in relation to the original text: in addition to the reproduction of the setting, the environment in which characters live and their costumes, the process of cinematic transposition has not to forget the adaptation of the linguistic dimension. Written words uttered by the individuals described throughout the pages come to life, requiring bodies and voice first, then gestures and intonation. In this specific case, literature, language and the audiovisual text melt to leave room to a new product which present *linguistic images* and *visual dialogues*.

### ***The Hours: a close up on emotions***

As stated above, contemporary high education studies in the field of foreign languages have undergone significant changes to make them more competitive and empower greater-quality offers worldwide. In this light, exploring both literature and linguistics together fosters a cross-cultural perspective through which their multifaceted interactions become meaningful milestones within the transformational changes in culture.

Such interaction between literature and linguistic is needed not merely because these two fields have reached impressive results in research and theory, but also because they are

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<sup>126</sup> Taking into consideration Mey's ([1993] 2001) definition, “context is a dynamic, not static concept: it is to be understood as the continually changing surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and in which linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible” (41).

the mirror of a complex and diversified context that is our society. A step further and we get to the point; discourse analysis and literary theory melt together to introduce another approach within text analysis: the cinematic perspective.

In this light, a meaningful instance of multi-perspective text to analyze by means of the above mentioned approach is Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*<sup>127</sup>. This work creates a dazzling maze of inter-textual references to both Virginia Woolf's literary production as well as to her biography. Just as Postmodernism relied on intertextuality, reminding us that all texts are potentially plural and have no defined boundaries, Cunningham manipulates his novel establishing a two-way relationship between himself and Woolf, thus offering an overt dialogue between past and present that involves a third participant: the reader. Indeed, as Allen argues, readers are actively involved in infusing texts with meaning in that "texts are always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic 'voices' which exist within society" (209). These voices represent one the most peculiar characteristics to notice in the novel and play their role in and out of the text through the *stream of consciousness*. How can this literary device be transposed into a film? To this respect, Claes (56-7) distinguishes between 'phenotext', that is the text the reader sees and *in* which references are made, and the 'source text', the invisible text called upon by the phenotext and *to* which references are made. Hence, the filmic adaptation uses the exterior dialogue to render the interior monologue, instead of resorting to the cinematic cop-out of the voice-over narration. More significantly, Hare's script makes frequent allusions to *Mrs Dalloway*<sup>128</sup> in a manner that also viewers who have not read the novel can understand and appreciate it, intertwining the stories more frequently than in the novel. This technique draws direct parallels amongst the lives of the characters, thus making them appear more recognizable to the audience.

The filmic adaptation also implies an adjustment of the intricate relationship amongst writer, narrator and reader/audience that acquires hereby an empowered position within the text as they are all called to experience narration. Cunningham's work and Hare's adaptation show three women who measure out their lives in one day and whose existence is evidently unhappy. As a matter of fact, *The Hours* as both novel and film proposes itself as an emotional-based identification amongst the three characters of the book and the spectator, following a multi-levelled structure that operates in a semantic and pragmatic perspective.

The semantic perspective highlights Cunningham's use of the names of the characters that appear in *Mrs Dalloway* and other novels or essays by Virginia Woolf also altering and inventing new ones to be used as variations on the former, thus asking the reader to explore the web of inter-textual relations among the works. For instance, when Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway* goes out into the city, Scrope Purvis observes her as she crosses the street and he finds her "a charming woman" (Woolf 4). Cunningham replaces this character with Willie Bas who notices Clarissa's "certain sexiness" (Cunningham 13). This is an evident example of constructive connotation in that Cunningham here just changes the characters' names

<sup>127</sup> Cunningham's novel won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. As in *Mrs Dalloway*, the intertwined events take place in a single day and recount the lives of three women: Clarissa Vaughan, a middle-aged socialite, Virginia Woolf herself, and Mrs Brown, a housewife in 1949 Los Angeles, who is reading the novel *Mrs Dalloway*. One of the main features that emerges in this novel is the "logic of contamination"; indeed, Cunningham suggests that, in the same way viruses survive and contaminate people and places over time, *The Hours*, repropounding Virginia Woolf's powerful novel, seems to become part of the transmission process.

<sup>128</sup> The events and actions of this novel happen in one day only, in London. The work tells the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a 51-year-old woman, who leaves her home to buy flowers for the party she has arranged for the evening. As she is out, her mind is captured in a web of memories. The reader sees the events through the protagonist's and the other characters' eyes, thus entering a series of mental tunnels from which there is no escape.

preserving their rather genital sounding effect, thus strengthening the link between Scrope Purvis in *Mrs Dalloway* and the “phallic” Willie Bas.

At a pragmatic level, a significant event to ponder over is Sally’s kiss to Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*. In the novel this kiss is referred to as the most exquisite moment of Clarissa’s life, a sort of present she receives that is “wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which [...] she uncovered, or the radiance burned through, the revelation, the religious feeling!” (Woolf 38-9). In the novel *The Hours* the three women all reflect on or receive a kiss. Indeed, the scene in which Virginia and Vanessa are seated and the maid, Nelly, leaves them alone, the two sisters share an “innocent” kiss on the mouth: “It is an innocent kiss, innocent enough, but just now, in this kitchen, behind Nelly’s back, it feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures. Vanessa returns the kiss” (Cunningham 154). Afterwards, the reader experiences another kiss, this time between Laura and Kitty. Also in this case, they are in the kitchen and Kitty is crying. Laura, in the effort to calm her down, leans towards her and embraces her when, all of a sudden, Kitty looks at Laura and they kiss: “Laura desires Kitty. [...] Laura desires Dan, too. [...] She can kiss Kitty in the kitchen and love her husband, too. She can anticipate the queasy pleasure of her husband’s lips and fingers [...] and still dream of kissing Kitty again someday” (Cunningham 143). Their kiss, if compared to the previous one, seems more sensual.

In *Mrs Dalloway* Clarissa and Richard share two kisses, the first one when they were young: “A kiss? Had Richard kissed her, or had she, Clarissa, only believed Richard was about to kiss her, and evaded it?”. The other kiss is in the scene in which Clarissa comes back home to arrange the party and leaves Richard. Unlike the other kisses, this one is on Clarissa’s cheek. After Richard’s death, Clarissa would regret her behavior and ask him forgiveness for not having kissed “him on the lips, and for telling herself she did so only for the sake of his health” (Cunningham 203). In all the instances quoted above, Woolf and Cunningham share a concern that ties the unitary consciousness to the sexual duality of the mind. Both Cunningham and Woolf knew well what it was like to live in a heteronormative society. This concern appears in the transposition of the novel into film in that emotions intermingle with narration, making it clear that feelings can be motivational forces for both readers and audience. The process through which emotions can be activated implies different levels of feelings defined by Grodal (1996: 129) as follows:

- Vividness: the power of an isolated percept;
- Salience: the percept in context;
- Excitations: local activations linked to central human concerns;
- Emotions: activations linked to global narrative concerns.

On this premise, the emotional flow expressed through feelings is controlled by a group of modal qualities (Grodal 1996: 136):

- Intense: vivid or salient percepts with no-narrative concerns.
- Saturated: salient percepts that activate associations charged with affect.
- Tense: percepts induce “action-readiness”
- Emotive: percepts induces autonomic outlet (tear and laughter)

According to these schemata, both readers and spectators elaborate and conceptualize data in relation to their knowledge of characters, genre and other social aspects. As a matter of fact, genres rely on generic narrative filters that activate emotions in the audience while watching a film scene. Thus, for both the literary work and the film the relationship between the three women is an essential issue to grasp the content of the novel. In this light, the extract quoted above relating to “the kiss” is a clear example of emotional adaptation. Indeed, in Cunningham’s novel (1999: 110) the kiss that Laura shares with Kitty represents a form of consolation:

Kitty nods against Laura's breast. The question has been silently asked and silently answered, it seems. They are both afflicted and blessed, full of shared secrets, striving every moment. They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work. Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss. It is Kitty who pulls away. "You're sweet", she says. Laura releases Kitty. She steps back. She has gone too far, they've both gone too far, but it is Kitty who's pulled away first. [...] Laura is the dark-eyed predator. Laura is the odd one, the foreigner, the one who can't be trusted. Laura and Kitty agree, silently, that this is true.

Even though, at the beginning, the not-quite kiss these two women share implies some eroticism expressed by the closeness of their bodies, all of a sudden the situation becomes uncomfortable and Laura is the transgressor. In the film, this scene is represented through a close-up on Laura as she pulls back and her face looks confused as her mind realizes the voices of the children who are playing outside. Therefore, the initial intimacy of the action is disturbed by the "children's intrusion" into Laura's house, which brings her back to her role of mother rather than lover. Kitty is here filmed from above, her eyes are open-wide as she says "You're sweet", as in the novel, so that the audience perceives her character as innocent and ingenuous. The different element that appears in the film is the sentence spoken by Laura as Kitty leaves her house: "You didn't mind?", and Kitty answers "What?" suggesting the audience that the kiss represents a fact to be ignored. This behavior leads us further; it implies the unspoken transgression of which Laura is guilty and, as such, it needs a verbalization in the film scene, since it might be difficult to understand its message with only visual information. This shifting representation of the kiss takes on a symbolic meaning as a metaphor of Laura's desire to leave her domestic life.

In the same way, the kiss that Virginia shares with Vanessa is the result of her wish to escape from the daily life that has trapped her, hence the same situation Laura experiences. The only difference to notice is to be found in the characters' position; in fact, in Cunningham's novel (1999: 154), Virginia and Vanessa sit while the maid, Nelly, is cooking:

Here is Nelly with the tea and ginger and here, forever, is Virginia, unaccountably happy, better than happy, alive, sitting with Vanessa in the kitchen on an ordinary spring day as Nelly, the subjugated Amazon queen, Nelly the ever indignant, displays what she's been compelled to bring. Nelly turns away and, although it is not at all their custom, Virginia leans forward and kisses Vanessa on the mouth.

What strikes the reader here is the fact that the kiss appears as a stolen moment of pleasure. The "subjugated Amazon queen" embodies all society's rules, which Virginia does not stand and loathes. The childish play she creates in kissing her sister as Nelly is cooking in the same room, just in front of them symbolizes, on the one hand, the secret sympathy they share as Vanessa returns her kiss and, on the other hand, Virginia's victory on social hypocrisy. In the filmic adaptation the kiss conveys a different value. Indeed, the action takes place as Vanessa leaves the house and Virginia forcefully kisses her. Here, the kiss loses its symbolic features, its emphasis on positive sensations and the secret pleasure portrayed in the novel. Hereby, the film displays Virginia's despair and emotional confusion stressing on the presence of tears and drawing a parallel with Laura's kiss as an action whose aim is to break the social bonds, thus epitomizing and etching the similarities between Laura and Virginia. As noticed above, the visual representation of the novel needs specific interpretative moves in order to make the audience realize what is actually happening; most of these moves depend and rely on a symbolic reading of the film. As such, the film focuses on how emotions are transmitted, making it clear that any adaptation is the result of a specific reading of the source material, adding, transforming or eliminating dialogue and events and/or using fictional strategies in the mise-en-scene.

## Conclusions

Within the cross-cultural fields of investigation, *Mrs Dalloway* represents a striking instance of how a text can be read through various perspectives also relying on the cooperation of the literary, linguistic and cinematic approaches. Indeed, alongside the development of cinema as a mass form of both cultural representation and social entertainment, the 'moving image' has empowered its role, thus becoming the expression of the multi-perspective reality in which men live. From the experimental films, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which images transformed the real world into dreamy scenarios, the cinematic adaptation represents now a way to connect the various domains of culture into a mutual research of our evolving society.

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