

The Hours

Do I Miscalculate?

Though this film offers a rich assortment of alternative candidate mottoes, including “So that’s the monster,” “Only I can know” and “That *is* what we do,” the metacritical thrust of this essay, like that of the essay on *Frida*, determines the choice of subtitle.

Examples have been given of the gratuitous rejection of both fictional adultery and historical inaccuracy. Another misapplication of practical standards is to be found in certain reactions to *The Hours*. Some viewers complain that the principal characters are spoiled and that they selfishly disregard their loved ones. Other viewers defend the accuracy of the portrayals, insisting that consequences are irrelevant to sufferers of clinical depression. These supporters consider it “arrogant” of the complaining viewers to “pontificate” without medical knowledge. Be that as it may, no such issue of authenticity ever legitimately arises.

Virginia says of her protagonist, “She will kill herself over something which doesn’t seem to matter.” Louis says of the character in Richard’s novel who is based on Richard’s mother, “For no reason she kills herself.” The stipulation that there is no good reason for this behavior makes the discovery of any such reason an irrelevant coincidence. It would be no less folly to search for a genuine clinical explanation for the purchase by a depressed woman’s husband of yellow roses instead of some other type of flower.

Similarly, many make the facile inference that Laura is gay. This would sufficiently explain some of her behavior and provide an extra degree of affinity between her and Clarissa as lesbian mothers. But this sufficient diagnosis is no more necessary than that of depression. Laura is held hostage to the internal logic of the film, which dictates that women will kiss each other in each of the three stories, whether Laura likes it or not.

When Virginia is asked why a character in her novel has to die, she explains the death in terms of its dramaturgical and psychological functions, proving that she may be crazy, but she is not stupid. Equivalent competence is not consistently demonstrated by the audience. As demonstrated by much of the reaction to *Mulholland Drive* and *Adaptation*, some people simply forget what it is they are watching, or never realize it in the first place. (“There is no band” in *Mulholland Drive*, just as “there is no spoon” in *The Matrix*. The former film begins with a POV shot showing a pillow and then fading out, strongly implying sleep, such that all subsequent illogic may be attributed to dream.) Must Virginia’s characters behave realistically? She, in a different context, says, “There is no such obligation! No such obligation exists.”

The behavior of fictional characters does not necessarily reflect that of real people. It is determined by authors who are typically yielding to the demands of drama. These characters cannot help but accede to the whims of their authors, who, tautologically, have sovereign authority over them. Laura could be acknowledging this film’s cascade of puppet/puppeteer relationships when she says, “What does it mean to regret when you have no choice?” Her behavior is determined by Virginia just as Virginia’s is determined not only by history but also by novelist Michael Cunningham and screenwriter David Hare. In fact, the film is a schematic symphony of derivative (and exhaustively contextualized) behavior, none of which requires justification on any external grounds of plausibility:

- Laura, as cited above, kisses Kitty and Clarissa kisses Sally because of action in Virginia's life and in her novel, though the latter is not dealt with in the film.
- Laura is still in bed when Dan comes home and Clarissa is still in bed when Sally comes home because Virginia is still in bed when Leonard comes home.
- Naturally evolving out of the extensive, obvious, explicit parallelism during the titles, Clarissa says, "What a beautiful morning!" and "It's a beautiful morning" because Dan says, "It's a beautiful day."
- Dan and Laura encourage Richie to eat his breakfast and Clarissa asks Richard if he has eaten his breakfast because Leonard makes an issue of Virginia's breakfast. This may also explain why Richard lives in a building topped by a billboard featuring a boy eating cereal.
- Laura and Clarissa both encounter yellow roses because Virginia brings them to the bird's funeral.
- It is because of the circumstances of Virginia's suicide that water imagery is associated with the corresponding scene in Laura's story, and also, vestigially, why Clarissa's kitchen faucet misbehaves, why Louis has the last name *Waters* and why water is his chosen beverage. (Incidentally, Laura's friend may be named Kitty because a character of that name appears in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, a story in which a woman commits suicide.)
- Laura decides to kill herself and then decides not to, saying, "I changed my mind" because Virginia says, "I was going to kill my heroine. But I've changed my mind."
- Louis and Clarissa each arrives somewhere early because Vanessa does.
- Clarissa cracks eggs because Lottie does.
- Clarissa prepares "the crab thing" because Dan dies of cancer. The crabs in Clarissa's sink may also derive from the image of a fish that graces Laura's kitchen.
- Laura goes for a drive and Clarissa goes out shopping because Virginia goes for walks.
- Clarissa walks past hanging slabs of meat on her way to her first visit to Richard because Nelly chops meat for Virginia's lunch. Laura's baking seems less related to these than does Kitty's impending surgery.
- Richard hears voices because Virginia does. Richard denies the influence of such voices at a particular moment because Virginia does. As Laura reads in the hotel room, the audience (and by implication Laura) hears not just anonymous voices but Virginia's.
- Laura and Clarissa are visited, respectively, by Kitty and Louis because Virginia is visited by Vanessa. Kitty and Louis ring doorbells when they arrive, while Vanessa need not because her last name itself is Bell.
- Richie helps Laura in the kitchen and Rodney helps Barbara in the flower shop because Ralph helps Leonard at the printing press and Lottie helps Nelly in the kitchen. The action of the printing press also echoes the breaking of eggs.
- Louis says of a character in Richard's novel, "A whole chapter about 'Should she buy some nail polish?' And then guess what? After fifty pages *she doesn't!*" and Laura says "Yes. No" to the hotel clerk because Nelly says of Virginia that "she says she wants something then it turns out she doesn't."
- Richard dies because Virginia says, "The poet will die." His last line even quote's Virginia's suicide note, and his mode of suicide is derived from that of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia's novel, which, again, is not dealt with in the film. Richie seems peculiarly aware of his mother's intentions because Virginia characterizes him not only as "the poet" but as "the

visionary.” This insight may make him aware of his mother’s aborted suicide, which becomes an example for him.

- Laura tells of leaving a note for Dan because Virginia leaves notes for Leonard and Vanessa.
- Richie witnesses Laura kissing Kitty because Angelica witnesses Virginia kissing Vanessa. Julia stays in the kitchen when Clarissa kisses Sally, but then embraces Laura.
- Laura takes off her shoes in the hotel and Clarissa takes off her shoes in her bedroom because Virginia’s shoes come off in the river.
- Clarissa is an editor and Laura gets a job in a library because Virginia is an author and Leonard is an editor and printer.
- Laura goes home from Mrs. Latch’s with Richie because Virginia goes home from the train station with Leonard. By contrast, Sally walks home alone from the subway station.
- Clarissa says to Richard, “What are you asking? What are you trying to say?” and Laura says to Kitty, “What did the doctor say exactly?” because Vanessa says to Virginia, “What are you saying?”
- Richard says that “Mrs. Dalloway” is always giving parties “to cover the silence” because Laura says, “So . . .” for just that reason in her scene with Kitty.
- Louis is relieved to leave Clarissa, Richie is relieved to leave Mrs. Latch, and Kitty is (probably) relieved to leave Laura because Vanessa is relieved to leave Virginia.
- Doctors are discussed in Laura’s and Clarissa’s stories because they are discussed in Virginia’s.
- Laura disposes of her first cake and Clarissa disposes of some of the food intended for her party possibly because Virginia skips breakfast, is disgusted by the meat she sees in the kitchen and almost manages to avoid dinner. Similarly, Richie builds and destroys a toy house because Laura bakes and discards her first cake. Clarissa also deals with Richard’s trash.
- Virginia has not been invited to Vanessa’s party, but wants to give her sister’s children “a treat” of ginger and conducts a funeral for a bird. These snowball first into Kitty speaking of Ray’s birthday parties that are typically attended by fifty people and the birthday party that Laura gives for Dan after she nearly commits suicide. Finally, there is the party of “around sixty” people Clarissa prepares for Richard, which is canceled due to his death. (Eventually, Clarissa’s party acquires such import that it becomes her ritual field, much as how Joseph Campbell interprets T. S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party*.)
- Louis asks, “Why is it crazy?” because Virginia asks, “Why is busy ridiculous?”
- Louis asks, “You think I’m ridiculous?” and Clarissa responds, “Ridiculous?” because Vanessa says, “It’s been ridiculous in London,” Virginia asks, “Ridiculous? How?” and, when Vanessa replies, “Busy,” Virginia asks, “Why is busy ridiculous?”
- Clarissa says to Julia, “He gives me that look” because Lottie asks Nelly, “Did you give her that look?”
- Laura reacts negatively when Dan says, “I’ve had a wonderful day” because Virginia reacts adversely when Leonard says, “If I could walk midmorning, I’d be a happy man.” Related to this may be the sarcasm with which Richard describes the prospect of Clarissa’s party as “Wonderful.”
- Clarissa has a picture of a sheep on her wall because Nelly prepares a lamb pie.
- Richard says to Clarissa, “Don’t come near me” after Clarissa says to Louis, “Don’t touch me.”
- Richard says to Clarissa, “I love you” after Richie says to Laura, “I love you.”

- Dan says, “Come to bed, Laura Brown” and Sally takes off Clarissa’s coat because Leonard hopes Virginia will go to bed.
- Clarissa calls Louis “fortunate” (and Dan feels fortunate) because Vanessa says of Virginia, “This makes her very fortunate indeed.”
- Richard prepares to speak but then does not, because Leonard does so. For the same reason, Laura prepares to speak but is interrupted and continues only after a momentary hesitation.
- Laura says that she is “terrified” that Kitty “could disappear” because Leonard says to Virginia, “You disturb me when you disappear.” Also, Virginia speaks of her “extinction.”
- Clarissa has been with Sally for as long as it took Richard to write his novel: 10 years. And, as Louis says about Richard’s novel, “He even had you living on Tenth Street.”
- Richard has a relationship with a lesbian who has the same first name as the title character of *Mrs. Dalloway* because his mother reads that book and he sees her kiss another woman. An Oedipal explanation could also apply here.
- Clarissa has a daughter (Julia) and Laura is pregnant with (presumably) “Richard’s sister” because Vanessa has a daughter (Angelica). Vanessa also has sons, and so Laura has Richie and Clarissa cares for Richard as if for a dependent son. Clarissa’s daughter is named Julia because Vanessa has a son named Julian.
- Julia is initially seen wearing a backpack because Angelica is initially seen wearing wings on her back. Julia is then seen ascending stairs because Angelica is then told, “Fly away.” Also, Richard, as an adult, wears a bathrobe with rockets on it.
- The failure of Laura’s first cake and Clarissa’s frustrations in preparing her party may in part be a reflection of the misspellings in the manuscript submitted to Leonard.
- Each of the three stories features a minor (in one case unseen) male character with a name beginning with the letter *R*, forming the alliterative set of Ralph, Ray and Rodney.
- Louis asks Clarissa, “Are you feeling better?” because Vanessa asks Virginia the same question.
- On the telephone, Clarissa insists, “This *is* Clarissa Vaughan” and, when Richard says, “Mrs. Dalloway, it’s you,” she replies, “Yes, it’s me. It’s me” because when Leonard says, “This is not you speaking, Virginia,” Virginia replies, “It is me. It is my voice.” However, when Barbara asks, “It’s you, isn’t it?” Clarissa first agrees and then equivocates. Later, she says to Louis, “It isn’t me.”
- It is because of the film’s theme of death that Clarissa listens to Richard Strauss’s *Four Last Songs*. Consistent with this, the idea of a “death knell” could be suggested by the name Nelly together with Vanessa’s surname of Bell. It may also be because, for Clarissa, “everything does seem sort of silly” that her friend is named Sally, though the name plausibly derives from Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, as do many other elements. Incidentally, note that Nelly is combatively surnamed Boxall, Lottie is optimistically surnamed Hope, and the imprisoning baby sitter is Mrs. Latch. Note also the irrelevance of any historical basis for these names.

Further parallels may include such things as characters looking out windows and the colors of earrings. (In an unrelated matter, this sort of pattern helps to explain why Jerusalem is important to all three Abrahamic religions. It became important before all three of those religions existed. Specifically, it became important to Christianity and Islam because it was already important to Judaism.)

These homologies are related to the rhyming pairs of events observed in several of the films already considered, with the added dimension of a subtle causal link enabling the playing

of a mystical game related to Simon Says: Thus Spake Virginia. Like thoughts in the mind of God, Virginia's words are made flesh. And, as in *Like Water for Chocolate*, not even death stops women from interacting. But despite the correlations among the three parallel plots, and with Clarissa being "stuck" with her connection to Mrs. Dalloway, the resolution of each woman's destiny is different: suicide; aborted suicide and flight; suicide of another and reaffirmation. This independence is suggested during the titles when all three stories feature flowers, but of different colors. After Virginia says, "I choose death," Laura exerts a measure of autonomy, saying, "I chose life," a choice that recalls Ayla leaving her child in *The Clan of the Cave Bear*.

A related issue is that of dramatized history, which has already been dealt with at length elsewhere. Though this film includes several actual historical figures, historical accuracy is no more relevant than psychiatric accuracy. Contrary to the ostensible historicity of Virginia's episode, Lewis says of Richard's novel, "I thought you were meant to do more than just change peoples' names." With an observation that could serve as a disclaimer for Cunningham and Hare, Clarissa comments on whether Richard's novel is historically accurate: "I mean, in a way. Sort of. Richard's a writer. That's what he is. He uses things which actually happen. . . . But then he changes things. . . . More like, he makes them his own." Of course, Richard's habit of appropriation extends beyond his writing, as noted above. Barbara says to Clarissa, "It's you, isn't it? . . . In the novel? Isn't it meant to be you?" This is equally applicable to Virginia's novel as to Richard's. Clarissa recognizes that her behavior parallels Virginia's fictional Clarissa, and she acknowledges this to Richard: "just like Mrs. Dalloway – in the book." She also possibly senses, vaguely, Richard's fate when she says, "it's like having a presentiment." (Another presentiment may be had by Sally when, referring to the party to be thrown for Richard, she asks, "What if nobody comes?" Likewise, the lilies that Clarissa finds "morbid," Barbara recognizes as "perfect.")

Deborah Hornblow (*Los Angeles Times*, 2/11/03) marvels at how modern audiences are able to take the "disconnected threads" and "splinters" of films like *The Hours* and "connect the dots." Actually, setting aside the prologue, chronological linearity is maintained within each story, making the film as a whole little more challenging than the parallel action in Edwin S. Porter's 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*. In spite of the normal chronology, nonlinear causality may have to be allowed for. Virginia may at least experience feedback from the future such that her behavior is an effect as well as a cause. Louis invokes "eternity" when discussing Richard's novel. Richard remembers a future ceremony, asks whether he has already died and says, "I seem to have fallen out of time," the latter being part of every poet's job. This allows the film, including the action following his death, to be taken as Richard's hallucination. In support of this possibility, Virginia refers to the character in her book who will die as "the visionary," and Clarissa says to Louis about Richard's novel, "You know how Richard is. It's a fantasy." As exemplified by such films as *Mulholland Drive*, that which would be overly deterministic as realism is excusable as dream, where connections are not bound by logic. Also to be considered is Siegfried Kracauer's assertion of the *psychological* realism of German Expressionism. Richard freely concedes that "it's all mixed up now," and ultimately, as Louis says, "Isn't it meant to be fiction?"

Typical mainstream films feature a plausible, purposeful, linear, teleological causal trajectory implied by rational, coherent, cause-effect editing and organizational lucidity. But the valorization of naive realist cinema can result in the misapplication of genre standards, "as when some critics found *Dr. Strangelove* cynical because it had no admirable characters, when in fact

the lack of admirable characters is a constitutive feature of satire,” to quote Robert Stam. This is the same order of genre mistake typical of the critiques of *JFK* that were discussed previously.

As Stam puts it, “Just as plot is subordinate to rhythm in poetry, so plot is subordinate to style in cinema.” Unmotivated, autotelic formal devices must be allowed for, as well as what Stam calls “the authorial interventionism of a Balzac.” He further observes, “In the postmodern ‘allusionist’ . . . cinema of a Tarantino, causality and motivation are trivialized; here, characters kill not out of any ‘project.’” The “project” in *The Hours* involves fidelity to the film’s internal logic. Interestingly, because of their knowledge of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the principals of this film are not blind to their own complicity.

Borders.com offers the insightful observation that Virginia “connects and consoles” Laura and Clarissa, whereas many (including, predictably, Michael Medved) find this film depressing and perceive only sorrow and misery. Some even solipsistically contend that any film that they dislike could not be sincerely appreciated by anyone else, rationalizing any claims of enjoyment as an emperor’s-new-clothes bandwagon effect. Such petty puritanical resentment of the pleasure of others is, however, utterly inconsequential, there being no accounting for taste.

Several commentators find the minimalist score of Philip Glass to be unendurable. Beyond the fact that the main title sequence barely qualifies as minimalism, it is difficult to see how it could be any more objectionable than, say, Bernard Herrmann’s main title theme for *Vertigo*, which features nearly the same repetitive arpeggios proceeding every bit as slowly. Comparisons could also be made to the Richard Robbins scores for various Merchant/Ivory films and to the beginning of the “Burning Bed” cue at the end of *Frida*. It should also be recalled that Wagner combined the oldest of stories with the newest of music. In his 12/27/02 *Los Angeles Times* review of *The Hours*, Kenneth Turan compares the repetitive structures of the score and the plot, and quotes Michael Cunningham as writing, “We are creatures who repeat ourselves, we humans, and if we refuse to embrace repetition – if we balk at art that seeks to praise its textures and rhythms, its endlessly subtle variations – we ignore much of what is meant by life itself.”

Stephen Farber, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, 2/9/03, finds the film lacking in “visceral impact” and emotional “punch.” He tellingly implies that he considers this an inadequacy that is insufficiently compensated for by the film’s *cerebral* impact and *intellectual* punch. Civilized people do not live by mind candy alone, which is always available for those overwhelmed by the burden of adulthood or simply lacking in refined taste. To paraphrase Virginia, neither peace nor civilization is to be found by avoiding life. But, if necessary, those who can only be reached by frontal assault and only be moved by mainstream Hollywood haymakers can always find satisfaction with the aggressive exhibitionism of the blockbuster.

Yet even when people find such satisfaction for themselves, they are sometimes frustrated when it is not universally shared. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 5/29/05, Peter Grant disapproves of critics who “rave about obscure, depressing, R-rated films . . . and malign romantic comedies in which the boy and girl get together at the end.” In addition to involving upward-looking snobbery and an *argumentum ad populum*, this statement asserts that quality is necessarily determined by genre. In fact, films based on either formula can be good or bad. Shame on those too cowardly either to “rave about” a good film just because it is “obscure, depressing, [and] R-rated” or to “malign” badly made romantic comedies regardless of how their characters wind up at the end. Those addicted to happy endings need merely adopt Kitty’s own brand of denial. As already cited in an earlier essay, when Laura says, “Kitty, it’s going to be all right,” Kitty wonders that Laura would bother voicing such a trivial truth.