

Spatial-Temporal Presentation and Feminist Expression in The Hours

Zou Yiqiao

Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, China
xx_jojo_xx@163.com

Keywords: The Hours; Spatial-temporal presentation; Feminism

Abstract: Released in 2022, the film *The Hours* connects the destinies of three characters as women through a novel called *Mrs. Dalloway*, and tells the stories of three generations of women spanning nearly eighty years. Through its special arrangement of time and space, the film achieves a special expressive effect. It also constitutes the film's special temperament of fluidity, jumping and instability, and thus conveys the changes and growth of the three generations of women in the midst of the changes of the times. The film connects the three time periods through the recurrence of similar imagery and plots. The fates of the three generations of women range from death, running away to liberation, and their different but similar fates together constitute the feminist expression of the film. This paper aims to analyze the techniques of spatial-temporal presentation employed in the film *The Hours* and examine the impact of its distinctive spatial-temporal narrative on conveying feminist themes.

1. Introduction

The spatial-temporal design of a film plays a crucial role in driving its narrative, expressing its themes, and establishing its atmosphere. Additionally, the intertwined and non-linear presentation of space and time is a distinctive characteristic of cinema that sets it apart from other art forms. ([1] Dang Wenxing, 2023, pp. 115-117) In *The Hours*, the utilization of non-linear editing techniques achieves a unique approach to depicting time and space, thereby enhancing the feminist expression within the work.

2. The Special Spatial-Temporal Presentation

The film commences with a meticulously crafted sequence of montage shots, beginning with the serene flow of a river accompanied by subtitles indicating the event and location - Sussex, England, 1941. Subsequently, we witness a woman buttoning up her coat before stepping out of her house. She traverses across a sunlit lawn adorned with vibrant flowers and passes through the garden fence. Abruptly, the camera transitions indoors to reveal an individual engrossed in letter writing while accompanied by a female monologue. This woman proceeds through a woodland setting, hinting at her impending suicide as revealed in her poignant farewell note that delves into her inner turmoil. Her trembling hand holding a dip pen adds to the emotional intensity portrayed on screen. Meanwhile,

scenes continue to unfold simultaneously depicting another woman collecting stones and venturing into the stream outside; creating an illusionary hope that these events are transpiring concurrently and that the husband can rescue his wife from this tragic fate. However, when he discovers the note amidst their living room chaos, it becomes evident that his wife has already succumbed to drowning in the river's depths without any chance for salvation. Overwhelmed by panic and desperation upon realizing this grim reality, he rushes out of their home in search of his beloved spouse who has been swept away by nature's current all along. It is only at this juncture that we learn about Virginia Woolf's identity through an inscription on the letter.

Now we can reconstruct the actual process of this event. The initial sequence of shots elucidates Woolf's suicide process, presenting a fragmented portrayal of space and time that alternates between moments. This not only engenders a highly suspenseful atmosphere at the outset but also signifies Virginia's emotional and mental instability on the brink of collapse, establishing a somber and contemplative tone for the film. The utilization of jump cuts captures the allure of incoherent temporal and spatial dimensions within the film while exemplifying characters' chaotic psychological states and disordered lives through an unconventional lens arrangement principle. ([2]Wang Hongyang, 2019, pp. 16-20) At the same time, they also foretell us that such a narrative style will appear many times throughout the film and become the main technique of the film.

Certainly, following the film's title sequence, a remarkable shift in time and space unfolds. Amidst the ethereal morning haze, a car traverses the courtyard as its driver heads homeward. Subtitles reveal the setting: Los Angeles, 1951. The man enters his abode bearing a bouquet of flowers, surveying his surroundings until he discovers his slumbering wife in their bedroom.

Another scene depicts a man returning home, marking yet another temporal and spatial transition: Richmond, England, 1923. Once again across the courtyard, a man pushes open his door and engages in conversation with a doctor. Through their dialogue emerges Mr. Woolf himself – Virginia Woolf's husband – who is referenced in the opening paragraphs' suicide note and will tragically lose his wife eighteen years henceforth. As they discuss Virginia's condition downstairs, the camera slowly pans towards the closed bedroom door upstairs where she lies on her bed with an impassive countenance that mirrors her inner turmoil; thus creating an inherent dichotomy within this couple's shared space.

Subsequently, we are transported to New York City in 2001. The camera glides through bustling underground tunnels to reach the platform opposite from which a woman walks amidst this steel jungle on her way back home. Upon arrival, she removes her coat and reclines on her bed while another woman remains asleep beside her. This recurring homecoming scenario now features characters of different genders for it signifies how social progress has transformed notions of intimacy.

Following these events, the three women lying at various points in time are awakened by an alarm clock. This suggests that our journey through shifting time and space concludes here, and no further temporal or spatial dimensions shall be introduced.

In addition to the initial 1941 time period, this film presents the parallel lives of three women in different eras - England in the 1920s, America in the 1950s, and contemporary America. The awakening scenes where each woman rises and freshens up before a mirror highlight their interconnectedness. The shot featuring Clarissa from the millennium era arranging flowers, Laura's husband from the fifties, and Virginia's maid from the twenties further emphasizes that these three women and their stories are reflections of one another. It is significant to note that Virginia wrote a feminist novel called "Mrs Dalloway," which influences Laura as she reads it by her bedside. Clarissa embodies the character Mrs Dalloway created by Virginia. The juxtaposition of these three time periods serves to strengthen their essential connection.

Virginia, as the creator of all these narratives, introduces her novel with a declaration akin to that of a Creator: 'It's on this day, this day of all days, her fate becomes clear to her.' This statement underscores how pivotal events will unfold for these three women within a single day. By examining

their lives through different lenses across time periods, we gain insight into their transformative journeys.

The lives of the three women are intricately intertwined through the film's unique temporal and spatial narrative technique, with their individual storylines being simultaneously interwoven. This approach not only fosters audience awareness of the interconnectivity within the narrative but also encourages active engagement in the film's thought-provoking "game," prompting contemplation on both women's destinies and our contemporary world.

3. Repetition and Feminist Expression

By depicting the daily experiences of three women across different time periods, *The Hours* employs its narrative concentricity, intricate plot developments, and palpable tension to externalize and convey the process of self-awareness awakening within the female characters to the audience. ([3] Wang Chengyue, 2022, p.49) These three women in the film find themselves trapped in comparable yet distinct life circumstances that reflect common dilemmas faced by women.

3.1. Shackles

In the 1920s, Virginia Woolf, a talented writer afflicted with chronic mental illness, resided in the countryside of Richmond under her husband's care to aid her recovery. Additionally, he established a book publishing house dedicated to releasing her literary works. Due to concerns about potential relapses, both her spouse and doctor maintained strict vigilance over her well-being. Regrettably, this resulted in her sister excluding Virginia from social gatherings as she was prohibited from venturing into town. While an ordinary woman might have found contentment in such circumstances, Virginia Woolf's unique identity rendered these restrictions on experiencing life profoundly disheartening for her. Comparable to the deceased bird discovered by her niece and some boys within their garden – bereft of its ability to soar freely – Virginia too felt confined under the custody of her husband. Notably intriguing is that upon finding the lifeless bird, it was referred to as "he" by the boys; however, when they dispersed and Virginia's young niece took charge of burying it with utmost tenderness and tranquility, she regarded this delicate creature as "she". Following everyone's departure from the little funeral ceremony where Virginia had placed a bouquet of flowers beside the grave site, she remained alone gazing intently into those dull eyes of the bird lying motionless before her. In that momentary instance, she identified herself with this dead avian being. Subsequently captured lying on one side through cinematography techniques employed at that time period signifying temporal and spatial shifts once again - Laura assumes a similar position while silently fixating upon emptiness.

Laura, a housewife in the 1950s, is not directly depicted as enduring the injustices she faced within her family or society in the film. However, akin to the plot of *Mrs Dalloway*, she embodies the character of a confident hostess who appears fine on the surface but struggles internally. In post-war America, men returning from battle were seemingly entitled to all that was good and peaceful in life while their wives, American women, were taken for granted as mere trophies of war and expected to sacrifice everything for these heroes. Laura experiences happiness through motherhood with a son and another pregnancy underway; meanwhile her neighbor Kitty faces an impending operation due to infertility caused by a uterine "growth." During this time, Laura's appearance reflects her unkempt state as a pregnant woman filled with worry over baking a satisfactory cake. Conversely, Kitty presents herself at home with impeccable makeup and an air of calmness which almost hints at subtle mockery upon seeing Laura's ruined cake. Kitty's life stands in stark contrast to Laura's, as she exudes confidence in family matters while Laura remains oblivious. However, it becomes evident that Kitty's mockery and self-assurance serve as a façade to conceal her inability to conceive. Despite Laura's lack of culinary finesse, her husband adores her so deeply that he still presents her with a bouquet of

flowers on her birthday. In contrast, Kitty grapples with an alcoholic spouse and finds herself lying on an operating table for what her husband dismisses as a routine physical examination but could potentially be fatal – entrusting the outcome to unfamiliar doctors due to her infertility. Both women share similar fates at this juncture; they are mere "trophies" whose destinies hinge upon fulfilling their "masters'" desires. The anguish endured by Kitty permeates into the seemingly contented life of Laura. Overwhelmed, she overturns the cake she painstakingly baked, discreetly places sleeping pills into her handbag, and prepares to depart from their home.

The central theme of Virginia's narrative revolves around the tormented brilliance, while Laura's story focuses on the laborious domesticity. Consequently, Clarissa, the millennial embodiment of "Mrs Dalloway," amalgamates these two narratives. Acting as a surrogate for Richard, her former lover and gifted poet, Clarissa embodies Mr Woolf's confinement of genius and Laura's entanglement in worldly secularism. A remark made by Richard years ago continues to haunt her throughout her life. Over time, she gradually discovers with a sense of horror that she is indeed treading down the very path he had foretold – one where mediocrity engulfs her existence. For many years thereafter, "Mrs Dalloway" becomes Richard's way of addressing her. Similar to Mrs Dalloway in the novel, once she departs from the liberating and romantic realm offered by Richard, she plunges into an abyss of ordinariness; however, ultimately failing to match his exceptional talent. In order to be constantly present alongside him, she naturally assumes the role of an agent consumed by mundane affairs which consequently restricts their freedom mutually. Her life crumbles at the arrival of Louis – Richard's ex-lover – perhaps even at their first encounter when he flies in from Los Angeles; sensing liberation within him prompts her association with an alternative life away from Richard - no longer dwelling under the shadow cast by deathly poetic musings but rather embracing fully new relationships with both herself and Sally; yet simultaneously unable to forget about Richard's resolute desire for self-destruction which she had shouldered entirely for so many years. These conflicting emotions relentlessly torment her.

Although the individual circumstances of these three women vary, the recurring theme of 'confinement and limited autonomy' pervades their narratives, representing a shared plight experienced by women.

3.2. Death

The film encompasses a multitude of fragments and reflections on mortality, exemplified by the demise of the bird, Virginia's passing, Laura's attempted suicide, and Richard's ultimate demise. These depictions of death exhibit a profound spiritual coherence while also displaying significant correlations in terms of spatial-temporal dynamics and character relationships.

The film explores two distinct time periods, the fifties and the millennial generation, both of which are associated with Virginia's "Mrs Dalloway" from the twenties. However, the connection between these two eras remains elusive until the conclusion when it is revealed that Laura's young son is actually Clarissa's friend Richard.

In the storyline set in the 1950s, Laura bakes an even more flawless cake and then sends Richard to a friend's house while she herself prepares to find accommodation and contemplates suicide. As Richard desperately watches his mother drive away, he screams out for her. Once Laura departs, Richard anxiously builds blocks at Mrs Latch's house, his face displaying signs of neurotic frenzy. Meanwhile, Laura lies in bed reading words and phrases written by Virginia nearly thirty years ago when she was lost in thought during a family gathering. The only surreal shot in the entire film occurs at this moment - Laura lying on the bed as if submerged by cold river water filled with tangled aquatic plants enveloping both her body and the bed itself. This scene intertwines Laura's contemplated suicide with that of Virginia's. However, it is here that Virginia decides to keep her protagonist alive;

thus, Laura survives because leaving behind her unborn child proves difficult after giving birth to her second child. Consequently, Virginia feels compelled to kill off another character - Smith, the war veteran featured in the book.

So who is Smith in reality? It is Richard, who exhibits a profound connection with both Laura and Clarissa. Brought up in a dysfunctional family - or rather, within a dysfunctional society - Richard displays traits of sensitivity, paranoia, and harbors a concealed Oedipus complex. He appears to be influenced by some form of hereditary mental illness stemming not only from his eccentric, fragile, and prematurely detached mother but also from the societal dysfunction and the ensuing tragedies it has engendered. He keenly observed his mother's suicide attempt and later comprehended and accepted her yearning for 'death,' ultimately giving her an ominous demise in his literary works. In this moment of affliction while plagued by disease and ensnared by Clarissa's grasp, he suddenly recollects the cries from his childhood; however now he becomes the subject of those very cries. Consuming the medication that his mother had neglected to take before him, he perches upon the windowsill and takes flight like a descending bird. At this juncture emerges an intertwining between Richard's demise and the deceased bird during Virginia's era.

Mr Woolf inquired, 'Why does someone have to die?' Virginia responded, 'Someone has to die in order that the rest of us should value life more. It's contrast. The poet will die. The visionary.' The poet and visionary mentioned here seem to symbolize Smith from the book; however, it can be interpreted metaphorically as Richard and even Virginia herself, who ultimately succumbs to suicide, through the dialogue between the Woolfs. Their own deaths bring relief to both Mr Woolf and Clarissa, who have custody over them. Laura, on the other hand, fails in her attempt at suicide and chooses a path of exile instead. Consequently, her son Richard assumes the role of the new 'poet and visionary,' akin to a martyr like Virginia.

3.3. Homosexual relationship

A significant and noteworthy recurring motif in this film is the depiction of same-sex kisses among the three female protagonists, which effectively portrays their nuanced emotional dynamics and how these dynamics evolve over time.

Despite maintaining a close outward relationship, Virginia's mental illness perpetually casts a shadow over her and her sister. Her sister perceives Virginia as abnormal and exhibits disapproval and incomprehension towards her "neurotic" behavior. When Virginia bids farewell with a kiss, her sister reacts with anger, fear, and hastily departs with the children. In the 1920s, feminist consciousness had not yet experienced widespread awakening, leading to a profound divide between the visionary Virginia and her sister. The postwar era of 1950s America witnessed transformative changes that challenged societal perceptions. During this time, Laura and Kitty—a beautiful and glamorous neighbor—find themselves entangled in women's shared destiny, prompting Virginia to write "Mrs. Dalloway" as an invitation for them to open up to one another willingly. When Laura kisses Kitty, although shock is evident on Kitty's face, there remains an unmistakable undercurrent of warmth between these two women. It is important to note that these same-gender pairs do not represent their homosexual orientation but rather emphasize emotional connections; their relationships are not centered around sexual bonds but rather focus on kinship and friendship dynamics. However, Clarissa definitively identifies as lesbian or bisexual since society had undergone significant changes by then where homosexuality was no longer considered rare or tabooed. Having lived together with Sally for many years while raising a daughter together further solidifies Clarissa's identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The kiss they share near the end of the film signifies not only kinship but also true lovers' affection—an act through which their feelings are sublimated while bridging years of estrangement finally comes full circle. The progression of these three pairs of

characters in the film also signifies the continuous development of feminism and the awakening of women's sense of independence. ([3] Wang Chengyue, 2022, p.50)

Additionally, the film employs visual motifs such as flowing rivers and vibrant bouquets of flowers to create a recurring symbolism.

3.4. Repetition and Feminism

Since the end of the nineteenth century, feminist social thinking and social movements have become popular and spread, and have completed the evolution of three waves. "The first wave refers to the liberal feminism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, the second wave refers to the Marxist feminism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third wave refers to the post-modernist feminism that emerged in the 1960s and 1980s."([4]Wang Danhong, 2016, p.25) In the evolution from the first wave to the third wave, the change from "women's right" to "feminism" is also a sign of the gradual maturation of women's emancipation. Feminism not only seeks equal rights for women in society, but also seeks the re-examination the gender relations, and a comprehensive understanding of women. The aim of feminism is not only to improve women's rights and status, but also to find the way of development of family, marriage and individual in the current and future society in the process of re-examination.

The three women in the film are in the process of this dual examination of both outward and inward, which does not point to the "gaze" of the environment on the individual or the audience on the characters, but rather the characters' view and examination of themselves as women in the radical changes of life and times.

Virginia in this film is an unfortunate visionary, who understands the reality of women's inequality before most people in the world, and is deeply worried about the general situation of women. She knows that the reality of women's fate is like that of Mrs. Dalloway in her novel, who seems to be in the bloom and the fire, but lives for the sake of others all the time. She is busy with the party, but the glory of the party never belongs to herself. She is just a decoration of the high-society circles in London. This has been the common fate of women for thousands of years, who have become the embodiment of poetry, the symbols of culture, the beauties in those portraits, dressed in silk and jewellery, which never really belonged to themselves. They were merely a showcase for the wealth and status of their fathers' or husbands' families. Virginia has been writing about women's rights for many years, but the huge obstacles in front of her and all women have caused her to become extremely worried, to the point of becoming a pathological depression that requires treatment by a doctor. Even though she was grateful for her husband's companionship and encouragement over the years, she eventually chose to commit suicide under great psychological pressure.

Laura was at a time when the world wars had just subsided, and the violent upheavals in the world had caused subtle changes in the rules of society, where the longstanding disempowerment of women became particularly naked. As a result of the first wave of the feminist movement, women had gained some political rights before the war, but the war brought it all back. The victorious men returns from the battlefield, and women consciously returns to their former position as housewives. The collective disempowerment has left her confused, but the changes that have happened to her close friends have caused her to feel the personal pain. Therefore, Laura reached the anxiety and anguish over the fate of women from Virginia the visionary. This has caused the stressful resistance to her husband and her son in Laura's mind, which lead to her attempted suicide. Even though she eventually abandons suicide and chooses to leave her family only after giving birth to her second child, all of this still causes long-lasting psychological trauma to her family, her children, and herself.

Clarissa faces a more complex situation. She is in a new century, when women do not live off men, and she enjoys the independence and freedom that the progress of the times has brought to women.

She has her own career, a happy family with her homosexual lover, and even a daughter with her. She has a family made up entirely of women, and the existence of this family structure is a kind of rebellion against the patriarchal system. However, in contrast to all these conditions, under the influence of the longstanding gender culture, women, even if they have a certain degree of autonomy in their material lives, are still mentally dependent on men. Clarissa is unable to detach herself from her former lover Richard, who is suffering from AIDS. It can be said that Richard's talent as a poet is her spiritual support, and she relies on taking care of Richard's living as a way to detach herself from the mundane and doltish life. It is only when Richard eventually chooses to commit suicide by jumping from a building due to his family's misfortune that she finally gets rid of this parasitic life in his spiritual world.

From these three similar yet different stories, we can see that women in different times do their best to recognise themselves; at the same time, we can also see that in the development of the times, these women who try to recognise themselves go from destroying and running away to gradually accommodating themselves. Mrs Dalloway finally gets a revelation, and ushers in freedom and independence.

4. Conclusion

The film *The Hours* utilizes the unique temporal and spatial concept to establish a narrative connection among four female characters, including Mrs Dalloway. This approach effectively portrays the perpetual dilemmas they encounter throughout their lives, thereby constructing an innovative framework for interpreting their stories. Without this intertextual linkage, the significance and impact of these individual narratives would be significantly diminished. Moreover, the structural transformation has fundamentally reshaped the thematic essence of the film. ([5] Huang Tianle, 2016, p.151) The shift in time and space does make the intertextuality of the stories possible. The juxtaposition of the three stories is in itself a feminist expression. This technique shows not only the common destiny of women, but also the equal status of women and the intermingling of their hearts.

References

- [1] Dang Wenxing. (2023). *The influence of inter-temporal presentation on film narrative - an example of director Kon Satoshi's film, Artist*, (08),115-117.
- [2] Wang Hongyang. (2019). *The theory and practice of the concept of film space-time*, *Film Literature*, (08),16-20.
- [3] Wang Chengyue. (2022). *The Externalization of Inner Emotions in Film Drama - A Case Study of The Hours*, *Culture Industry*, (11),49.
- [4] Wang Danhong. (2016). *Feminism and women's political participation: from social thought to political practice*. Jilin University,25.
- [5] Huang Tianle. (2016). *Editing Rubik's Cube - The Influence of Non-linear Editing on Film Themes from The Hours*, *Contemporary Cinema*, (09),151.