The Kiss as kairos in *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham

*Le baiser comme kairos dans The Hours de Michael Cunningham*

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Michael Cunningham’s use of the title of Virginia Woolf’s unpublished first draft for *Mrs Dalloway* points to the American author’s interest in Woolf’s modernist exploration of temporality. It signals a shift in focus from the hypotext to the hypertext, from the eponymous character to the question of time. Indeed, in Cunningham’s *The Hours*, time may well be the main protagonist in the novel. But if time comes to the forefront, the question remains as to its nature and function. Like its hypotext, *The Hours* revolves around the representation of chronological time (*chronos*) which ineluctably brings human beings towards an untimely death when life gets interrupted by suicide or a disease like AIDS. But like its forebear, Cunningham’s novel also plays with another modality of time, that of *aiôn*, corresponding to the intensive vibration of “enduring becoming” that lies at the core of Bergson’s notion of duration. Thus, *The Hours* contains moments of happiness and ecstasy that seem to endure across time. If *Mrs Dalloway* represented Woolf’s attempt to conjure up an intensive vision of time against the ruthless and monumental temporality of *chronos* which the leaden circles of Big Ben’s hours emblematise (see Ricœur), *The Hours* attempts to create a poetics of the moment capable of transcending the passage of death-bound chronological time. It seems to me that this poetics is encapsulated in the image of the homoerotic kiss as *kairos*, i.e. as a capacity to seize the truth of the moment, to be open to an encounter with the event.

The kisses which Clarissa Dalloway remembers giving to Sally Seton at Bourton, and that she gives to Peter Walsh when he comes to visit her and bursts into tears on her sofa are key to Woolf’s fictional enterprise of resistance against the temporality of death. If both kisses are experienced as ecstatic moments of epiphanic truth, the female protagonist, however, fails to be faithful to the kind of truth they bring. In the case of Sally’s kiss, Clarissa fails to recognise its personal homosexual resonance and later in her life directs herself towards heterosexual love, a bourgeois marriage and...
The kiss as a failed moment of being in *Mrs Dalloway*

To begin with, we may recall that the kiss between Clarissa and Sally Seton in *Mrs Dalloway* is described as “the most exquisite moment in [Clarissa’s] whole life” (33). It signals the presence of an amorous encounter that is also a moment of truth revealed in an epiphany:

The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down) she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (33)
In its momentous nature, the kiss between Clarissa and Sally makes the diegesis skip a beat, as it "temporarily interrupts Clarissa's inevitable movement towards marriage and reproduction" (Haffey 137). Because of its homoerotic nature, it is a moment of revelation that is also a suspension of the dominant narrative about compulsory heterosexuality according to which Clarissa must become an accomplished adult by getting married with a man and begetting children. Indeed, the kiss is described as running counter to the chronological flow of narrative time because its memory comes back with so much intensity. It gives Clarissa a "present" in more than one sense of the term. To take up Kathryn Bond Stockton's analysis, it represents "an erotic pause", a "pocket where time functions in a different manner" (Stockton 302). Indeed, that kiss disrupts the dominant phallocentric narrative which teleologically orients women towards marriage and reproduction.

This homoerotic kiss is to be pitted against and contrasted with the heterosexual kiss given by Clarissa to Peter Walsh during his visit to her, when he starts crying after having admitted that he is hopelessly in love with a married woman from India. Although equally signalled as momentous, Clarissa's kiss to Peter does not leave the lasting trace in her memory which Sally's kiss has left, neither does it give birth to the searing sensation of having missed a tremendous opportunity. Rather, it is lived as a moment of happiness that fails to change Clarissa's life. What is interesting in the parallelism between the kisses, however, is that they are both followed by a resumption of chronological time which thereby signals its interruption as particularly meaningful.

Indeed, in the case of the homoerotic kiss, Clarissa's thoughts are redirected towards her age and fading beauty (34), and in the case of the heterosexual one, the narrator significantly mentions Big Ben striking the hours (44).

Both homo- and heterosexual kisses in Mrs Dalloway exemplify Woolf's attempt to write a new temporality against chronological time, in which "past and present interpenetrate" (Pearce 146). That attempt is also visible in the modernist writer's novel's famous incipit which deliberately blurs the distinction between past and present by interlacing both temporal frames:

> What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave, chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen. (5)

The temporal ambiguities of this excerpt and of the word "squeak" in particular have been repeatedly underlined by critics. They underscore the power of Woolf's style to conjure up an intensive and subjective time outside the ineluctable flow of death-bound chronos.

It is this intensive and subjective temporality which the kisses in Mrs Dalloway attempt to explore, in their capacity to represent felicitous moments of holding past and present together into one single messianic crystalline image which reveals some deeply felt hidden truth to the main protagonist. In the case of Clarissa's anamnesis about Sally's kiss, for instance, the recollection leads the female character to re-experience in the present the old feeling she had felt in the past:

> She could remember going cold with excitement and doing her hair in a kind of ecstasy (now the old feeling began to come back to her, as she took out her
hairpins, laid them on the dressing-table, began to do her hair), with the rooks flaunting up and down in the pink evening light, and dressing, and going downstairs, and feeling as she crossed the hall “if it were now to die ‘twere now to be most happy.” (32)

Immediately after this felicitous moment, however, Clarissa is plunged back into the brutality of chronos. Yet the memory of the kiss helps her muster her energy into one little “spasm” leading her to “plunge [again] into the very heart of the moment” (34) so as to transfix it in an intellectual movement that collates together “this moment of June” and “all the other mornings”, an operation making it possible for Clarissa to get reconciled with her old self: indeed, she can feel at that moment that she coheres into “the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself” (34). The recollection of Sally’s kiss, disrupting as it does the chronological and teleological course of time, seems to give Clarissa the strength to actually resist the passage of time and find the solid core of herself in the holding together of several layers of time.

The second momentous kiss in Mrs Dalloway produces an extraordinary sensation in Clarissa—the “brandishing of silver-flashing plumes like pampas grass in a tropic gale in her breast” (43)—which triggers an anamnesis that disturbs the narrative flow into lengthening and slowing down time. Thus, the present can brush against the past and revise it: “Take me with you, Clarissa thought impulsively, as if he were starting directly upon some great voyage; and then, the next moment, it was as if the five acts of a play that had been very exciting and moving were now over and she had lived a lifetime in them and had run away, had lived with Peter” (43). Clarissa kissing Peter enables the past to resurface into the present and blend with it in a moment of ecstasy where the possibility of love and intense happiness are suggested. “[F]eeling as she sat back extraordinarily at her ease with him and light-hearted, all in a clap it came over her, If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!” (43). The possibility of happily rewriting history and going back in time is stifled when Clarissa once again is confronted with the ruthless (and noisy) ineluctability of chronological time: “The sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour struck out between them with extraordinary vigour, as if a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate, were swinging dumbbells this way and that” (44).

The inability of the kiss in Mrs Dalloway to really establish some enduring form of alternative temporality suggests that if the kiss represents the irruption of some form of truth in the narrative, that truth remains out of reach for the main protagonist who falls back on the sequential narrative of heteronormative discourse. In its very elusive nature, the transformative temporality which Woolf’s kiss introduces remains ephemeral and seems to evade the protagonist’s lasting grasp. Contrarily, Cunningham’s novel rewrites Woolf’s kisses into moments of kairos where the protagonists seize on the alternative temporalities offered them by the kisses to enjoy life-changing experiences.
Rewriting the kiss as *kairos*: Cunningham’s poetics of the moment in *The Hours*

In *The Hours*, the two momentous kisses which lay at the core of *Mrs Dalloway* are rewritten into three blissful same-sex kisses located in each of the three intersected narratives, and symmetrical to the two kisses taking place between Clarissa and Richard. The heterosexual kisses are described as missed opportunities and even as failures as far as kisses go—they are either described in anatomical terms and lead to a separation, or fail because Clarissa refuses to reciprocate Richard’s kiss, a gesture that she comes to regret after he commits suicide. On the contrary, the same-sex kisses in Cunningham’s novel actualise all the positive potentials of the kisses present in *Mrs Dalloway*. They are associated with pure moments of bliss, togetherness and love. They are described as capable of suspending chronological time and replacing it with a very Bergsonian form of intensive duration. They correspond to moments of extreme happiness and even of ecstasy experienced outside the frame of the dominant heterosexual narrative, and in that, they evoke the “caves” behind the characters which Virginia Woolf sought to create in her fictional work, as consigned in her diary and in the epigraph to *The Hours*:

> I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about *The Hours*, and my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, and each comes to daylight at the present moment. (Woolf 2017, entry for August 30, 1923)

The same-sex kisses in *The Hours* introduce pockets or “caves” behind the characters, where an alternative temporality is created which introduces depth and where past, present and future are allowed to interpenetrate in one intensive moment of happy truth.

The first kiss takes place quite early in the novel between Clarissa Brown and her florist Barbara, and appears as a run-up to more elaborate emotions and sensations, since it is only a kiss on the cheek, which is nonetheless very transformative: “‘Hello,’ Clarissa says. Her lips touch Barbara’s skin and the moment is suddenly, unexpectedly perfect; she stands in the dim, deliciously cool little shop that is like a temple, solemn in its abundance, its bunches of dried flowers hanging from the ceiling and its rack of ribbons trailing against the back wall” (Cunningham 24). The perfection of the kiss possesses a transformative power: it turns the simple flower shop into a religious place, a temple, where some transcendental truth may be apprehended, recalling the religious feeling experienced by Clarissa Dalloway when she kissed Sally Seton. One could venture the idea that at that moment the passage, which reads as a vignette, pays homage, and erects a textual shrine to, the lasting memory of the same-sex kiss which Cunningham had discovered in the hypotext. Indeed his rewriting of the kiss celebrates the very exclusive and secluded form of temporality linking past and present together, which Woolf was attempting to create in her own novel. Indeed, Clarissa’s kissing Barbara connects what chronological time keeps disconnected: the past that is gone forever but can be remembered through the intensity of the present moment, and the present moment itself:

> There was that branch tapping the windowpane and there was another, though she’s been older, five or six, in her own bedroom, this branch covered with red leaves, and she can remember thinking back reverently, even then, to that earlier
branch, the one that had seemed to excite the music downstairs; she remembers loving the autumn branch for reminding her of the earlier branch, tapping against the window of a house to which she could never return, which she could not otherwise remember in any of its particulars. (Cunningham 25)

The image which the kiss between Clarissa Vaughan and Barbara the florist crystallises is that of the emergence of a truth about the past, a being-present of the past experience, which is brought to the character’s consciousness in the present moment, because it is a moment of exception reconciling two irreconcilable temporal frames. It is a unique moment to be cherished because it makes possible an encounter with the past, which is otherwise impossible—an encounter experienced with the clarity of a personal and universal truth.

The second momentous and blissful same-sex kiss in The Hours takes place in Mrs Brown’s narrative, between Laura Brown and Kitty, her neighbour, who has come to visit her:

Without quite meaning to, without deciding it, she kisses Kitty, lingeringly, on the top of her forehead. She is full of Kitty’s perfume and the crisp, clean essence of Kitty’s brown-blond hair. [...] Kitty nods against Laura’s breasts. 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. (Cunningham 110)

When Laura remembers the kiss a few pages later, she associates it with love and desire, and refuses to reject it as improper for a married woman. On the contrary, she assimilates it and claims it as her own to the point that she would like to repeat it:

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 (is it that she desires his desire?) and still dream of kissing Kitty again someday, in a kitchen or at the beach as children shriek in the surf, in a hallway with their arms full of folded towels, laughing softly, aroused, hopeless, in love with their own recklessness if not each other, saying Shhhh, parting quickly, going on. (Cunningham 143)

Contrary to Clarissa Dalloway, Laura does not exclude the homosexual narrative but decides to consider both homo- and heterosexual narratives as possibilities in and of her life.

The third kiss takes place between Virginia Woolf, the fictitious character, and her sister Vanessa who has come to visit. It takes place against the background of Virginia Woolf’s decision, as she is working on her new novel Mrs Dalloway, to let her main character live after all, and to have another of her protagonists die instead. The reason why she decides against Clarissa’s suicide is not fully explained in Cunningham’s text, but is obviously rooted in the visit Vanessa has made to Virginia, and the perfect burial her children are able to give to a small dying bird they picked in Virginia’s garden.

Virginia nods. At this moment, she can’t seem to speak. There is so much in the world. There are coats at Harrods; there are children who will be angry and disappointed no matter what one does. There is Vanessa’s plump hand on her cup and there is the thrush outside, so beautiful on its pyre; so like millinery. There is this hour, now, in the kitchen. Clarissa will not die, not by her own hand. How could she bear to leave all this? (Cunningham 153)

This intense moment when Virginia opts for life against death, because her sister brings life and happiness to her household, corresponds to a point in her narrative where she experiences the truth of life and seizes on that truth to incorporate it into
the writing process. It is immediately followed by the most transgressive of all the homoerotic kisses in the novel, when Virginia kisses her sister Vanessa behind the servant’s back, and thereby experiences incestuous homoerotics: “the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures”, a pleasure that is shared when her sister “returns the kiss” (Cunningham 154). This kiss which Virginia later in the book will describe as “not quite innocent” (210) represents a superlatively happy moment: it is delicious because forbidden; it is potent, full and blessed (163). It is a moment of truth, of transgressive communion that interrupts the running of time. It is a singular moment whose elusive truth can only be approached through double negatives: it is “not unlike what Virginia wants from London, from life” (210). The exact nature of its felicitous love cannot be pinned down to a specific object: it is “ancient, neither this nor that” (210). The experience of the kiss is transformative for Virginia, who then decides to move and expose herself to the pleasures of London, because the kiss has rendered manifest for her the importance of light and life, “the elusive brightness that shines from the edges of certain dreams” (210), and the necessity to hold past and present together so as to orient oneself towards an open future: “anything might happen, anything at all” (210).

Conclusion

Virginia’s kiss to her sister, a kiss of love that is far from innocent, brings the series of same-sex kisses in The Hours full circle, as it encapsulates their capacity for transgression, starting with the transgression of the linear teleological course of chronos that presides over the trajectory of the heterosexual characters. It is a matricial kiss for the fictitious Virginia writing Mrs Dalloway, since it enables her to make a decision regarding Clarissa Dalloway’s fate and to finish her book. But it is also a transformative moment in the narratives of Clarissa Vaughan kissing her florist and Laura Brown kissing her neighbour Kitty. Those kisses represent a form of kairos for the characters who experience them and expose themselves to their transformative powers. But above all they are moments of kairos for Cunningham himself, who seized on Woolf’s original representation of the ecstatic kiss between Sally and Clarissa Dalloway to expand it into a full novel in which homoerotic kisses become momentous life-changing events of truth. The kisses’ capacity to suspend time between life and death, youth and adulthood, past and present, enables Cunningham to assert the power of those “queer moments” to run counter to the dominant current(s) of (the) time. As the kisses reconfigure the traditional narrative structures running from childhood to adulthood through marriage and procreation, they represent the very temporality of desire for, and as, life in Cunningham’s novel. Their queer temporality suspends any teleological conclusion or closure of the text, leaving space for its ever-renewed rewritings and interpretations (Latham 2015).
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ABSTRACTS

If *Mrs Dalloway* represents Woolf’s attempt to conjure up an intensive vision of time against the ruthless temporality of *chronos* which the leaden circles of Big Ben’s hours emblematise, Cunningham’s *The Hours* attempts to create a poetics of the moment capable of transcending the passage of death-bound chronological time. This poetics is encapsulated in the image of the homoerotic kiss as *kairos*, ie as a capacity to seize the truth of the moment. Beyond the opening up of a new queer temporality within the text, the kiss fosters an intertextual poetic encounter, it is the matrix for a literary conversation between Cunningham and Woolf that transcends the passage of years, based on the resonance of a felicitous moment of being.

Si *Mrs Dalloway* résultait du désir woolfien de faire surgir une vision intensive du temps, à rebours de la temporalité linéaire inexorable de *chronos* que les cercles de plomb des cloches de Big Ben représentaient, *The Hours* de Michael Cunningham cherche pour sa part à créer une poétique de l’instant capable de transcender le passage du temps chronologique orienté vers la mort, poétique que l’image du baiser homoérotique résume parfaitement, dans sa capacité à se présenter comme un moment de *kairos*, de saisie de la vérité de l’instant. Au-delà de l’ouverture à une nouvelle temporalité queer à l’intérieur du texte, ce baiser donne naissance à une rencontre
poétique intertextuelle, il est la matrice d’une conversation littéraire qui transcende le passage des années et qui s’ancre dans la réalité d’un moment de jouissance pleine de l’être.

INDEX

Mots-clés: intertextualité, baiser, kairos, temporalité, amour, événement, rencontre, vérité
Keywords: intertextuality, kiss, kairos, temporality, love, event, encounter, truth
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Professeure de littérature britannique à Le Mans Université, Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès travaille sur les rapports entre texte et image et la question de l’événement littéraire et artistique. Elle s’intéresse à la question de la poétique du roman britannique contemporain et de son rapport à l’image. Elle a été porteuse d’actions de recherche en Humanités Numériques, sur les questions de porosité de genre et sur les enjeux artistiques de l’anthropocène.