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**‘This is probably how it must feel to be a ghost. It’s a little like reading, isn’t it’: An exploration of the spectral in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours***

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Vanessa Bell, *A Conversation*, 1913-16, Oil On Canvas, 86.6 X 81cm, The Courtauld, London.

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## Introduction

Published in 1998, *The Hours* is Michael Cunningham's fourth novel, and one that brought him international fame with its Pulitzer Prize win. Themes of sexuality, queer homemaking, familial relationships and their joys and difficulties are all present in *The Hours*, and are themes that continue from Cunningham's previous, more traditional, novels, like *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) and *Flesh and Blood* (1995). In writing *The Hours*, however, Cunningham takes a new approach, using the form, plot, and characters of Virginia Woolf's seminal feat of modernist prose *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) as scaffolding for his own work. Cunningham explains his process as being 'akin to music, to jazz, where a musician will play improvisations on an existing piece of great music from the past'; Woolf's novel forms the foundation of the text, but *The Hours* is distinctly Cunningham's own.<sup>1</sup> Thus the novel functions on two levels: as its own text, with original characters and plot, and as a palimpsest of *Mrs Dalloway*, whose spirit suffuses Cunningham's own work.

This dissertation will be exploring the many layers of *The Hours* through the lens of hauntology, which reads into the spectral and the many forms that hauntings take in both personal and political dimensions. The term was coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1994 book *Specters of Marx* as a portmanteau of haunt (*hanter*) and ontology (*ontologie*), which he first used in a political context. Since then, it has been applied to the arts, ethics, political theory, and psychoanalysis, to name a few. Hauntology itself is a slippery theory. Its rules are not clear-cut, its characteristics nebulous, and its manifestations are found across many disciplines. It was significantly revived in the 2000s in a new wave of study with Mark Fisher at the helm, which applied hauntological theory to music and visual media. Fisher contends that a key facet of hauntology is its being about the 'agency of the *no longer*'; the weight of this theory lies in things past, and the ways in which they return to us in the present.<sup>2</sup> That hauntology is difficult to pin down makes it a fertile theory for exploring the past, a pliable enough framework to fit various arguments no matter the discipline. So although I will be analysing literary writing, Derrida and Fisher's respective theorisations of ghosts and the spectral have had a keen influence on the foundations of this dissertation.

My analysis will largely take two approaches: looking at hauntings both outside and inside the narrative of *The Hours*. Chapter 1 will cover the kinds of 'macro' hauntings that live outside the text, with *Mrs Dalloway* being the most commanding of its spectres, while also exploring a selection of *The Hours*' other intertexts. Chapter 2 begins a discussion of the novel in and of itself, reading it as a series of hauntings that reside within the text, and evincing the nature of spectres' relationship to time and memory. Chapter 3 continues in this vein, turning towards gender and sexuality in a meditation on spectral selfhoods. These three strands of argument contribute towards establishing *The Hours* as an innately haunted piece of literature.

## 1: Spectres of Woolf

Books are physical objects, their contents notionally sealed off to the time in which they were written, yet they are still alive in the present and will continue into the future. Joseph G. Kronick reads this idea through Derrida's relationship between the spectral and the literary, writing that '[as] a spectre, literature is neither spirit nor body and both at the same time'; the written word itself is of the mortal world, but the stories, images, and ideas of literary writing

<sup>1</sup> James Schiff, 'An Interview with Michael Cunningham', *The Missouri Review*, 26:2 (2003), 111-128 (p.113).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fisher, 'What Is Hauntology?', *Film Quarterly*, 66:1 (2012), 16-24 (p.21).

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exist in the sphere of the spectral.<sup>3</sup> This idea is particularly pertinent to *The Hours* because it is a book *about* books, how they are written and how they are read. It was Cormac McCarthy's assertion that 'books are made out of books, the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written', a helpful idea for understanding another way in which literature is inherently spectral.<sup>4</sup> This rings especially true for *The Hours*, a book hewn in the form of another book: *Mrs Dalloway*.

One of the key concepts to Derrida's understanding of the spectral is the idea of inheritance, of recognising a ghostly lineage between past and present. He writes: 'this is why I am an inheritor: the other comes *before* me'.<sup>5</sup> Relating this to literature, Kronick writes that for Derrida, literature 'names [the] possibility wherein the undecidable relation to the other might occur'.<sup>6</sup> Derrida sees the spectre as an artefact that is conferred upon him, to be looked at and valued thusly; highlighting this idea, drawing out the link between the other and the spectral, illuminates how another facet of hauntology can be applied to *The Hours*. There are a great many inheritances from *Dalloway* to *The Hours*, from structure to setting, and this chapter will draw out both the explicit and implicit links between the two novels and a range of other intertexts, paratexts, and peritexts. The relationship between *Dalloway* and *The Hours* has had many different theoretical frameworks applied to it, such as postmodernism, queer theory, adaptation theory, and intertextuality.<sup>7</sup> By discussing the relationship between *The Hours* and the texts it relates to in hauntological terms, I will shed new light on the text's use of time and memory, how both of these ideas can be seen as spectres.

Literature, as outlined in the foregoing paragraph, is inherently spectral, but Katy Shaw writes that part of the 'internal hauntology' of literature is also the 'power of intertextuality to communicate from beyond the confines of the immediate text'.<sup>8</sup> *Mrs Dalloway* is the dominant intertext, but not the only one. The book's first epigraph is taken from Jorge Luis Borges' poem 'The Other Tiger', where he sets forth his quest to 'go on pursuing through the hours/Another tiger, the beast not found in verse'.<sup>9</sup> The origins of this spectral 'other tiger' can be found in the poem's companion essay, 'Dreamtigers', where he writes: 'My childhood outgrown, the tigers and my passion for them faded, but they are still in my dreams [...] they still endure'.<sup>10</sup> Though Borges writes about memory with a more oneiric tilt, his tiger speaks to the spectral nature of memory; like the spectre it can never again be

<sup>3</sup> Joseph G. Kronick, *Derrida and the Future of Literature* (Albany: SUNY, 1999), p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Woodward, 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction', *The New York Times*, 19 April 1992 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/19/magazine/cormac-mccarthy-s-venomous-fiction.html>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> April 2023].

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, 'Spectrographies' in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p.41.

<sup>6</sup> Kronick, *Derrida*, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> See, respectively: Mary Joe Hughes, 'Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and Postmodern Artistic Re-Presentation', *Critique*, 45:4 (2004), 349-361; Chris Stayaert, 'Three Women. A Kiss. A Life. On the Queer Writing of Time in Organization', *Gender, Work, and Organization*, 22:2 (2015), 163-78; Martin Halliwell, 'Modernism and Adaptation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.90-106; and Michaela Praisler and Alexandru Praisler, 'Writing on the Woolfian Palimpsest. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*', *Cultural Intertexts*, 8 (2018), 122-40.

<sup>8</sup> Katy Shaw, *Hauntology: the Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.15.

<sup>9</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Other Tiger', *Selected Poems, 1923-1967*, ed. by Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p.145.

<sup>10</sup> Borges, *The Aleph*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p.143.

physically real, living only in the vestiges of childhood memories. Yet in spite of its evanescence, it still has the power to haunt Borges. Virginia Woolf will attempt to write a perfect book; Laura Brown will try to bake the perfect cake; Clarissa Vaughan will try to host the perfect party; and Borges will 'hunt for a third tiger', haunted by this 'string of laboured tropes that have no life'.<sup>11</sup> Using 'The Other Tiger' as an epigraph functions as a nod to two important themes in *The Hours*: the intangibility of memory and the impossible nature of creative perfection.

Cunningham's most palpable reference to *Mrs Dalloway* is arguably Virginia Woolf herself as a character in *The Hours*, with her section of the novel following a day in the life as she begins to write the first lines of *Dalloway*. According to Colin Davis, hauntology provides 'a place where we can interrogate our relation to the dead', and by both referencing and representing the life and works of Virginia Woolf, Cunningham revivifies her, and her narrative becomes a ghostly act of ventriloquy.<sup>12</sup> Of his construction, Cunningham asserts 'I was never writing about Virginia Woolf. Mine is a fictional character who in her outward particulars resembles Virginia Woolf'.<sup>13</sup> Cunningham's distinction of 'outward particulars' against the 'real' Woolf emphasises the hauntedness of her presence in the novel; there is a disconnect between the Virginia Woolf of reality, who was born in 1882 and died in 1941, and the Virginia Woolf of *The Hours*, who exists solely in the realm of imagination. This disconnect makes a spectre of the latter, like Derrida's characterisation of the spectre, she is 'of the invisible visible [...] the visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood', both fact and fiction.<sup>14</sup>

In an act of exposition, *The Hours*' prologue is out of joint with the three narrative strands that form the main body of the text; it is the only part that strays from the chronology of the rest of the novel. Here, over half a century after the fact, Cunningham imagines Woolf's suicide: she puts a stone in her pocket 'roughly the size and shape of a pig's skull', steps into the River Ouse, and the reader follows her up the river to her death.<sup>15</sup> María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren note how 'hauntology reshapes history by disrupting its conventional structure of chronology', intentionally reordering events to create new meaning. With her death, the prologue immediately establishes Woolf as the novel's closest thing to a literal ghost, and so the novel begins with an ending.<sup>16</sup> By starting the book anachronistically, even Woolf's own narrative strand in 1923, the earliest of the three women, proceeds with the knowledge that she is already dead. Woolf's spectre in the book is therefore twofold: she is both the returned dead, who appears and reappears throughout the book, and there is the spectre of her writing, words she has written and characters she has invented that permeate *The Hours*.

Cunningham's Clarissa Vaughan is a contemporary reinterpretation of Clarissa Dalloway, transposed to New York in the late nineties. She is innately but unwittingly haunted by Dalloway because everything about her has been touched in some way by her predecessor, a fictive past self. Clarissa broods over the passage of time, wondering 'when will the crepe and gauntness, the shrivelled lips, of her old woman's face begin to emerge?',

<sup>11</sup> Borges, 'The Other Tiger', p.145; p.143.

<sup>12</sup> Colin Davis, 'Hauntology, spectres and phantoms', *French Studies*, 59:3 (2005), 373–379, (p.379).

<sup>13</sup> James Schiff, 'An Interview with Michael Cunningham', *The Missouri Review*, 26:2 (2003), 111-128 (p.116).

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, 'Spectrographies', p.38.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (1998) (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p.4.

<sup>16</sup> María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 'Intro: Conceptualizing Spectralities', *Spectralities*, p.14.

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just as Clarissa Dalloway 'felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged'.<sup>17</sup> Vaughan wonders what her life would be like had she married Richard Brown, Dalloway wonders the same of Peter Walsh; Vaughan thinks herself 'trivial, endlessly trivial' for caring about the party, Dalloway feels at her own party that 'these triumphs [...] had a hollowness', unsatiated by its success.<sup>18</sup> Further parallels are found in the two Clarissas' respective relationships: Clarissa Dalloway shares only a single kiss with Sally Seton, which she still remembers as 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life' three decades later.<sup>19</sup> For Clarissa Vaughan, however, times have changed and Sally is Clarissa's wife. Yet they do not align with their Woolfian counterparts as simply as that. Seton is vivacious, 'completely reckless', whereas Cunningham's Sally is 'Sally the stoic, the tortured, the intelligently wise'.<sup>20</sup> In character, Sally resembles Richard Dalloway, who is 'a bit limited [...] but a thorough good sort', he loves Clarissa but finds it hard to tell her so, just as Sally wants 'to tell Clarissa something, something important, but can't get it phrased'.<sup>21</sup>

So, the two Clarissas are two sides of the same ghostly coin, past and future intertwined. But what purpose does this comparison serve? Cunningham notes that in writing *The Hours*, he 'wondered what would happen if someone very much like Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway were alive today and free of the constraints that were placed on Clarissa Dalloway in London in the '20s', forming a parallel which 'helps the reader to register the seismic social shifts that have taken place since Woolf created her novel'.<sup>22</sup> For Sadeq Rahimi and Byron J. Good, hauntology is 'a language of human subjectivity in time', and *The Hours* plays with subjective human experience to suggest that it might not be so singular as it first appears.<sup>23</sup> That the spectre of Clarissa Dalloway haunts Clarissa Vaughan reveals that one person in 1923 can share the same feelings as another, generations later; the presence of *Mrs Dalloway* in *The Hours* takes the reader back and forth through a spectral layering of reality, fiction, past, present, and future. *Mrs Dalloway* contains its own reality; the 'Mrs Woolf' chapters are a fiction based in the real history in which *Dalloway* was written; in Clarissa Vaughan's fictive reality her Woolfian namesake is merely a work of fiction. These are but a few of the layers of narrative in *The Hours* that collide and reverberate across each other, simultaneously recalling the past and looking into the future.

Exploring what surrounds *The Hours*, its para- and metatexts, reveals a wealth of meaning and subtext that expands our understanding of the text itself. It was Mark Fisher's contention that 'spectres are textural', and this idea is compatible with *The Hours* in two ways: looking at the spectre as both text and texture.<sup>24</sup> Borges' poetry, Mrs Dalloway, Woolf's diary, and Woolf's essays are spectres that oscillate between metatext, text, and subtext. This creates layers of meaning in the spectral warp and weft of *The Hours*' plot, themes, and characters. Having examined *The Hours* in relation to its literary orbit, in order

<sup>17</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.23; Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.7.

<sup>18</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.94; Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.148.

<sup>19</sup> Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.30.

<sup>20</sup> Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.29; Cunningham, *Hours*, p.20.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.63; Cunningham, *Hours*, p.82.

<sup>22</sup> Schiff, 'Interview', p.113; Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), p.148.

<sup>23</sup> Sadeq Rahimi and Byron J. Good, 'Preface: Ghosts, Haunting, and Hauntology', *Ethos*, 47:4 (2019), 409–10 (p.410).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Fisher, 'Phonograph Blues', *k-punk*, 19 October 2006 <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/008535.html>> [accessed 21 May 2023].

to provide context and tug at its fabric, the following two chapters will investigate hauntings which occur within the text itself.

## 2: The Presence of the Past

There are many ways to categorise the past: the historical, the literary, and the personal in particular have been the most important in this dissertation. In talking about the past, we bring it into the present; then and now can never be wholly cleft from one another. Michael M.J. Fischer sees that ‘behind every claim of “how things are” lie shadows, ghosts, temporary suppressions of alternatives and contestations in the rich possibilities of life, history, politics, justice, and desire’, elucidating the idea that every idea or feeling, every moment or memory is haunted in some way by what it was or what it could have been.<sup>25</sup> This chapter looks inwards to personal histories, exploring *The Hours* in its own context, without emphasising references to *Mrs Dalloway*. The majority of scholarship on *The Hours* analyses it as palimpsest and reading this novel through *Dalloway* is a crucial element to understanding it. However, my intention now is to analyse it as a stand-alone novel, to explore spectralities *within* the boundaries of the novel.

The presence of the past is keenly felt by all three women in *The Hours*, but it finds its real synthesis in Clarissa. She is the character who has the most distinct, emotional relationship to the past; her narrative is studded with references to days gone by. In a bookshop, ‘she is visited by an old memory’ of ‘a branch tapping at a window as the sound of horns begin’ when she was a small child, and this memory stays with her as she shops. The fact that Clarissa is ‘visited’ by this memory highlights the spectral nature of memory, it implies an aspect of presence, just as Derrida considers: ‘this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory’.<sup>26</sup> Only in the seconds after it passed, a moment is spectralised into memory. Derrida writes that ‘absolutely real present is already a memory’, and even within the course of her day, Clarissa demarcates past and present: she leaves the florist Barbara, in ‘what [she] can’t help thinking of now as the past [...] while she herself walks into the present’.<sup>27</sup>

Clarissa is almost hyperaware of time passing, and this manifests itself in a number of different ways within the narrative. For example, having returned home from buying the flowers, ‘Clarissa is filled, suddenly with a sense of dislocation’, an unease in her surroundings. Looking around at the ephemera that decorates her house, she ‘recognizes these things but stands apart from them’.<sup>28</sup> There is a strong sense of the uncanny at play here, a concept well-suited to the spectral because both mark a kind of return. For the uncanny, it is the return of the repressed, as outlined by Freud in his definitive essay *The Uncanny* (1919) and which, in a more modern take, Fischer defines as the ‘scarily similar, unnervingly different’.<sup>29</sup> In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida makes a direct link to the uncanny by naming the spectre as a figure who is ‘strangely familiar and inhospitable at the same time (*unheimlich*, uncanny)’.<sup>30</sup> The original German for uncanny (*unheimlich*) directly translates as ‘unhomely’, thus looking at the uncanny through its etymology is especially revealing in its application to this scene with Clarissa feeling alienated in her own home. She suddenly feels

<sup>25</sup> Michael M.J. Fischer, ‘Epilogue’, in *The Hauntology of Everyday Life*, ed. by Sadeq Rahimi (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), p.82.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), p.xviii.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, ‘Spectrographies’, p.47; Cunningham, *Hours*, p.49.

<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, both p.91

<sup>29</sup> Fischer, ‘Epilogue’, p.94

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, p.212

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that '[t]his is not her kitchen at all [...] She lives in a room where a tree gently taps against the glass as someone touches a needle to a phonograph record'; the uncanny feeling invokes the spectre of this childhood memory, in turn leading her to '[feel] the presence of her own ghost'.<sup>31</sup> It is as if Clarissa becomes aware of the spectre of her three-year-old self, her past self, who doesn't know this apartment, this life that she now leads almost 50 years later.

Most of the memories that Clarissa is haunted by are associated with Richard; like Peter Walsh and Sally Seton, Richard Brown represents youth, freedom, possibility. The freshness of the June day reminds her of 'that day in Wellfleet', at a time when they were still lovers, living together with Louis Waters in his aunt and uncle's country home.<sup>32</sup> They share a kiss which holds all the feelings of hope and optimism for life and love to be had. 'It had seemed like the beginning of happiness' but, as an adult, Clarissa comes to 'realize that it was happiness'. The thing that made this moment so potent was the anticipation of an unknown future, pregnant with possibility. Yet with experience, although the kiss still 'lives undimmed in Clarissa's mind', it is reduced to 'a kiss at dusk on a patch of dead grass', taking on a moribund aspect now that time has taken Clarissa so far away from this moment.<sup>33</sup> The spectre of this memory thus aligns with Blanco and Peeren's contention that 'the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge': knowledge is an aspect of memory; we know what happened, yet with the clarity of hindsight and experience, it may be remembered differently, taking on new inflections.<sup>34</sup> And so it is for Clarissa, who walks through New York on a summer day in June, preparing for her party, remembering and re-remembering.

Richard and Wellfleet come back to her again and again throughout the day. For Blanco and Peeren, '[h]aunting has been classically conceived as attached to a *where*', often the return to a particular place will bring forth a spectre.<sup>35</sup> On her way to Richard's apartment, she passes a street corner on which 'she had stood with Richard when Richard was nineteen', where 'they had kissed or not kissed' but 'had certainly argued', and it was this argument that 'ended their little experiment', the romantic dimension of their relationship.<sup>36</sup> Almost in reverse, the memories of Wellfleet that haunt Clarissa, Richard, and Louis, are invoked through each other. When Louis visits Clarissa at her apartment, 'at the sight of her [he] smells the air – pine and grass, slightly brackish water – of Wellfleet more than thirty years ago', echoing the 'grassy smell sharpened by pinesap' that Clarissa too remembers from that summer, earlier that day.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Louis' presence reminds Clarissa of Wellfleet, and her relationship to it thirty years later, believing 'that the dune in Wellfleet will, in some sense, accompany her forever'.<sup>38</sup> At 52, she cleaves to the notion that '[s]he will always have been standing on a high dune in the summer [...] will always have been young and indestructibly healthy'.<sup>39</sup> This place from her past and all it evokes still haunts her,

<sup>31</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.91; p.92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p.10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.98.

<sup>34</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Intro', *Spectralities*, p.9.

<sup>35</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Possessions: Spectral Places', p.395.

<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.51; p.52; p.52; p.52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.127; p.10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.131.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.131.

meaning while it cannot be truly sealed off to history, as long as her mind goes in and out of past and present as it does, Clarissa will never fully live in the now.

So far I have examined Clarissa's relationship with time as figurative and symbolic. But Richard, 'whose mind seems to have passed beyond any sort of repair' because of AIDS, experiences this temporal oscillation veridically, he no longer experiences linear time as Clarissa does.<sup>40</sup> For Blanco and Peeren, in hauntology '[t]he borderline between then and now wavers, wobbles and does not hold still', an idea which evokes Richard's mental state, making him another figure for which hauntology is a useful application.<sup>41</sup> He says to Clarissa: 'I seem to have fallen out of time [...] I seem to have gone into the future, too', believing the party that Clarissa is preparing for that evening has already happened.<sup>42</sup> He says to Clarissa 'we're middle-aged and we're young lovers standing beside a pond [...] we're everything, all at once'.<sup>43</sup> His saying his thoughts out loud makes something of a Shakespearean fool of him; he verbalises how Clarissa feels, that they are at once young and old, but his words come across as the ramblings of a madman. This recalls Woolf's characterisation of her Clarissa and Septimus Smith as respectively embodying 'the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side', they both have their own truths which are expressed and received entirely differently.<sup>44</sup> Clarissa dismisses Richard's claim that their kiss by the pond is 'still happening [...] happening in that present [...] happening in this present', but she experiences the exact same thing: setting off to buy flowers, passing a street corner, seeing Louis; all these things bring back Wellfleet, Richard, a kiss, the past.<sup>45</sup>

Another figure from Richard's past is his mother, Laura Brown, whose story in *The Hours* begins in 1949 and ends transposed onto Clarissa's narrative strand. As outlined in the first chapter, literature is spectral, but this occurs not just external to *The Hours* but within it: Laura's haunting has a specifically literary quality to it because she reappears through Richard's writing. Of photography Derrida writes that knowing a photograph will outlive its subject means it already haunts us from a future yet to come, and consequently 'we are spectralized by the shot, captured or possessed by spectrality in advance'.<sup>46</sup> The same logic can be applied to the written word: once a person is written about, they are spectralised. Richard, through his writing, makes a spectre of Laura; she becomes 'the ghost and goddess' of his work.<sup>47</sup> For Kronick, 'the condition of the "presence" of both ghosts and literature is their living on, *survie*'.<sup>48</sup> Laura literally survives Richard – she is still alive when he kills himself – but also her presence in his oeuvre immortalises her in literature, and she becomes the 'victim and torturer who haunted Richard's work'.<sup>49</sup>

Where Laura haunts Richard's 'small body of private myths made public', the opposite is true for Clarissa; she is haunted by her own presence in Richard's writing.<sup>50</sup> Clarissa is his novel's main character, and the spectre of her fictionalised self reappears to her through the people she meets. Thus there are three Clarissas: Woolf's, Cunningham's,

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.56.

<sup>41</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Queer Spectrality', *Spectralities*, p.337

<sup>42</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.62.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.67.

<sup>44</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Vol. II 1920-24* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), p.207.

<sup>45</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.66.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, 'Spectrographies', p.38.

<sup>47</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.221.

<sup>48</sup> Kronick, *Derrida*, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.226.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p.221.

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and Richard's, all interwoven and layered on top of each other. When Clarissa sees Walter Hardy, he places her as 'the woman in the book, the subject of a much-anticipated novel by an almost legendary writer' and Louis Waters remarks how Richard 'hardly even bothered to change [Clarissa's] name' in the self-same book.<sup>51</sup> She is haunted by another self, one wrought from Richard's fertile imagination. Kronick determines that both literature and spectres share 'an undecidable relation between body and spirit [...] materiality and ideality', a useful concept for understanding that Richard making literature out of people in his life can be considered a spectral process.<sup>52</sup> This process occurs on two levels: in his writing and in 'the epic poem he is always composing in his head'.<sup>53</sup> Richard fictionalises people in real time, which leads Clarissa to feel like she is 'to him, an essentially fictional character', asking herself 'wasn't it, really, just another poetic conceit, Richard's idea of her?'.<sup>54</sup> His creations are spectral because they speak to Derrida's claim that 'through mimicry, the mimetic, or simulation, we record what is past. The imprint, in essence, continues to be printed'; through Richards' writing, he has made spectres of both Laura and Clarissa.<sup>55</sup>

Like ghosts, memories in *The Hours* are manifestations of the past, with the potency to revivify spent emotions, bringing the past into the present. Looking at memory, and literature as an artefact of memory, in this way aligns with Shaw's observation that spectres 'defy time and space, and challenge any fixity of the temporal'; their hauntings occur outside of the standard boundaries of space and time.<sup>56</sup> This spectral strand of memory runs throughout *The Hours*, taking the narrative through time in order to reveal more than a chronological narrative has the power to.

### **3: Queering the Spectre**

Selfhood and sexuality is another thread that runs through *The Hours*, again linking Virginia, Laura, and Clarissa. Although Woolf had her own relationships with women, most famously with Vita Sackville-West, whom *Orlando* (1928) is dedicated to, her narrative in the novel begins two years before she met Sackville-West and reveals little of her own sexuality. The only reference to Vita, and an oblique one at that, comes in the prologue, just before she steps into the River Ouse, as 'she thinks of Vanessa, of the children, of Vita and Ethel'.<sup>57</sup> Yet *The Hours* is a highly metafictional novel, a term which Patricia Waugh defines as writing which 'draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.<sup>58</sup> Following this definition, it is appropriate to consider the subtext that Virginia Woolf was a queer woman when reading sexuality throughout the novel. This knowledge is spectral as queerness is spectral, it lives next to and around Woolf as the aforementioned 'invisible visible'.<sup>59</sup> Laura and Clarissa are also queer women whose relationships with their sexuality and desires haunt them; the former shares a kiss with Kitty that evokes Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton's kiss ('the most exquisite

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p.16; p.129.

<sup>52</sup> Kronick, *Derrida*, p.2.

<sup>53</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.61.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.61; p.52.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, 'Spectrographies', p.47.

<sup>56</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, p.7.

<sup>57</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.5.

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1984), p.15.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, 'Spectrographies', p.40.

feeling of her whole life'), and the latter has been in a relationship with her own Sally for 18 years.<sup>60</sup>

This section develops spectral theory by using it alongside queer theory to read gender performance as innately spectral and reveal how desires can be haunting. Naturally, I will be drawing heavily on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, complimented by the works of other queer theorists, and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). Blanco and Peeren highlight Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) as 'an important counterweight to Derrida's emphasis on the specter as a powerful haunting force'; a text which '[emphasises] the ghost's association with dispossession, disappearance, and social erasure' in relation to literary lesbian representation.<sup>61</sup> Castle's conceptualisation of the spectral as an agent of the no longer mirrors my exploration of past desires are spectral and the implications of their erasure. My approach of blending different theories with spectral theory serves to support my contention that hauntology is an expansive methodology that works well alongside other seemingly unrelated theories.

The character of the post-war, suburban, sexually inhibited housewife has been so vastly represented and parodied that it runs the risk of cliché. Cunningham, however, characterises his housewife Laura Brown with deftness and compassion, and the claustrophobia she feels in performing a role of the perfect wife and mother is represented with empathetic subtlety. Baudrillard defines simulation as 'to feign to have what one doesn't have', underlining the disjunct between what is real and what is simulated.<sup>62</sup> This idea dovetails well with Butler's theory of gender as performance; both recognise a form of fakery: acts and gestures that misalign with the real or true. Butler asserts that gender is 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts', with this idea of "stylization" evoking Baudrillard's "feigning", and Nowell Marshall conflates these two ideas in 'considering femininity as simulacrum [my emphasis]'.<sup>63</sup> Laura Brown simulates happiness, maternal instinct, wifeliness, all for the sake of upholding a gender expression that profoundly misaligns with how she really sees herself. To add another link in the theoretical chain, characteristics of simulation and performance both echo the spectre, as something both real and unreal, present but intangible, which Derrida names as 'someone by whom we feel ourselves watched, observed, surveyed'.<sup>64</sup>

This idea of performance is established in its most literal sense early on in the narrative: after Laura wakes up, she waits to go downstairs to meet her husband and son feeling as though she is 'about to go onstage and perform in a play for which she is not appropriately dressed, for which she is not adequately rehearsed'.<sup>65</sup> She is acutely aware of herself; when her husband buys her flowers on his birthday 'she sees him see that she is angry', reflecting her concern with both her performance and how that performance is perceived. Later, as she drives to a hotel to spend a few hours alone, reading, 'she is a woman in a car dreaming about being in a car', and later she is an 'inchoate, tumbling thing known as herself, a mother, a driver'.<sup>66</sup> Laura obsesses over the external, seeing herself

<sup>60</sup> Woolf, *Dalloway*, p.30.

<sup>61</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Intro', *Spectralities*, p.10.

<sup>62</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.3.

<sup>63</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) (London: Routledge, 2002), p.43; Nowell Marshall, 'Refusing Butler's Binary: Bisexuality and Performative Melancholia in *Mrs. Dalloway*', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9:3 (2009), 317-341 (p.318).

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, 'Spectrographies', p.40.

<sup>65</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.43.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p.141; p.187.

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from the outside – driving her car – and then uses what she sees to add to an image of herself – identifying herself as mother and driver in the same breath. Blanco and Peeren note how spectres 'specifically evoke an etymological link to visiting and vision, to that which is both *looked at* [...] and *looking*' and, like the spectre, the version of herself that Laura so carefully constructs day by day both sees and is seen.<sup>67</sup>

This aspect of gendered performance, acting as if under surveillance, is reflected in the interplay between Laura and Kitty, a neighbour and fellow housewife. Their scene together is a navigation of expressing and receiving acts, recalling the idea of 'repetition and a ritual' with which Butler defines performativity.<sup>68</sup> Blanco and Peeren note that 'slippage occurs with respect to the ideal-image [of performance], resulting in a doubling or self-haunting'; illustrating this idea, the two women interact with a cloying politeness and formality despite their secret knowledge that 'they are each impersonating someone', not wishing to disrupt their carefully honed performances.<sup>69</sup> As Kitty tells Laura the upsetting news that she needs to stay at the hospital, she 'sits the way one sits among strangers on a train', and after she's finished 'does not move or speak, does not cry'.<sup>70</sup> Yet Laura, perhaps because of her own awareness of the need to perform, perceives this dichotomy with heart-breaking clarity, sees her as 'Kitty the powerful, Kitty the May Queen, ill and frightened'.<sup>71</sup>

Similarly, though with a little more viciousness, Laura tries to act 'careless, debonair, charmingly innocent' about her less-than-perfect birthday cake, but Kitty 'punctures Laura's brash, cigarette self at its inception' by calling the cake "cute", completely dismantling her performance.<sup>72</sup> Cunningham names Laura's endeavour as 'trying to bake a cake so perfect that it banishes sorrow': her hopes for the cake are a projection of her hopes for herself, 'woman of sorrows'.<sup>73</sup> For Blanco and Peeren, 'Butler's theory of performativity [...] invokes a sense of spectrality in the way the constant reiterations of the norm required for its maintenance are never perfect reproductions'.<sup>74</sup> This idea is typified by Laura, who 'is herself and [...] the perfect picture of herself' as she tries to bake a cake 'glossy and resplendent as any photograph in any magazine', the two quotes together amplifying her concern with image and the way that she perceives it as something far removed from her reality.<sup>75</sup>

In *The Hours*, desires are spectral and amorphous, and Cunningham himself asserts that 'there is no character who can accurately be described as gay or straight'; none of them explicitly identify one way or another, so applying any label would be inaccurate and misinformed.<sup>76</sup> Yet even in 2023, Marwa Alkhayat describes Clarissa as 'the *lesbian* New York publisher Clarissa Vaughan [my emphasis]', negating the expansiveness of Clarissa's sexuality, limiting her identity to a more binary form.<sup>77</sup> As detailed in the previous chapter,

<sup>67</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Intro', *Spectralities*, p.2.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.xv.

<sup>69</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Spectral Subjectivities', *Spectralities*, p.310; Cunningham, *Hours*, p.110.

<sup>70</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.107; p.108.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p.108.

<sup>72</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, p.103; p.104.

<sup>73</sup> Twenty Summers, *Michael Cunningham and Daniel Mendelsohn in Conversation*, online video recording, YouTube, 18 Oct 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6SURouPAXI&list=WL&index=1&t=1127s>> [accessed 7 May 2023].

<sup>74</sup> Blanco and Peeren, 'Spectral Subjectivities', *Spectralities*, p.310.

<sup>75</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, both p.76.

<sup>76</sup> Schiff, 'Interview', p.126.

<sup>77</sup> Marwa Alkhayat, 'Towards a Feminization of Time in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) and Sahar Al-Mouji's *The Musk of the Hill* (2017)', *Women's studies*, 52:3 (2023), 339–361 (p.346)

Clarissa's past desires for Richard, a man, still haunt her, and just as Katy Shaw suggests that 'spectres disturb the present with the possibility of alternative pasts and futures', the spectre of her erstwhile desire causes Clarissa to imagine how things might have been different for her and Richard.<sup>78</sup> She feels like 'it is impossible not to imagine that other future, that rejected future', which she imagines as 'as a vast and enduring romance', with a profundity and passion that contrasts the 'stable and affectionate marriage' she shares with Sally.<sup>79</sup> These wild imaginings, the spectral possibilities that are still real to her, serve to prove that Clarissa's sexuality is more all-encompassing than it is often given credit for.

Surely, then, this means Clarissa is bisexual. This would certainly be a satisfying identification following Steven Angelides' contention that 'bisexuality has always been sexuality's most fearful ghost', as it is the spectre of her love for Richard that tells the reader that Clarissa's sexuality goes beyond binary.<sup>80</sup> However, defining Clarissa's identity in any way would be anathema to Cunningham's assertion that 'the terms "gay," "straight" or "bisexual" are so inexact and crude as to be virtually meaningless', and would not reveal anything further about Clarissa's character or motivations.<sup>81</sup> It is Butler's contention that 'crafting a sexual position, or reciting a sexual position, always involves becoming haunted by what's excluded'; naming Clarissa's identity with too broad or narrow a stroke risks losing subtlety and therefore meaning.<sup>82</sup> This quote from Butler echoes Derrida's observation that 'hauntedness is not only haunted by this or that ghost [...] but by the specter of the truth which has been thus repressed'.<sup>83</sup> In the context of *The Hours*, the 'specter of truth' is Clarissa's past desire for Richard, and while it would be too strong to say she represses this desire, there is a truth here that Clarissa keeps within her, hiding. Following all of this, it is easier to refer to her sexual identity as 'queer', a more inclusive and expansive term which April Scarlette Callis characterises as 'an ambiguous, fluid concept that can and does change', just as Clarissa does.<sup>84</sup>

In her introduction to *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Castle writes: 'It is time, I maintain, to focus on presence instead of absence, plenitude instead of scarcity'.<sup>85</sup> This is to say identity and desire are - despite expansive work in the realm of queer theory - ultimately, incomprehensible forces, too human and too personal to wholly define and categorise. Better, then, to define queerness through its indefinability. My aim here, in likening queerness to the spectral, is to reveal how they both share an intangible nature that provides fertile ground for divergent interpretations.

## Conclusion

*The Hours* is a novel where all three narrative strands are set firmly in reality; it is not a gothic text and there are no actual ghosts. What makes it spectral is what makes many texts, of differing genres, spectral: the presence of things past, the power of memory, recognition

<sup>78</sup> Shaw, *Hauntology*, p.7.

<sup>79</sup> Cunningham, *Hours*, all p.97.

<sup>80</sup> Steve Angelides, 'A History of Bisexuality', p.203.

<sup>81</sup> Schiff, 'Interview', p.126.

<sup>82</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (1994), 32-39 (p.34).

<sup>83</sup> Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 9-63 (p.55).

<sup>84</sup> April Scarlette Callis, 'Bisexual, pansexual, queer: Non-binary identities and the sexual borderlands', *Sexualities*, 17:1 (2014), 63-80 (p.69).

<sup>85</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (United States: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.19.

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of the self. I have investigated these three ideas within and across the three chapters of this dissertation to endorse hauntological analysis as a means to draw out latent meaning in what we consider spectral. This is, in essence, to acknowledge that the past lives on in the present, to recognise that our subjective experience of time is not as linear as it may seem, and to highlight that these notions are well suited for literary writing. *The Hours*, therefore, can be used to demonstrate how malleable spectral theory can be.

It is profitable, then, to identify where else we might seek out the spectral, as outlined in the foregoing analysis, elsewhere in the work of Cunningham and Woolf. Cunningham's following novel, *Specimen Days* (2006), shares many similarities with *The Hours*: tripartite narrative, palimpsest on another book (Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), use of free indirect discourse. There is a character who 'went out into the morning, a spanking-fresh June one' and 'paused for a moment on the stoop, taking it in'.<sup>86</sup> This image is spectral because it could just as well have been taken from Cunningham's previous novel, in the same way that a spectre of *Mrs Dalloway* shapes the images in *The Hours*. Or indeed, more significantly, how *Leaves of Grass* influences *Specimen Days*.

We can find the spectral also in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), which echoes Mrs Dalloway's concern with the self and memory:

'Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, [...] those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their hauntings by day and night, [...] shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves.'<sup>87</sup>

Derrida writes that 'they are always *there*, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet', and here Woolf invokes both the 'no longer' and the 'not there yet', the 'unborn selves', recognising as I have also attempted to recognise, that to speak of storytelling is to speak of haunting.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Cunningham, *Specimen Days* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), p.114.

<sup>87</sup> Woolf, *The Waves* [1931] (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), p.163.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, p.221.

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