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Flight of the Red Balloon



3H Productions, Margo Films and Les Films du Lendemain present

Flight of the Red Balloon

A film by **Hou Hsiao Hsien**

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Synopsis

A mysterious red balloon affectionately follows seven-year-old Simon around Paris. His mother Suzanne is a puppeteer who uses her vocal talents to bring life to the shows she writes. Completely absorbed in her new show, single mother Suzanne becomes overwhelmed by the complications of modern daily life. She decides to hire Song Fang, a Taiwanese film student, to help her care for Simon.



Archetypes of persistence from an interview with Hou Hsiao Hsien

FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON is the first film in a series initiated by the president of Paris' Musée d'Orsay, Serge Lemoine, and the production, in conjunction with the museum's 20th anniversary. The idea is to bring together contemporary artists, in this case world class filmmakers, and the Museum's Impressionist or Art Nouveau treasures. The terms are particularly simple: the museum must be present, either throughout the film or just a scene. This is how Hou Hsiao Hsien came to scout locations for the first time in Paris. This was the starting point for the adventure of this film: FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON.

When did you first see Albert Lamorisse's film *Le Ballon Rouge*?

When Francois Margolin, on the behalf of the president of the Musée d'Orsay, came to see me and invited me to make a film with them, I agreed and started researching what I might do. I met people, read about Paris, read about French cinema... and I found out about Lamorisse's film and watched it.

I also read a very useful book, published in France. It's called *Paris to the Moon* and it's by an American, Adam Gopnik. I think I related to this book because it's written from the perspective of an outsider, and it became my guide to Paris. From the book I learned about the children's toy called "The Machine for Drawing the World," which I used in the scene in which Simon and Louise draw pictures. Gopnik's book taught me many other things too, such as the fact that there were pinball machines in many Parisian cafés in the old

days. He also writes about the game on the merry-go-round in the Jardin de Luxembourg: the kids on the ride have little sticks, which they try to push through the small metal ring as they go past. I put that in the film, too.

Coming to Lamorisse's film fifty years after it was made, what did you make of it?

My first reaction on seeing it was that it showed certain realities of Paris in 1956. It shows the city's ambience, and the social system of the time. The focus on the various constraints surrounding the child is revealing: he is forbidden to do things at home, at school, on the bus ... He doesn't have enough space to live, but at the same time the film gives a sense of the new, post-war freedoms around him. Kids today don't have such freedoms. I didn't think of the red balloon itself in metaphorical terms; I think the film shows cruel realities.

How well did you know Paris before making your film?

I'd visited the city two or three times and seen the tourist sights. Once the film was set up, I took every chance to visit and spent as much time as I could exploring the city.

There are certain similarities between your approach to Paris and your approaches to Tokyo in *Café Lumière* and to Taipei in *Three Times*. You anchor your stories in the topography, culture, history and everyday life of the cities...

Before making *Café Lumière*, I'd never imagined that I could make a film abroad. I didn't feel I knew well enough how people lived in other countries and other cultures. During the *Café Lumière* shoot I gave the actors certain freedoms to do things their own way, and the results were quite pleasing. And so I approached this film the same way.

I start with the locations. The first thing this time was to find Suzanne's apartment. Then Simon's school. What time does it come out? Where is it in relation to the apartment? Where is the puppet theatre where Suzanne performs? Once all of these concrete

things are established, I can start work on the script.

Your Paris has a distinctly Chinese flavour, though, thanks to the casting of Song Fang as the child-minder and to the puppet play that Suzanne narrates.

I met Song Fang at the Pusan Film Festival when I was the dean of its first Asian Film Academy and she was one of the students. I talked with her and found she spoke fluent French; she'd spent years in Brussels and Paris, and was then studying at Beijing Film Academy. Meeting her inspired the character she plays, who is not untypical of Mainland Chinese in France. Plenty of Taiwanese students go to France to study, but hardly any of them work as child-minders. On the other hand, lots of Mainlanders do.

The puppet play that Suzanne narrates derives from a Yuan Dynasty play. Director Bai Jingrui wanted to adapt it as a movie for many years, but never did. Versions of it are often performed in Taiwanese puppet theatres. About five years ago, the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* asked me to write something about Truffaut's cinema, and this play came to my mind right

away. I associate Truffaut with single-minded, persistent characters, and this ancient play offers an archetypal image of persistence.

It's hard to find people who are truly persistent in that way these days, but I think Suzanne is like that. She narrates the story of Zhang Yu, the scholar who tries to boil away the ocean to retrieve his beloved Qiong Lian, and her own domestic situation is analogous: she's stuck in an emotional impasse, and is determined to help herself out of it through her own efforts.

How much of a film like this do you script in advance? Just the overall structure, or is it more than that?

I have a full script, but without the dialogue. Each scene is discussed in detail with the actors, who invent their own dialogue to fit the situation. This worked fine in general but I had a problem with the child actor who plays Simon. There are strict regulations on the hours that children are allowed to work, and I had only thirty days in total to shoot the film. I wasn't satisfied that I'd captured the child's feelings very fully, and that led to a lot of additional work in the editing and post-production.





How well did Juliette Binoche adapt to this way of working? Presumably she's used to having a dialogue script to work from?

We didn't have that much time for preparation, and I met Juliette only three times before we started shooting. The first time, she wasn't ready and couldn't come up with any dialogue. The second time was not much better. But the third time, she arrived as Suzanne. She'd entered the character, knew her hair colour, knew how she talked, everything. When you work with actors as professional as Juliette Binoche is, you can expect to get that kind of contribution from them.

I had a similar experience with the parents in *Café Lumière*. They're both professional actors and their contributions ended up defining the characters they played. The man decided that he should be taciturn, almost silent, and the woman played off that, becoming more nervous and insecure.

Do you give the actors full backstories to work with?

Yes, I write as much background as possible, in great detail. For example,

we decided that Suzanne's father and mother met in 1968 and later divorced. They ran a printing business in Paris. When they divorced, the apartments went to the wife, who bequeathed them to Suzanne. Suzanne had Louise by her first long-term partner. When that relationship ended, Louise went to live with her grandfather (Suzanne's father) in Brussels. Pierre (Simon's father) is thus Suzanne's second long-term partner, a novelist; he went to Canada as a writer-in-residence for a university in Montreal. Most of this detail is never mentioned in the film, but because the actors know it all they can draw on it and refer to it when they need to.

This is the second film you've made in which puppet theatre is a central motif. What draws you to this very specialised art?

When I was young puppet shows were often staged in front of temples and I saw them many times, and so puppet theatre always looms large in my own memories. I even tried to make my own puppet shows when I was a kid. In this film, it was thinking about the persistence of Suzanne's character that led me back to puppet theatre. The story of Zhang Yu is a staple of the puppet theatre, and so

I wanted to use that in some way. But this is a French movie, and so I had to find a way to integrate a Chinese puppet-theatre story into a French narrative. That's how I came up with the idea that Suzanne would be a creator and voice performer of puppet shows in Paris.

from an interview by Tony Rayns, conducted at Spot Cinema in Taipei in March 2007, translated by Chang ChuTi.

Cast and Crew

DIRECTOR	Hou Hsiao Hsien
CAST	Suzanne: Juliette Binoche Simon: Simon Iteanu Song: Song Fang Marc: Hippolyte Girardot Louise: Louise Margolin
LANGUAGE	French
LENGTH	1h53
FORMAT	35mm - 1.85 - Colour
SOUND	Dolby SR
LOCATION	France
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	Mark Lee Ping Bing
SOUND ENGINEER	Chu Shih Yi
EDITORS	Liao Ching Sung Jean-Christophe Hym
PRODUCTIONS	Margo Films, Les Films du Lendemain, 3H Productions Limited
PRODUCERS	François Margolin and Kristina Larsen
LINE PRODUCER	Liao Ching Sung
IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH	Arte France Cinéma

In partnership with **Le Musée d'Orsay**

With the support of **La Région Ile de France**

With the participation of **Canal Plus, CineCinema, la Sofica Poste Image and Soficinema 3**

Hou Hsiao Hsien

Director

2007	FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON Cannes 2007 - Un Certain Regard - Opening Film
2005	THREE TIMES, Cannes 2005 - Official Selection
2004	CAFÉ LUMIÈRE
2001	MILLENNIUM MAMBO Cannes 2001- Technical Grand Prize
1998	FLOWERS OF SHANGHAI Cannes 1998 - Official Selection
1996	GOODBYE SOUTH, GOODBYE Cannes 1996 - Official Selection
1995	GOOD MEN, GOOD WOMEN Cannes 1995 - Official Selection
1993	THE PUPPETMASTER, Cannes 1993 - Special Jury Prize
1989	A CITY OF SADNESS, Venice 1989 - Golden Lion
1988	DAUGHTER OF THE NILE Cannes 1988 - Director's Fortnight
1986	DUST IN THE WIND
1985	A TIME TO LIVE, AND A TIME TO DIE Berlin 1985 - International Critics Award
1984	A SUMMER AT GRANDPA'S
1983	THE BOYS FROM FENGKUEI
1983	THE SANDWICH MAN
1983	THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME
1981	CHEERFUL WIND
1980	CUTE GIRL

Juliette Binoche

Actress

2007	DISENGAGEMENT, Amos GITAI PARIS, Cédric KLAPISCH
2006	DAN IN REAL LIFE, Peter Hedges FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON HOU, Hsiao Hsien
2005	MARY, Abel FERRARA BREAKING AND ENTERING, Anthony MINGHELLA A FEW DAYS IN SEPTEMBER, Santiago AMIGORENA
2004	BEE SEASON ,Scott Mc GEHEE & David SIEGEL HIDDEN ,Michaël HANEKE
2003	IN MY COUNTRY, John BOORMAN
2001	JET LAG ,Danièle THOMPSON
2000	CHOCOLAT, Lasse HALLSTRÖM
1999	CODE UNKNOWN, Michael HANEKE THE WIDOW OF SAINT PIERRE, Patrice LECONTE
1998	THE CHILDREN OF THE CENTURY, Diane KURYS
1997	ALICE AND MARTIN, André TECHINE
1995	A COUCH IN NEW YORK, Chantal AKERMAN THE ENGLISH PATIENT, Anthony MINGHELLA
1994	THE HORSEMAN ON THE ROOF, J-P RAPPENEAU
1993	THREE COLOURS : BLUE, Krzysztof KIESLOWSKI
1992	DAMAGE, Louis MALLE
1991	LOVERS ON THE PONT NEUF, Léos CARAX WUTHERING HEIGHTS, Peter KOSMINSKY
1987	THE UNBEARABLE, Philip KAUFMAN LIGHTNESS OF BEING, J.C. Carrière et P. Kaufman
1986	THE NIGHT IS YOUNG, Léos CARAX
1985	HAIL MARY, Jean Luc GODARD FAMILY LIFE, Jacques DOILLON RENDEZ VOUS, André TECHINE

Margo Films

Production Company

MARGO FILMS was founded in 1989.
François MARGOLIN is the managing director.

Short-Films

- 1998** BARBES-STALINGRAD by François MARGOLIN
- 1994** A LUCY by Radha-Rajen JAGANATHEN
- 1989** ELLE ET LUI by François MARGOLIN

Documentaries

- 2004** LES PETITS SOLDATS by François MARGOLIN
- 2003** OAS, L'HISTOIRE INTERDITE by François MARGOLIN and Georges-Marc BENAMOU
- 2003** DERRIERE LE VOILE by François MARGOLIN
- 2001** L'OPIUM DES TALIBANS by François MARGOLIN and Olivier WEBER
- 1999** PETITE CONVERSATION FAMILIALE by Hélène LAPIOUER
- 1999** MIOTTE by Raoul RUIZ
- 1996** LE TANGO DES VITAMINES by Robinson SAVARY
- 1995** DIX ANS APRES de François MARGOLIN
- 1992** NICE, LA PETITE RUSSIE by Pavel LOUNGUINE

Features

- 2006** FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON by HOU Hsiao Hsien
- 2006** BOARDING GATE by Olivier ASSAYAS
- 2004** JOURNEES A LA CAMPAGNE (DIAS DE CAMPO) by Raoul Ruiz
- 2003** FOREST WALKERS by Ivan VOJNAR
- 2001** THE PILGRIMAGE OF STUDENTS PETER AND JACOB by Drahomira VIHANOVA
- 1997** MATANGA by David-Pierre FILA, in co-production with les Productions La Gauchet (Canada), le Ministère de la Coopération et les Films Bantou (Congo). Selected at Ouagadougou
- 1995** A PROPOS DE NICE directed by seven directors: Claire DENIS, Raymond DEPARDON, Costa GAVRAS, Pavel LOUNGUINE, Catherine BREILLAT, Abbas KIAROSTAMI and Raoul RUIZ, (in homage to Jean VIGO), in co-production with LA SEPT CINEMA, pre-sale CANAL PLUS
- 1995** THE FORTRESS by Drahomira VIHANOVA
- 1993** THE LIE by François MARGOLIN with Nathalie BAYE and Didier SANDRE

Les Films du Lendemain

Production Company

LES FILMS DU LENDEMAIN was founded in 1993. The president is Bernard-Henri LEVY, the producer is Kristina LARSEN.

- 2007** ON WAR by Bertrand Bonello
- 2006** FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON by Hou Hsiao Hsien
- 2006** LADY CHATTERLEY by Pascale Ferran
- 2006** AMERICAN VERTIGO (documentary) by Michko Netchak
- 2006** GRADIVA by Alain Robbe-Grillet
- 2005** LA MAISON DE TANGER (TV documentary) by Benoît Jacquot
- 2004** EARTH & ASHES by Atiq Rahimi
- 2003** MY MOTHER by Christophe Honoré
- 2003** NE FAIS PAS ÇA ! by Luc Bondy
- 2001** SERBIA, YEAR ZERO documentary by Goran Markovic
- 2000** SAVAGE SOULS by Raoul Ruiz
- 1999** LES INFORTUNES DE LA BEAUTÉ by John Lvoff
- 1999** TIME REGAINED by Raoul Ruiz
- 1998** BIENVENUE À VITROLLES documentary by Guy Konopnicki and Thierry Vincent
- 1996** DAY AND NIGHT by Bernard-Henri Lévy,
- 1994** BOSNA ! documentary by Bernard-Henri Lévy



