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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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.
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 tried 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 back-stories 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
Abel: 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
Jean-Christophe Hym

EDITORS
Liao Ching Sung

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 Cinema

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 CAFE LUMIERE
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
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 GRANDPKS
1983 THE BOYS FROM FENGKUEI
1983 THE SANDWICH MAN
1983 THE GREEN, GREEN GRASS OF HOME
1981 CHEERFUL WIND
1980 CUTE GIRL

Actress
2007 DISENGAGEMENT, Amos GITAI
2006 DAN IN REAL LIFE, Peter Hedges
2005 MARY, Abul FERDARA
2004 BREAKING AND ENTERING, Anthony MINGHELLA
2003 IN MY COUNTRY, John BOORMAN
2001 JET LAG, Daniel THOMPSON
2000 CHOCOLAT, Lasse HALLSTRÖM
1999 CODE UNKNOWN, Michael HANEKE
1998 THE CHILDREN OF THE CENTURY, Diane KURYS
1997 ALICE AND MARTIN, André TECHINE
1996 A COUCH IN NEW YORK, Chantal AKERMAN
1995 THE HORSEMAN ON THE ROOF, J-P RAPPENEAU
1994 THREE COLOURS : BLUE, Krzysztof KIESLOWSKI
1993 DAMAGE, Louis MALLE
1991 LOVERS ON THE PONT NEUF, Lous CARAX
1989 THE BOYS FROM FENGKUEI
1988 THE UNBEARABLE, Philip KAUFMAN
1987 LIGHTNESS OF BEING, J.C. Carrière et P. Kaufman
1986 THE NIGHT IS YOUNG, Lous CARAX
1985 FAMILY LIFE, Jacques DOILLON
1984 RENDEZ VOUS, André TECHINE

Juliette Binoche

2007 PARIS, Cédric KLAPEK
2006 PIETTE HEGES
2005 MARY, Abul FERDARA
2004 A FEW DAYS IN SEPTEMBER, Santiago AMIGORENA
2003 IN MY COUNTRY, John BOORMAN
2001 JET LAG, Daniel THOMPSON
2000 CHOCOLAT, Lasse HALLSTRÖM
1999 CODE UNKNOWN, Michael HANEKE
1998 THE CHILDREN OF THE CENTURY, Diane KURYS
1997 ALICE AND MARTIN, André TECHINE
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1986 THE NIGHT IS YOUNG, Lous CARAX
1985 FAMILY LIFE, Jacques DOILLON
1984 RENDEZ VOUS, André TECHINE
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 and Georges-Marc BENAMOU
2003 DERRIERE LE VOILE by François MARGOLIN and Olivier WEBER
1999 PETITE CONVERSATION FAMILIALE by Hélène LAPIERRE
1996 LE TANGO DES VITAMINES by Robinson SAVARY
1995 MATANGA by David-Pierre FILA, in co-production with les Productions La Gauchet (Canada), le Ministère de la Coopération et les Films Bantou (Congo).

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 Gauthier VINCENT
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).

1999 A PROPOS DE NICE directed by seven directors: Claire DENIS, Raymond DEPARDON, Costa GAVRAS, Pavel LOUNGUIE, Catherine BREVILLAT, Abbas KARRIERSTI and Raoul RUIZ, (in homage to Jean VIGO), in co-production with LA SEPT CINEMA, pre-sale CANAL PLUS.

1995 THE FORBIDDEN by Drahomira VIHANOVA
1993 THE SIX by François MARGOLIN with Nathalie BAYE and Didier SANDRE

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 Michka Netach
2006 GRADIVA by Alan 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 BEAUTE by John Luoff
1999 TIME REGAINED by Raoul Ruiz
1998 BIENVENUE À VITROLLES documentary by Guy Kopsni and Thierry Vincent
1996 DAY AND NIGHT by Bernard-Henri Lévy
1994 BOSNA ! documentary by Bernard-Henri Lévy