ARTICLES

Pinning down Hou Hsiao-Hsien's red balloon

It is a risk for a filmmaker to establish an inanimate object as a crucial agent of meaning. This is not because objects (on film) lack the capacity for meaningful resonance, but rather that their significance can all too easily seem to be externally bestowed. As viewers, we attempt to interpret the words and actions of people on screen because attending and responding to other people is how most of us navigate the social worlds in which we live; but these worlds are often perfectly navigable without us having to interpret the objects, too. (A common claim in writing on objecthood suggests that 'things' claim our attention, as things, only when they malfunction or break.) When a film positions an object as significant, and significant beyond its immediate utility, it tends to be an *assertion*. A sustained close-up of a human face may be offered to viewers as something to consider in their ongoing interpretation of a scene or sequence, but a sustained close-up of a coffee cup or a vase or an electric fan is invariably offered for more than consideration – one could say that our activity in these moments, as viewers, nudges from *watching* to *reading*. (This effect is often particularly pronounced when the shot arrives as a cut-away, or when a human character leaves the frame and we are invited to focus on something left in their wake. Both techniques carve out an opportunity for contemplation which is not available to the scene's characters.) Needless to say, a great many filmmakers have chosen to assert the significance of objects and achieved extraordinary results and effects by doing so. But the risk is nevertheless a real one; might conspicuous emphasis on a particular thing short-circuit the delicate relay of meaningful exchanges and patterns elsewhere in the scene, or the film?

Flight of the Red Balloon (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 2007) runs this risk more than most. A reimagining of *Le Ballon Rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), Hou's film is about a beautiful, bold-red sphere. This balloon is more substantial than the kind associated with children's parties, but just like them it moves constantly and apparently without purpose or predictable direction, permeating the movie. It is addressed in its first spoken words, and its final song; it is the subject of its opening and closing shot; it is, more than once, followed by the camera in sustained long takes; a number of sequences imply a fantastical connection between it and one of the main characters (Simon, played by Simon Iteanu); it is filmed by another main character (Song, played by Fang Song); its likeness appears painted on a Parisian wall, by which Simon and Song walk; another likeness appears in a painting (*Le Ballon* by Félix Vallotton) housed in the Musée d'Orsay, a painting which is not only *shown* in the film, but is actively interpreted and discussed; even the balloon's colour is repeated and distributed elsewhere in the film – particularly in the decor of the department where much of the film takes place, but also in the clothes of Suzanne (Juliette Binoche), in street furniture, and in posters and pictures adorning interior and exterior walls. The balloon functions in almost opposite terms to those written about by George Toles in his essay about 'world particles' in film, which he describes as 'easily overlooked, seemingly inconsequential peripheral details' (2022: 46). Were we to somehow quantify the optical and rhetorical emphasis placed on things in films, I can only imagine that *Flight of the Red Balloon* would emerge as an outlier, a movie which is unusually preoccupied by – and possibly led by? – a specific object.[1] The balloon is asked to bear considerable meaningful weight.

But to what extent is this 'bearing of weight' purely metaphorical, a means by which criticism articulates the elusive qualities of rhetorical and expressive devices, and to what

extent do the physical and material properties of the balloon actually come into play when we consider those devices? That is the primary concern of this essay. The invocation of tactile qualities as a means of making sense of a film is so common as to seem unavoidable and unremarkable; a critic need not

be deliberately haptic in their approach to describe a movie as uneven, or rough, or heavy, or unbalanced, or finely poised. Often these judgements or descriptions have no ostensible relation to the physical properties of what is in the film, though sometimes one is struck by an unerringly apposite account of a film's meaningful physicality (Raymond Durgnat is especially adept at this). *Flight of the Red Balloon* is not only an opportunity to put such thoughts to the test, but it could be said to *require* the critic to venture some kind of reconciliation between the film's physics and its expressiveness, given the potent disconnect between the meaningful weight (or burden) of the balloon and its literal, quintessential lightness. One commentator demonstrates the flights of interpretive travel which seem to be permitted by the film's eponymous object:

> The red balloon itself is an allegorical stand-in for the hallucinatory and unstable intersubjective status of the transitional object as an adequate substitute for the good enough mother. It stands for the presence of a sympathetic observer, the magic of digital technologies, and the ways in which special effects can visually incarnate the intersubjective, intergenerational experiences and memories of childhood all at the same time. Not diegetic nor anthropomorphic as it was in Lamorisse's film, the red balloon exists in an intersubjective and intermediate, nonphenomenological space—between people's fantasies and experiences, between analog cinema special effects and digital cinema's transformation, between cinema history and cinema practice, between adults and children, between the laws of gravity and the laws of fantasy. (Liu 2011: 449-450)

And yet it seems to me that the film avoids the mistake which it initially appears to make – of relying too heavily on the balloon as an all-purpose receiver of projected meanings – by positioning other things in its action and its mise-en-scène which relate to and inflect, or balance, the balloon and its role. These other things are less prominent than the balloon, but careful attention to them is vital, and can help us understand that Hou's film is not quite so reliant on the 'floating signifier' as might first seem the case.

The very term 'floating signifier' of course seems almost too apt. The notion of a sign being untethered from its referent, too free to function in a coordinated system of meaning-laden relations, too loose and too unpredictable in its movements and suggestiveness – what could fulfil and illustrate this role better than a balloon? Frederic Jameson claimed much the same for the shark in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), describing it as a feature of the film whose very 'vocation' as a symbol 'lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb' multiple interpretations (142). To help me better understand what is happening in *Flight of the Red Balloon*, I would like to have known more of Jameson's thoughts on the shark's capability to hold and maintain this role *as a shark*; does its speed, its elusiveness, its status as desperately-sought prey, qualify it for this vocation? (Or to phrase this another way; would a coffee cup or a vase or an electric fan function just as well, were a filmmaker to deploy it accordingly?) Jameson's argument does not lead him in this direction because he is more concerned with the ideological ramifications of 'allowing social and historical anxieties to be folded back into apparently natural ones' (142). But even here we get a sense of how a thing's basic characteristics (the shark is an animal), and not just its associations (sharks seem ugly and threatening), affect its capacity for making meaning.

Lesley Stern also writes about the expressive and rhetorical role of a film's non-human agents in terms which lend themselves to a reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon*. I hope it is not cute or flippant to draw on Stern's writing about 'two modes of cinematic operation' – *inflation* and *deflation* – when considering Hou's balloon (324). It would, I think, be disingenuous to read Stern's words here as anything other than vivid descriptors for a film's tendency to 'play up' or 'play down' the meaningful force of an object, to be 'ostensive' or 'intensive', and her main examples – raindrops and teardrops, leaves blowing, kettles, cigarettes – unsurprisingly have nothing to do with the filling or emptying of objects with air.[2] What matters more to my discussion is the subtle but significant shift or sleight undertaken by Stern, whereby she studies not what a thing in a film means, but rather what is involved in the acquisition of its meaning. To think in terms of in flation and deflation, writes Stern, 'signals a shift away from a problematic of representation, an orientation more towards rhetoric, towards the potentialities and actualisations of filmic language (how worlds are conjured into being, ideas shaped, emotions solicited, viewers interpellated and touched)' (325-326). My claims for *Flight of the Red Balloon* are indebted to Stern's essay, but as well as attending to the 'potentialities and actualisations of filmic language' through which we apprehend the

balloon, I will explore how the balloon's objecthood is related to *other* things in the film. (Stern's taxonomic approach limits the potential for this kind of interpretation.) The most acute question this then leads to is whether the camera itself can reasonably, or usefully, be understood as one of those other things.

Suzanne and the balloon

Simon may be considered the main character of *Flight of the Red Ballon*, though his child-minder Song and his mother Suzanne each have a claim. (As with other Hou films, 'centrality' does not seem like an appropriate figuration for articulating someone's position in the story.) He is an apparently likable young boy, affectionate and imaginative, and as far as we can glean, he is not especially frustrated with the adult-centric conditions and expectations – school, close living quarters, absent family members, his mother's work commitments – which set the parameters for his experience of the world. In many ways, he is quite inscrutable, and Hou's decoupage does not give us much to work with in the realm of facial expressions. But there are 'facts' about Simon's engagement with this world which are made clear by the film, and the most pertinent to my essay are as follows: that he sees the balloon and registers its unusual behaviour and its potential sentience; that he is not disturbed by this; and that he does not seek to share his experience of the balloon with anyone else.

These features of Simon's relationship with the balloon are established very early on in the film, and remain relatively undeveloped for its remainder. At the very beginning, Simon is at the entrance to a Metro station, ostensibly alone but talking to a (the) balloon offscreen. It ignores his invitation to join him on the train, but the subsequent sequences seem to show the balloon 'tracking' Simon's journey onwards to another station, where he glances it through the train window. He will shortly meet for the first time Song, who mentions in passing Albert Lamirosse's *Le Ballon Rouge*, and that it tells the story of a young boy and a red balloon – but Simon rather mysteriously makes no discernible or conscious connection between this and his earlier encounter. Even if we suppose that this is not the first time Simon has seen the balloon (and I struggle to identify any evidence in the film suggesting one way or another, that this is the first time or part of a pattern), the coincidence would seem to warrant some kind of reaction – but none transpires. What effect emerges from this odd combination of flagrant artifice and narrative inconsequence, or rather what effect emerges that has anything to do with the balloon's specific and inherent qualities?

Simon's seeming indifference to the subject of the balloon, once it has passed from his sight, is in part a resignation, a concession to the fact that the balloon – however compelling, and seemingly attentive – is now by its nature most likely to have passed through his life, not to return. Simon does not know that he is in a film named after the balloon, and even if his new companion mentions another film with a similar name, this too cannot be expected to attract or secure his interest as much as it might ours (who are more likely to know the full extent of the connection with Lamorisse's film, including the Parisian setting). In other words, while Simon might have experienced some private moments of fantastical communion with the balloon, he would also be more likely than us to have simultaneously felt, or assumed, its ephemerality. The film's viewers have seen, as Simon has not, the balloon descend from the sky into a Metro station just seconds before a train arrives, and then hang in mid-air on the platform, as if waiting to greet a passenger. This is not simply a matter of film narration granting viewers access to events unknown to characters (though it is this too); rather the film guides us to follow and linger with something that the character would be helpless to deliberately seek out even if he wanted to. *Flight of the Red Balloon* is in many ways a tender portrait of Simon, but it keeps its distance from him. In these opening scenes of the film, we encounter – and begin to interpret – the balloon according to very different parameters than those offered to him.

Attention and significance seem to be lavished on this object from so early on in the film that first-time viewers are unlikely to have the knowledge of, and insight into, other aspects of the film world necessary for understanding, or even supposing, quite what warrants that attention and significance. Knowing virtually nothing of the emotional or material conditions of Simon's life leaves us somewhat helpless when it comes to speculating about the balloon's presence and status – what does it offer, or promise, or stand for?[3] But in a fascinating structural manoeuvre, the film then takes leave of the balloon for approximately 40 minutes, during which time our understanding of Simon is 'filled out', and we have the chance to connect this emerging narrative texture with the balloon. (The question of whether viewers are, cognitively speaking, *likely* to strive for these interpretive connections, in the way that they are likely to fill in standard spatial and temporal ellipses, is intriguing to say the least, but beyond the scope and expertise of this essay.) Most significantly, we are introduced to Suzanne.

Simon's mother is a tender but distracted woman; she is sweet and honest and open with other people on a moment-by-moment basis, and there are few serious questions raised by the film about her dedication to Simon, but the cocktail of pressures she encounters – single parenthood, fractious relations with neighbouring tenants, professional duties, marital separation – take their toll. She is frazzled. Juliette Binoche brings to a number of screen performances a remarkable combination of bodily energy and poise, and in *Flight of the Red Balloon* the balance certainly swings towards the former, with just a small handful of moments allowing Suzanne (and us) respite from her apparently routine state; harried, adrenaline-fuelled, absent-minded, pressed upon. She seems often to be slinging bags and scarves on and off her body, fiddling with or re-arranging the clutter of her apartment, and if not on the verge of leaving a space, her mind always racing ahead to her next appointment. (Her professional work as a puppet voice-artist is a significant, pointed exception to this.) When she drives Song to Simon's school for their first meeting, Suzanne rushes out of the car and quickly heads down the street to the school gates, forgetting to unlock the passenger door and leaving Song momentarily trapped in the car. Suzanne apologises, but can't talk for long; she needs to hurry back to her rehearsal.

We become acquainted with Suzanne during the balloon's hiatus. When it eventually returns, at virtually the exact halfway point of the film, the re-introduction is striking (and more 'inflationary' than its appearance at the film's start). The camera looks skywards, holds the balloon in the centre of

the frame against a blue but cloud-speckled sky, and then by following its movement downwards, reveals a cluster of chimneys and rear walls and skylights of the kind that have become (through films by René Clair, Jean Renoir, Jacques Rivette and Olivier Assayas, for example) a kind of cinephilic alternative to more conventional, touristic icons of Paris. A cut to Simon inside the apartment, holding Song's video camera and aiming it towards the window, suggests – without confirming – that he is watching and recording the balloon (which we do indeed see hovering outside that same window a minute or two later). Of course this moment once again raises questions posed earlier about Simon's understanding of, and feelings towards, the balloon's presence; but this time there emerges something else, namely a clear opportunity or invitation to contrast the balloon's tentative grace with Suzanne, who before long comes clattering through the door. She is late to meet her lawyer and friend Lorenzo (Charles-Edouard Renault), who has waited with Song and Simone for her to return, and issues scattershot apologies and greetings as soon as she is inside. An engine of excitement and nervous energy, Suzanne casts off her satchel and keys and coat and belt, passes Lorenzo a gift-wrapped bottle of wine, and throws the resultant empty plastic bag across the table. She also thrusts gifts towards Song and Simon, and in a particularly delightful grace note, bumps the low-hanging ceiling lamp as she reaches across the table towards her son. For the 20 minutes of screen time which have so far taken place in the apartment, this lamp has been a constant and steady source of warm light. Hou's approach to staging and framing (minor variations on a gently mobile, frontal master shot) has kept it in a more or less central position. This then allows the apparently minor gesture of an accidental nudge of the lamp to be felt and seen as genuinely disruptive; Simon even gently upbraids his mother, and the wobbling light now casts an unstable, jerky glow across the room.

When Simon regards the balloon, in the two sequences I have described, there is quite simply insufficient visual or narrative evidence to suppose with any confidence what he feels about, or values in, the encounter. But in the second of these, we watch them 'meet' equipped with knowledge about his mother, a near-frantic presence in his life whose loudness and unsteadiness and general precarity seem to sit in almost direct, oppositional contrast to the balloon. The fact that the balloon seems to attract a gentle pull towards Simon, silently floating just beyond the window moments before Suzanne crashes back into his orbit must be understood as an expressive strategy through which the balloon accrues meaning, even if we stop short (due to the film's complexity or tentativeness) of 'pinning down' the meaning as such. In considering the deep relationship between gesture, film style and material affect in cinema, Lesley Stern proposes that:

> the more that fiction films observe "documentary integrity" and adhere to the quotidian propensity (deploying deflationary operations with regard to editing and narrative drama) the more likely they are to frame gesture, and this gestural attention is likely to elicit a certain quality of thingness (an inflation of gesture and of things). (328)

Flight of the Red Balloon vividly bears this out. Hou's style most certainly tends towards the deflationary, and Suzanne's gestures are given ample opportunity to take place as a visible part of a larger spatial and temporal integrity. But while Stern writes mainly of films – such as *Umberto D* (Vittoria de Sica, 1952) and *L'Argent* (Robert Bresson, 1983) – in which gestures interact directly with the objects in question, Hou's film offers us something different: parallel planes of object and gesture, Suzanne and the balloon, whose coexistence ensures that the balloon never floats too freely from the human drama.

The piano and the balloon

If the balloon can be said to physically 'answer' or contrast with Suzanne's bodily and gestural tendencies, and through this contrast offer Simon feelings and experiences which are currently unattainable with his mother, then this is a claim which requires quite a careful navigation of the film's human drama. (For instance, it would seriously patronise Suzanne to suggest that she *ought* to float through life more serenely!) A less emotionally complex, but nevertheless significant, counterbalance is achieved through Simon's engagements with the piano on which he plays, and which is moved from the downstairs apartment up to Simon's and Suzanne's home.

On their first day together, shortly after Song has brought Simon to the apartment, Simon's piano teacher Anna (Anna Sigalevitch) arrives. The lesson takes place *not* in this apartment, but the one immediately downstairs, and Hou rather uncharacteristically clarifies the spatial and temporal coordinates by showing us the three characters moving from one space to the other. As they arrive in the room, Anna reassures Song that she need not clear the mess in the apartment, and the three settle into a spatial arrangement whereby Anna and Simon sit closely together at the piano, and Song watches on from behind, near the room's opposite wall. The space is not large, but the camera's position (and long lens) makes it impossible for all three to be framed together; the camera is obliged to look, or choose, between them, and trains its attention on Song rather than Anna or Simon as the lesson begins.

But almost immediately there emerges in the doorway behind Song a figure entering the apartment. Flora (Floore Vannier-Moreau), the girlfriend of tenant Marc (Hippolyte Girardot), has forgotten about the piano-lesson arrangement,

and has returned home with her food shopping in preparation for a dinner party. She then swiftly and apologetically moves around the room, clearing its mess while trying in vain not to disrupt the aura of the lesson. Throughout her quietly anxious tidying, the camera follows Flora's movements with striking persistence, dynamically reframing in response to her gestures and her direction of travel, emphasising how different an energy she is bringing to a space that moments previously had been a peaceful gathering of three still bodies. (And even when Song had knelt down to begin picking up clutter before Flora's arrival, the camera had not tracked her movement, but instead retained its view of Anna and Simon at the piano. A rhetorical distinction has clearly been made.) The continuing sound of piano chords and warm-up exercises being methodically played out by Simon make for a lovely, gently ironic counterpoint to Flora's hurried motions.

What does all this mean for the piano's position in the film's arrangement of things and feelings? I think we can establish that *Flight of the Red Balloon* is here characterising the piano not as a means for performance or expression (nor inert, decorative furniture)[4], but rather as a domestic object which, through its allocated position in the rooms and routines of the film's characters, seems to be something of a permanent and well-used fixture. Anna's warm familiarity with Simon (she greets him with a kiss) and her assurance in the apartment, Simon's comfortable confidence to begin the lesson with very little direction or instruction, Flora's admission of 'guilt' for forgetting the lesson – these all speak of a constancy or deep regularity in the position of the piano and the piano lessons in these people's lives. Just as a balloon is not only light, but essentially characterised by its lightness, a piano has become established in film as quintessentially a heavy object.[5] So Hou's deployment of the piano offers Simon, and us, an unerringly direct and tangible contrast to the contingency and unpredictability of the balloon.

The balloon, though, is not immediately present, and the piano's solidity is more directly contrasted with other figures in the room. The starkest of these contrasts is with Flora, who, as we have seen, scurries between different corners of the room. Her restlessness and absentmindedness actually align Flora quite closely with Suzanne (though this scene precedes Suzanne's late and frantic return to her apartment, described above). We have no reason to believe this comparison occurs to Simon, but second-time viewers of the film especially are likely to sense here a patterning, or an opportunity to see different figures bringing different kinds of energy into Simon's environment.

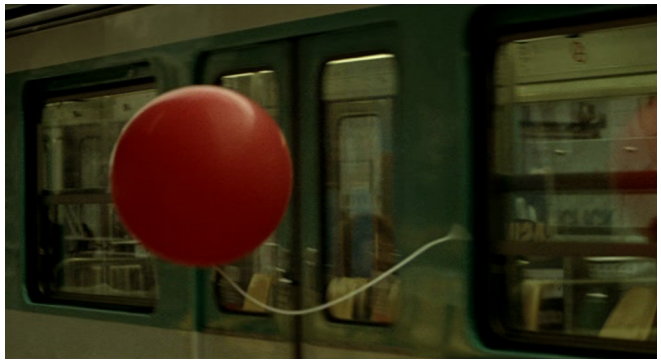
And throughout, Song watches on. The balloon is absent, and will not be seen again for 30 minutes, but I think a strong case can be made for Song's positioning and demeanour carrying with it some trace of the red balloon, with which in many ways she has already been paired (a pairing which is strengthened if we suppose that the balloon entered Simon's life on the same day as has Song). It is unusual for a film character to observe the actions of others in the same room, silent and arms folded, and for the observation to be almost entirely *neutral*, though this seems to be the case. Song has no reason to be concerned or suspicious or even especially interested, although she perhaps brings to the scene the natural curiosity of a bright young person in a new cultural environment. Yes, the social expectations of the situation (the music lesson, Song's employment as a child minder) make it entirely plausible that she would stand still and quietly watch, but it would be equally plausible for her to leave. The significance of her presence is essentially non-psychological and undramatic, and seems to me dependent on qualities – attentive but carefully distanced, present for Simon but in a deeply unobtrusive manner – which suggest a strong alignment with the balloon, and in turn a contrast, and balance, with the piano. Although vividly achieved film narratives often stage and illustrate dramatic developments through the arrangement of physical properties and patterns (size, scale, texture, velocity), *Flight of the Red Balloon* is rare in the extent to which the 'arrangement' predominates, and bears meaning; in this scene, exchanges between heaviness and lightness, stillness and flurry, matter more than anything.[6]

The camera and the balloon

By the time of *Flight of the Red Balloon*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien had developed one of the most distinctive visual styles in global art cinema. That the project was commissioned by the Musée d'Orsay says a great deal about the cultural and critical esteem in which his work was held, particularly in France. (Some years before this, Olivier Assayas made the celebratory profile film, *HHH: Portrait of Hou Hsiao-Hsien* (1997).) Comparisons with Yasujirō Ozu were and are unavoidable, and in the context of this essay, the most striking correspondence between them is their shared willingness to provide non-human things with space and time to accrue meaning (and often pathos). One could make the case that this kind of object-oriented realism was shared by a number of other celebrated 'slow cinema' filmmakers of the time, for whom long takes, long shots and repeated framings came to constitute a familiar palette. But in Hou's films we encounter an irreality that has a lot to do with the manipulation of, and responsiveness to, light, as well as a camera style poised between weighted stillness and a kind of untethered potential.

The camera in his films tends to be still to the extent that it rarely moves to much discernible degree across a space (through tracking, dolly shots, etc.), but fluid in its almost constant reframing, through tilts and pans which accommodate the movement of bodies. This accommodation normally helps us see the characters' gestures, and to that extent is purposeful; but it can likewise feel wilful and arbitrary, following a certain character's activity at the expense of another, as in the example described above, when the camera studies Flora's clearing of the apartment rather than direct our attention to Song or Simon. Hou Hsiao-Hsien apparently grants quite a lot of leeway to his long-time cinematographer Mark Lee Ping Bing, who himself has spoken about surreptitiously introducing more camera movement into their collaborations. Whatever the on-set techniques and processes which enable this effect, one does watch these films as if their action is somehow filtered through an unobtrusive but unmistakable mediating intelligence and sensibility. The camera in *Flight of the Red Balloon* does not seem to guide or select or emphasise, but nor does it retreat to cold, hard indifference; it does not explore space as such, but neither is it fixed. I am tempted to say that it hovers.

This context gives me reason to suggest that the red balloon has a reflexive capacity, and that as well connecting meaningfully to other participants in the film world – Suzanne, Song and the piano – it also maintains a relationship with the camera which films that world. Reflexivity in film normally comes to us by way of more deliberate human activity, actions and gestures with discernible correspondences to filmmaking and / or film spectatorship, such as looking, interpreting, organising, manipulating, displaying. And of course *Flight of the Red Balloon* itself features at least one explicit reflexive manoeuvre, by featuring in its story a Chinese filmmaker who travels to Paris, and makes a film inspired by *Le Ballon Rouge*. But I find a richer and more distinctive reflexivity in the scenes where there emerges a kind of shared and mirrored watchfulness between camera and balloon. The aforementioned sequence of the balloon seemingly waiting for Simon at the metro station early in the film, its unpredictable swishes through the air answered by and captured in the camera's responsive movements, makes for an extraordinary 'dance' between the two. In



retrospect, it looks as though the film in its early stages is calibrating its way of looking at the world by way of the balloon.

This approach to *Flight of the Red Balloon* is informed by and indebted to Daniel Morgan's recent book about camera movement, *The Lure of the Image*. Morgan argues that film criticism and theory has tended to conflate camera movement with absorption, assuming through an analogy of camera and eye that 'the camera functions as our surrogate, our mode of access to the world' (9). It is no hard to recall examples of this process or sensation, wherein a mobile camera seems to grant us, its audience, a kind of proxemic involvement, however partial and restricted that involvement might be. But, Morgan writes, rather than a means of 'standing in' for us, camera movement is better understood as 'the contingent ways that specific cinematic techniques work with and make use of our fantasies [...] a desire to latch onto *this* thing' (45-46). His claim that an audience will want to 'latch on to a thing' is presumably phrased in such a way as to retain a degree of flexibility and looseness when describing the connection between film viewer and camera, and his decision to substitute 'thing' for 'camera', is part of his argument against apparatus theory – it is an invitation to think less mechanistically about the camera's particular way of mediating the film world, and to gather more clues from that world about the nature and effect of that mediation. Although Morgan's study does not argue for anything like an object-oriented account of camera movement and point of view, it does disentangle the camera's position from, on the one hand, the notion of viewer surrogacy, and on the other hand the notion of a character's point of view. It thus leaves a kind of vacancy, which we can only convincingly argue is taken up by other 'things' on a case-by-case, film-by-film basis. *Flight of the Red Balloon* is an unusual but telling instance of an object filling that role.

What does it mean to propose that a viewer of this film might 'desire to latch on' to a balloon rather than a camera? At a very basic level, it is worth noting that a balloon is the kind of object that permits or affords latching – an enthusiastic or purposeful connection that is quite different from how we would take up a relation with (for example) a coffee cup or vase or electric fan. It is already an object which shares some qualities with film cameras – for example how it can plausibly sit and operate at almost any height, and that its movement cannot be controlled without a good degree of effort and concentration – as well as an intertwining history, through early experiments in aerial photography over the skies of Paris.

But of course Hou's film has given us more localised reasons to engage its world in sympathy with its balloon. As a benevolent observer of Simon, a respite from Suzanne, and a confederate of Song, the balloon really does seem to offer a valuable position from which to understand these people and their experiences. Rather than symbolising something external to the film, the balloon is better understood as an entry point for seeing and knowing its drama. Extraordinarily, it seems to provide this *whilst inhabiting the story world*, a non-human guide which is in a physically dynamic relationship (but not lockstep) with both the camera and the people subject to the camera.

Conclusion

While I have chosen not to organise my argument about this film around rhetorical terms – such as metaphor, metonym, imitation and denotation – I think it helps at this point to turn to Nelson Goodman's term 'exemplification'. In *Languages of Art*, Goodman considers the range of ways in which symbols – across language, pictorial representation and music – refer outwards. For example, some symbols may possess qualities in common with their referent (as when a red circle on the Japanese flag refers to the sun), while others might function metaphorically by being applied to a referent not normally considered to be part of the same schema (as when Wallace Stevens repeatedly refers in 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds' to the ocean as a machine). Exemplification is slightly different to both of these; it is, explains Goodman, 'possession plus reference. To have without symbolising is merely to possess, while to symbolise without having is to refer in some other way than by exemplifying' (53). The exemplifying symbol will only share *some* characteristics with that of its referent. A mannequin possesses relevant qualities of the human body (approximate shapes and proportions) but not irrelevant ones (such as the nervous system). And it possesses those qualities of the human body *whilst also referring* to the human body; this is exemplification.

At the risk of trying to condense my reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon* by way of a single concept, 'exemplification' does serve to articulate the particular degree of connection I find between the balloon and other features of the film. (A degree of connection which is palpably different to, for example, that between the shark in *Jaws* and communism or dysfunctional masculinity, both of which it has been thought to symbolise). I have already claimed that Hou's balloon is not the vague and multi-referential symbol it might at first appear to be, and provided some evidence for this through my interpretation of sequences in the film. But I would now choose to revise some terms of my original claim, in which I suggested that Hou's film avoids overloading the balloon with vagueness of meaning 'by positioning other things in its action and its mise-en-scène which relate to and inflect, or balance, the balloon and its role'. Phrased like this, my reading projects onto the film and the filmmaker an order of play (the balloon as preceding other features) which is convenient but inadequate. Exemplification, as a critical term, instead helps us attend to the *simultaneous* sharing and referring which makes *Flight of the Red Balloon* so finely tuned. In Goodman, as in most accounts of symbolisation, there is an implicit assumption that the symbol is present to us, and the referent is absent – and a related implication that the referent pre-exists the symbol. I have tried to account for a subtle but significant variation on this in Hou's film, in which the balloon's referents are close to hand.

It is likely that I initially understood the balloon as existing prior to other things in Hou's film for the simple reason that *Flight of the Red Balloon* is in explicit dialogue with *Le Ballon Rouge*. Given the nature of Hou's project – described in the closing credits as an 'homage' to Albert Lamorisse and a 'free adaptation' of his film – I took the balloon to be a non-negotiable, foundational feature of *Flight of the Red Balloon*. But I suspect that this immovability of the balloon's importance challenged Hou to explore ways of changing the *nature* of that importance. And the difference is pronounced. *Le Ballon Rouge* has its balloon clearly exhibit a deliberateness in its action, moving decisively towards or away from people and things, isolating it in a film world which in all other respects betrays familiar qualities of physics and custom (not to mention a colour palette designed, unlike that in Hou's film, to contrast and offset the red of the balloon). In other words, it has agency and incongruity of the kind not really carried through in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Both films seem to demand that special attention be paid to their respective balloons, but while Lamorisse has us pondering what kind of energy and associations his balloon has brought into the film world, Hou has the balloon help us understand more fully what's already there.

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1 I enjoy entertaining the possibility that there are many balloons rather than one, but find it difficult to identify evidence in the film for this. At most, it would certainly be an interesting creative variation on *Le Ballon Rouge*, whose climax is a gathering of many balloons.

2 Although Stern's first illustrative example upon introducing the terms, *An Interesting Story* (James Williamson, 1905), does include literal inflation.

3 This is another description of meaningfulness which draws on physical and material properties; is something less able to 'stand for' something else if it itself constantly moves?

4 During a memory sequence at around the film's halfway point, we see Suzanne watch on as Simon plays with his sister. The living space is bright and clutter free and full of whites and creams. In the background is a baby grand piano, adorned with framed photographs.

5 This is presumably rooted in popular film comedy – Buster Keaton suffers from the weight of a piano in *One Week* (Buster Keaton, Edward F. Cline, 1920), while Harold Lloyd mischievously transfers the load of a piano to an unsuspecting passerby in *Hey There!* (Alfred J. Goulding, 1918) – and when in *Flight of the Red Balloon* two men maneuver the piano up a staircase, minds are likely to turn, however fleetingly, to Laurel and Hardy in *The Music Box* (James Parrott, 1932).

6 David Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light* provides a thorough and illuminating account of Hou's evolving approach to staging in the 1980s and the 1990s, taking into account a range of factors, including genre, lens length, and formative influences. Bordwell's claim that, in Hou's films, 'the action is designed to flow felicitously around our point of vantage,' is a valid and evocative summary, but I think perhaps misses the sense of flow *as* action, or proxemic relations *as* narrative matter.