

Adapting Impressionism: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*

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Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* (2007), set in Paris and directly inspired by Albert Lamorisse's beloved French children's film *Le Ballon rouge* (1956), is remarkable for the fact that the adaptation is the work of a Taiwanese director who had never before filmed outside Asia and who speaks no French. Hou had retained from childhood 'un souvenir émerveillé' of Lamorisse's film which remained indissociable from his mental image of Paris (Lalanne 14). Moreover, his memory had recently been refreshed by his reading of Adam Gopnick's *Paris to the Moon* (2000) (Lalanne 14), in which the American journalist not only relates a very similar experience connecting Lamorisse's work to the city but also reminds the reader of the possibility of intermedial alteration: 'My first images of Paris had come from the book adaptation of *The Red Balloon*, the wonderful Albert Lamorisse movie. [...] This was my first impression of Paris, and of them all, it was not the farthest from the truth' (5–6).¹

As a result, when Hou accepted a commission from the Musée d'Orsay to make a film in celebration of the museum's twenty-year anniversary, with the single stipulation that the museum make an appearance in the film, he immediately asked whether the museum had 'any Impressionist paintings with red objects, preferably balloons' (quoted in Lim).² Although Félix Vallotton's 'Le Ballon' (1899), held by the Musée d'Orsay, represents the museum within *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, both Vallotton's post-Impressionist work and the film itself are strongly evocative of an earlier Claude Monet painting, 'Impression, soleil levant' (1872), held by the Musée Marmottan. The reddish

- 1 During the shooting of the film in Paris, Gopnick's work became Hou's guidebook to the city, a particularly suitable choice since Gopnick's own Paris years continued to be informed by Lamorisse: 'I don't go on a bus in Paris without still expecting my balloon to be barred' (17). It seems similarly appropriate that the first adaptation of the film should have been done by Lamorisse himself and in reverse. The book was subsequently turned into a stage musical by Anthony Clark in 1989.
- 2 In actual fact, Hou, Olivier Assayas, and Hong Sang-soo appear to be the only directors to have completed works commissioned by the Musée d'Orsay, and all three produced feature-length films rather than the shorts originally requested by the museum. Coincidentally, Assayas, a great admirer of Taiwanese cinema, is also the director of *HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1997) and describes *L'Heure d'été* (2008), the film begun for the Musée d'Orsay, as 'mon film le plus taiwanais' (*L'Heure d'été*).

sun depicted in Monet's painting looks strikingly like a red balloon floating through the sky. The work's title named a movement that has not only endured but expanded to include analogous styles in a variety of visual arts and other media. In keeping with the extraordinary focus within Hou's film on lighting and the colour red, his tribute to Lamorisse is all about allusions, reflections and impressions. Indeed, Hou's reinterpretation of *Le Ballon rouge* intersects not only with his own recurrent stylistic preferences and prior work as a filmmaker, but also with a wide variety of self-reflective art works, metaphorically making the film something of an Impressionist museum unto itself.

Le Voyage du ballon rouge is thus richly illustrative of the value of broadening our understanding of the practice of adaptation. This resonates with recent theoretical arguments for the substitution of intertextuality – the orchestration of pre-existing discourses – for a traditional concern with a one-to-one relationship between two texts (see, for example, Stam, Hutcheon, and Sanders). Since Hou's film not only bears no direct connection to literary or even written sources and consciously raises questions about its own adaptation, it challenges the underlying assumptions of most of the works reviewed in 'Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads', Thomas Leitch's 2008 survey of the previous decade's work in the field. In addition, *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* provides a particularly useful context in which to explore the relatively new attention devoted within adaptation studies to the concept of intermediality.

Hou's film concludes with an on-screen acknowledgement that what he calls his 'homage' to Lamorisse is 'librement adapté' from *Le Ballon rouge*. Indeed, although the title alone³ makes the connection obvious, and *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* retains not only the iconography of the earlier film but also the Parisian setting and the basic narrative arc of a boy and a red balloon, Simon (Simon Iteanu) is now surrounded by his mother Suzanne (Juliette Binoche) and their au pair Song (Fang Song), whose lives intertwine with his own. In essence, the memory of the earlier film provides the framework for Hou's film, since *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* also opens with the scene that is most clearly reminiscent of its predecessor: a child is attempting to reach a balloon that hovers out of sight above him. Although the sounds of street traffic replace the lyrical melody that introduces Lamorisse's model, Simon stands beside the entrance to the Bastille metro, whose old-fashioned art nouveau grillwork is consistent with the traditional setting of the earlier film in the working-class neighbourhood of Ménilmontant. The original balloon, however, despite its playful independence and frequently wilful behaviour, allows Pascal, played by Lamorisse's son, to grab hold of it. In contrast, the

3 In 1960, Lamorisse made a feature film titled *Le Voyage en ballon*. Hence, both Hou's film and title may be a homage to the French director.

balloon that is its contemporary counterpart, like the film in which it figures, never relinquishes its freedom. This is immediately marked by its visual association – as it sails up into the sky – with the ‘Génie de la liberté’, the gilded statue atop the July Column that commemorates the 1830 Revolution.

Subsequently, the red balloon, arguably the star of Lamorisse’s film, in which it is omnipresent, is often absent from the screen in Hou’s adaptation. Its occasional appearances thus serve to determine both the leisurely rhythm of the film and the distant, objective viewpoint of the outsider in an internal duplication of the slow pacing, the long shots and the long takes characteristic not only of this film but of Hou’s cinema in general. Hou’s static camera has frequently resulted in critical commentary linking his cinematic style to the art of painting (Udden 159). Such a comparison is particularly apt in the case of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, given the significance of both the art work that inspired the film and those that are included within it. Similarly, Hou’s relatively limited use of montage provides a direct link to Lamorisse, whose *Ballon rouge*, a film that in the words of André Bazin ‘ne doit et ne peut rien devoir au montage’ (52), inspired Bazin’s noted essay on film editing. Consistent with James Udden’s description of Hou as ‘arguably the most Bazinian filmmaker today’ (177), such connections to French film and film theory help support the thesis of *No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (2009). In this work, Udden sets out to challenge conventional critical assumptions that Hou’s cinema is somehow essentially ‘Chinese’, an argument based in part precisely on the absence of montage and the similarity to painting characteristic of his filmmaking.

If the balloon itself is not literally present in *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, there is, however, no danger that the spectator will forget its existence. Whereas Lamorisse’s film draws on circles and other geometric shapes to serve as a visual complement to the titular object itself, Hou privileges its colour. The balloon metaphorically bleeds into his film which is drenched in red. This is particularly evident in the cramped space of the apartment shared by the three main characters. On the rare occasions when the living-room curtains are open, the lighting is natural, which serves to emphasize the artifice of the reddish tint that infuses the entire frame of the shot when they are closed. The red filtering is frequently reinforced by the red shade of a lamp and the numerous red accessories worn by the actors who pass through the room. Significantly, we often see through multi-coloured objects that diffuse light, such as a mobile that hangs in the apartment, so that the visual effect is that of an Impressionist painting. In one such remarkable sequence, Hou cuts unexpectedly from an interior shot in which Suzanne is glimpsed through a semi-transparent curtain, which already distorts our view and challenges our vision, to show us what appears to be the abstract play of light and shadow,

followed by a whirling blur of colour that only gradually becomes identifiable as the circular platform of a spinning carousel.

Kevin B. Lee proposes that Hou's cinematographer, Mark Lee Ping-Bin, has invented a 'sub-genre' of his own.⁴ Kevin Lee terms this 'mothimatography', for 'its instinctive gravitation towards light and movement, letting those elements frame the shot and define the scene with mercurial consistency'. The scenes in *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* in which Mark Lee Ping-Bin films reflections through glass might well serve as *mises en abyme* or mirror images of Hou's strategies of adaptation. One sequence in particular is astonishing in its layers of visual complexity. In the opening scene, Simon and Song are sitting at a table outside the café where he learned to play pinball. We witness their conversation through the ambient noise of passers-by and the window of the café itself, in which red circles of the *flipper* are reflected. We continue to hear their voices as the camera shows us a *bateau mouche* floating down the Seine in a movement whose pace imitates that of the balloon gliding through the sky. If this image could reasonably be interpreted as seen from the point of view of Song and Simon, the same is not true for what follows.

Suddenly the camera cuts to a shot of Simon coming out of a park and descending a staircase toward the same café in the company of his older sister, Louise (Louise Margolin), whom we see for the first time and whose unexpected appearance alone marks the scene as a flashback. The words of the song that Simon selects on the jukebox, Charles Aznavour's 'Emmenez-moi', not only specifically recall the previous view of the Seine but are also clearly suggestive of the imagery and the strategies of Hou's film as a whole: '[les bateaux] viennent du bout du monde / Apportant avec eux / Des idées vagabondes / aux reflets de ciels bleus / De mirages' (my emphasis). The 'wandering ideas', 'reflections' and 'mirages' of the lyrics appear to produce an impressive succession of optical illusions. The music continues as the camera tracks right to frame a series of dissolves in which at least three levels of reflection are embedded: the bartender in the foreground, Simon playing pinball behind him, and the people passing in the street outside the window. All are visually juxtaposed in an image of striking density and intricacy. A sound overlap connects this scene to the next. As we see Simon and Song re-enter Suzanne's red-tinged apartment, the shift from the diegetic music of the jukebox to the same song now heard on the film's non-diegetic

4 Mark Lee Ping-Bin is also known as Mark Lee and Ping Bin Lee. His collaboration with Hou became particularly significant during the 1990s. Udden notes that *The Puppetmaster* (*Xi meng ren sheng*) (1993), whose aesthetic most closely resembles that of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, shows 'rich gradations of light and shadow never seen before in a Hou film' (122).

soundtrack marks the entire sequence as metacinematic.⁵

The most extended example of *mise en abyme* is also the most literal. Like Fang Song, the actress who plays her, the character Song is a film student at the Beijing Film Academy. Like the director of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, for whom she serves as a diegetic double, Song is shooting a digital remake of *Le Ballon rouge*. When she first meets Simon, Song asks him if he has seen Lamorisse's 'histoire d'un petit garçon et un gros ballon rouge'. That he says he hasn't is amusingly ironic since it will turn out that he is in fact starring in Song's version of the film. Indeed, when we later see footage from Song's video as she screens it on her computer for herself and for us, our perception of the film we are watching is abruptly altered as we realize that the opening scene of Hou's film has in fact been recorded by Song. Even as this revelation reminds us that we are watching a film and not 'reality', it also serves to call into question the authenticity of all on-screen imagery. Song reinforces our awareness of the constructed nature of visual representation when she reveals the secret behind what is no doubt the most important of the special effects on which all three versions of the story depend: the editing out of the actor holding the balloon to create the illusion that the balloon is in flight.⁶

Moreover, Song's first film school work, fittingly titled *A l'Origine*, also has a clearly self-referential relationship both with the film that inspired *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* and with Hou's film itself. In keeping with the analogy to the latter, a film that is at once intellectually demanding and emotionally rewarding, Suzanne (who has seen *A l'Origine*) notes that she was 'vraiment touchée' by a work that she also describes as having 'un côté abstrait'. Song's film reminds Suzanne of a scene from her own childhood. From her bedroom on a mezzanine, she used to hear the sounds of voices below her that resounded like 'une sorte de caisse à résonance', a sound box or an echo chamber: the film 'avait ce rapport-là – des sons, des images, le côté très sombre parfois des images [...] ça joue sur des émotions profondes et oubliées presque'. Not only is Hou's film as a whole an intertextual and intermedial 'echo chamber', but Suzanne's memory of Song's film literally becomes the autogenerative 'origin' of a scene that we will see toward the end of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*. In the one sombre moment in the film, in which Simon appears withdrawn and sad in reminiscence of Lamorisse's lonely young hero, he curls up in bed in his dimly lit loft to the sound of Song moving about in the kitchen below.

5 Similar sound bridges serve to smooth over temporal ellipses in *The Puppetmaster*, where music also shifts from diegetic to non-diegetic (Udden 124–25).

6 Udden suggests that Hou's self-reflexivity is the one area in which he diverges from Bazin's understanding of the filmmaker as illustrated by the original *Ballon rouge*: 'Bazin likely would not have been so comfortable with these reflexive acknowledgements' (178).

Appropriately, it is at this very moment that the red balloon, which has been absent from the film for over twenty minutes, reappears outside the window to watch over Simon.

Song's remake of *Le Ballon rouge* also serves to highlight once again the interrelationship between film imagery and pictorial representation. In fact, the first image that we see Song filming is a red balloon painted on the side of a building. In the footage she later screens on her computer, the scene has been edited so that the shot explicitly juxtaposes the filmic and the pictorial; the camera now tracks to the painting as its cinematic double slowly drifts out of sight. The composition of the wall itself, on which the balloon is surrounded by other objects – including a red umbrella and a red broom – also recalls the iconography of Lamorisse's film. Here, his balloon takes shelter under an umbrella, and the schoolyard is swept by the only sympathetic adult in the film, whose smile as Pascal and the balloon pass by echoes that of the spectator.

The same scene in Hou's film, in which Song's take is embedded, fittingly borrows imagery from Lamorisse as well. As Song and Simon leave the wall, the camera focuses on the red circle of a traffic light, also prominent in *Le Ballon rouge*, as Pascal crosses the street. In Lamorisse's film, the objectified reflections of the balloon are memorable because there are so few of them. In Hou's film, in contrast, in keeping with its emphasis on self-referentiality, the red circle of the traffic light is immediately reproduced in multiple forms. As Song and Simon move through the streets of Paris, they are surrounded by the familiar red-framed warning signs of the city. The last one we pass, just as they arrive at Suzanne's apartment, reads 'Rappel', a playful 'reminder' of the diverse works that *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* references, imitates and reproduces.

Traces of the French New Wave are also visible throughout Hou's colourfully prismatic film. Although Lamorisse's original version of *Le Ballon rouge* dates from 1956, its non-professional cast and accurate portrayal of Paris already anticipate the later movement. Similarly, Hou recalls certain filmmaking strategies and stylistic innovations favoured by the directors of the New Wave. The role of Simon, for example, is played by the son of Hou's press attaché, and that of Simon's sister is played by the daughter of the film's producer (Lançon). Moreover, the fact that all of the dialogue in the film was improvised on the spot by the actors themselves (Hoberman) adds to a sense of authenticity and spontaneity, also seen in the early films of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut.⁷ In the outdoor scenes of *Le Voyage du*

7 Hou wrote a script without dialogue, perhaps in reminiscence of Lamorisse's virtually silent film. The first dialogue in *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* does not occur until twelve minutes have passed and there are significant moments of silence throughout.

ballon rouge, Hou reveals the same interest in capturing fleeting impressions of the daily life of the modern city, a reference to a New Wave concern that is reinforced by Song's use of a handheld camera. Moreover, as a foreigner, she wanders the streets of the capital with the same detached, curious gaze characteristic of Charles Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's *flâneurs*. Significantly, this is, of course, also the view of modern urban reality celebrated by the Impressionist painters, who, like Constantin Guys, Baudelaire's ideal artist, walked the streets of Paris 'registering the kaleidoscopic patterns of life in all its grace and detail' (Sheringham 86).

The many texts cited within Hou's film are not limited to the cinematic or the pictorial, although all are embedded in several layers of allusion. In the gardens of the Champs-Élysées, Simon shows Song a statue of a woman puppeteer watched by two children, which he associates with his mother, himself and his sister. The imprecision that surrounds both his description of the puppeteer, 'une fille qui s'est déguisée en homme', and that of his sister, 'une fausse sœur parce que c'est pas vraiment ma sœur', reinforces the impressionistic nature of Hou's filmmaking. In a direct link to *The Puppetmaster*, which stars the famous puppeteer Li Tian-lu, Suzanne is the 'voice' – indeed the multiple voices – of a puppet theatre which we view from backstage in keeping with the artistic self-reflectivity of the film as a whole.⁸ Similarly, we see Simon's grandfather, also a puppeteer, perform only in a home movie, for which Suzanne's improvised dialogue echoes her role within Hou's film. More importantly, the puppet show in rehearsal is a French adaptation of the traditional Chinese story of Zhang You, in an inverse reflection of a Chinese filmmaker's adaptation of a classic French film. When a famous Chinese puppeteer who speaks no French – Maître Ah Zong, played by Li Tian-lu's real-life son – comes to Paris to give a demonstration of his art, Song translates for him, just as she did for Hou during the shooting of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*.

The last five minutes of Hou's film offer us an extraordinary culmination, summary and final reflection of all that has come before, a temporal indicator meant in the most inclusive sense possible. The introduction and the conclusion to *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* serve as bookends to establish a complex framework within which both Lamorisse's *Ballon rouge* and Hou's adaptation are contained. The children in Simon's class visit the Musée d'Orsay to view Vallotton's 'Le Ballon' (1899), a pictorial *mise en abyme* of Hou's film as well as a painting reminiscent in its composition and lighting of Monet's 'Impression, soleil levant'. As the camera explores the depiction of a child chasing a

8 Binoche's father worked as a puppeteer (Hoberman), adding to the documentary quality of *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*.

red ball in a park, one boy recalls that he once saw ‘un film qui parlait d’un ballon rouge’ and another wonders if that could be the name of the painting. Asked about the whereabouts of the painter, the children suggest that he is a distant observer, recalling the point of view of the cinematic balloon, now visible alongside the museum. This serves as the director’s double in both Lamorisses’s and Hou’s versions of the story: ‘On a l’impression que toute la scène est vue d’en haut [...] Peut-être qu’i[ll] surveille le petit’. In fact, the children explicitly define the perspective by the filmic term ‘la plongée’. In reference to the overall mood of the painting, the children perceptively observe that it is both ‘joyeux’ and ‘triste’ because ‘d’un côté c’est sombre et de l’autre côté il y a du soleil’, an impression fully in keeping with the aesthetics and the thematics of Hou’s and Lamorisse’s films. Finally, in an effect we see throughout *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*, the entire scene is viewed through glass reflections, as the spectator is alternately positioned inside looking out at the balloon and outside looking in with the balloon.

As the self-referential lyrics of Camille Dalmais’s ‘Tchin tchin’ begin to play, we see the balloon sail up into the sky from Simon’s subjective viewpoint, as in the opening shots of the film. *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* returns to its starting point in the traditional Paris of Lamorisse – that is, appropriately enough, in the Paris of innumerable films – as the balloon flies off alone above the roofs of the city. Against the backdrop of Notre Dame and Sacré Cœur, we hear the film’s final words of homage: ‘Tchin tchin à toi mon ballon rouge’. Hou’s film, which, in the words of Nicholas Rapold, ‘rewards multiple viewings, like revisiting a painting’, clearly serves the original project of the Musée d’Orsay extremely well.

Le Voyage du ballon rouge provides an equally rewarding context in which to revisit adaptation studies. Just as Lamorisse’s film allowed Bazin to exemplify his understanding of montage, so Hou’s version illustrates the importance of exploring new intermedial possibilities in the field. Although Leitch suggests at the conclusion of his 2008 article that *Intermedialities*, a 2007 collection of German essays, offers ‘a tantalizing glimpse of the more distant future’, he also notes that the field of intermediality has found much wider acceptance in Europe than in English-language theory (76).⁹ However, Christine Geraghty’s *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* already outlines a methodology that extends across a variety of media. Her description of adaptation as ‘a layering process [that] involves an accretion of deposits over time, a recognition of ghostly presences, and a shadowing or

9 *Intermedialities* is still unavailable in English translation and most of its essays, like more recent work in intermedial studies, do not deal explicitly with adaptation. On the other hand, although the focus of *Redefining Adaptation Studies* (2010) is primarily pedagogical, the collection includes an interesting essay by Freda Chapple on intermedial adaptation.

doubling of what is on the surface by what is glimpsed behind' (195) seems preconceived to apply to Hou's *Le Voyage du ballon rouge*. This remarkable film, imprinted with self-reflective allusions to Impressionist painting and to the history of cinema, as well as references to particular art works and different types of artistic performances, offers us an example of an adaptation whose levels of meaning extend across temporal, national, disciplinary and medial boundaries to create a highly original network of relationships.

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