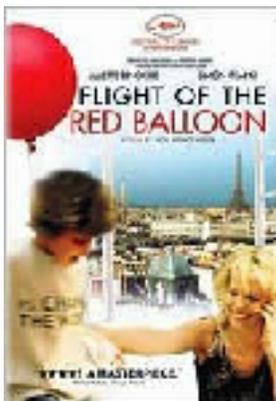


A Call to the Sacred

A review of the film



The Flight of the Red Balloon

(2007)

Hsiao-hsien Hou (Director)



Reviewed by

[Ryan M. Niemiec](#)

The Flight of the Red Balloon (2007), an independent film from France, reveals snippets from the lives of three characters living in Paris. Suzanne (Juliette Binoche) is clearly overwhelmed by her life as she attempts to juggle multiple tasks, numerous responsibilities, and all-too-many stressors. She strives to maintain her work life as a puppeteer and manager of an apartment whose tenants refuse to pay their rent, her love life in a long-distance relationship, and her family life as she parents her young son, Simon.

She employs a respectful, competent Taiwanese woman named Song, who studies film and photography, to serve as a nanny for Simon. Song is calm, responsible, and attentive to her job. She displays considerable social skill and, despite her quiet role, clearly portrays the two main features of social intelligence: *social awareness*, the sensing of the

inner state of others and understanding complex social situations, and *social facility*, presenting oneself effectively and influencing outcomes (Goleman, 2006). Song is attuned to the needs and stresses of Suzanne and Simon, and she is able to interact with them comfortably and smoothly.

Suzanne functions on autopilot—she moves from task to task, stays constantly busy, and uses her activities as ways to keep her from ever having to fully experience her life. Her frequent mindlessness, high levels of stress, and negative thinking make her prone to depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). One interaction between mother and son follows:

Simon: Mama, you seem rushed.

Suzanne: I'm always rushed. . . .

Simon: Why are you rushed, Mama?

Suzanne: Because I have so many things to do.

Although she's a puppeteer in her work, Suzanne struggles to achieve comparable control in her interpersonal and family life, and she is clearly overwhelmed in her role as Simon's mother. Nevertheless, her strong qualities of reflection, gratitude, and care, coupled with her motivation to stay engaged in her son's life, facilitate her resiliency.

This film meets the criteria for a positive psychology film (Niemiec, 2007) in that Suzanne displays a character strength (persistence), faces obstacles that compromise that strength, and demonstrates an ability to overcome these barriers by using her strength. This film is a positive psychology film for another reason—its uplifting mood. The underlying tone is one of nostalgia; soft piano music permeates the film, inviting reflection and memory.

The film's mood is also enhanced through its use of symbolism. Symbols have been used in film since motion pictures were first made, including a yellow-brick road, a freight train, a cigar, a bouquet of red roses, a crown of thorns, and a single feather. In this film, a large, rubbery, red balloon is more than a symbol—it becomes a “character” itself. The sporadic yet strong presence of this “fourth character,” purposefully integrated and interspersed from onset to conclusion, is a direct call to the viewer—though the purpose of the call remains somewhat unclear throughout the film. Interestingly, the balloon engages and stimulates character strengths. If the viewer uses the systematized typology of strengths and virtues delineated by Peterson and Seligman (2004), the balloon can be seen to bring out salient and specific character strengths in each of the three characters.

In the balloon's first scene, it is caught in a tree, eventually getting unstuck and floating freely, perhaps foreshadowing Suzanne's journey as she overcomes her stressors and her autopilot habits. In a later scene, Suzanne slows down long enough to take pictures of the happy Simon at play as if attempting to savor the moment—experiencing considerable

pleasure and intentionally choosing to dwell in this pleasure (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). For Song, the balloon inspires creativity as she pursues her work as a budding filmmaker and discusses how she is actually working on a film about red balloons.

The young Simon's interactions with the balloon at the film's onset illustrate character strengths common in children—for example, curiosity (under Peterson & Seligman's, 2004, virtue of wisdom) and humor/playfulness (under the virtue of transcendence; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This is reminiscent of the behavior of Pascal, the boy and protagonist in the award-winning short film *The Red Balloon* (Lamorisse, 1956), which was part of the inspiration for this film (see <http://kr.youtube.com/watch?v=DBS2TvWD2t8> to watch the short film in its entirety). He beckons the balloon, bribing it with candy, and engages it interpersonally, becoming upset when he believes the balloon is not listening to him. In one way, this interaction reminds the viewer to pay attention; at the same time, the scene underscores the importance of play.

Simon is the only person who takes notice of the balloon as each passerby scurries along, scarcely noticing the balloon or casually pushing it aside. Simon's growth is portrayed as an expansion of his character strengths. This is apparent toward the end of the film, when Simon sits in class at a museum and the teacher shows the children a painting of a child and a small red balloon; they discuss the ideas that the painting itself is “a bit happy and a bit sad” and that the painter was employing a high perspective in the painting. Meanwhile, the actual red balloon returns and “peers” through a window in the ceiling as if to listen in on the teacher–student conversations. Simon leans back to interact with the balloon.

His experience illustrates the character strengths of awe and gratitude (both included under the virtue of transcendence) as he remains transfixed on the balloon dancing above the overhead window. The viewer—and perhaps Simon—is left with a sense of hope that everything is going to be all right, and the viewer knows that Simon will have a protector and that his life and family are headed in the right direction.

With the assistance of this fourth “character,” the human characters are able to flourish (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005), and they reach an enhanced level of functioning. Danny Wedding and I believe that movies both *portray* character strengths and *evoke* character strengths in the viewer (Niemic & Wedding, 2008). In this film, the attuned viewer will experience a sense of wonder as well as an appreciation for beauty, the sacred, perspective, and meaning.

The interspersed appearance of the balloon is likely to pique viewer curiosity. This curiosity should not be underestimated, as this character strength can lead to a deeper sense of meaning (Kashdan & Steger, 2007). How does the viewer experience the balloon as it lingers, hovers, rises, falls, and then remains still? It is simultaneously haunting and calming, misplaced and interconnected, a nuisance and deeply meaningful. Is the balloon an angel, or perhaps a symbol of the importance of leading a good life?

Since the balloon lingers on rooftops and at apartment windows as if to be peering in, observing, consulting, and protecting, is this a symbolic reference to the presence of God or

a Higher Power, leading the viewer to feel there is a comforting presence to which we can turn when necessary? Is the balloon a call to the sacred? Can the mundane and the minute make such a call to us?

One scene shows a street packed with people, all of whom pass by the balloon oblivious to any significance or sanctity it might contain. One person knocks the balloon out of the way, as if to demonstrate the insignificance of this floating object. How often do we pass by or knock away the sacred in our lives? The people who pay attention and take time to actually see the balloon are using their character strengths—for example, the curious Simon and the socially intelligent Song, but not the distracted Suzanne or the busy, preoccupied public.

This film is a joyous call to mindfulness, reminding us to pay more attention to the all-too-fleeting, all-too-precious present moment.

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