

“Unspoken Affection”: Articulating Friendship in Gladys Ng’s *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life*

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Abstract

Gladys Ng’s *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life* (2016) has been described as a short film about the “unspoken affection and awkward conversations [that] fill the last day two best friends [Yokes and Steph] spend together.” Inasmuch as it is about goodbyes, it is also about the many ways to *not* say goodbye. Yokes pauses, digresses, and acts out, refusing to bid farewell to Steph who is leaving Singapore. Their friendship is characterised by an inexpression which is product of adolescence and discipline, as well as a strategy to circumvent normative practices of friendship. Drawing on the philosophies of Deleuze and Bergson, this article attempts to evince the unspoken affections through the acts of hesitating and acting out. With a discussion on friendship dynamics that are contingent on a renewed understanding of what it means to hesitate and act out, the article will frame inexpression as a strategic aporia, in which the lack of certainty and ineloquence enables a reconceptualisation of friendship. That is, inexpression becomes a means of reaching out, beyond the body and frame, to present a corporal assemblage in which meaning is no longer localised but dispersed, as if the characters are befriending the audience.

Keywords: Friendship, adolescent girls, girlfriends, Singapore literature, Gladys Ng

“You buy me balloon ah?” begins the exchange between Steph and Yokes, the adolescent protagonists of Gladys Ng’s 2016 short film, *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life*. Commissioned by the 27th Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF), the film’s synopsis in the programme booklet reads: “Unspoken affection and awkward conversations fill the last day two best friends spend together.” The logline, worded by the SGIFF team, is a starting point to consider how inexpression and awkwardness characterise the girls’ final moments of relating to each other. “Steph Chan is leaving Singapore for good. Yokes *struggles* to say goodbye” (emphasis added), Ng describes the film in her official website. Inasmuch as the film is about the “struggles to say goodbye,” it is also about the many ways to *not* say goodbye, to forestall the impending closure of a relationship that has not been articulated, for it has no definition to begin with. Instead of a farewell message or an embrace, Yokes (Lam Li Shuen) presents Steph (Zoea Tania) with a yellow balloon to bring up the airplane and balks at her best friend’s lack of appreciation for the farewell present. Minutes later, she throws Steph’s textbooks off the corridor, then whirls around the examination hall until she collapses. Exhausted, she prostrates herself on the floor, heaving sighs of helplessness, unable to summon the words or actions that would communicate her feelings towards Steph. Towards the end of the film, notwithstanding

Steph's tearful goodbye and final words to her near the MRT station—"Stay silly, okay?"—Yokes remains mostly silent, her thoughts drowned out by the passing train. Interactions between the adolescents rely on intermediaries such as the balloon and the thrown-out books that absorb the complexities of emotions and defer possible confrontations, replacing them with moments of distraction or spite. It seems characters are not privy to the nature of the relationship, just as audiences are left in suspense. Affection is unspoken, mediated at best.

The culture of friendship amongst adolescent girls within Singapore with emphasis on inexpression also emerges in Alfian Sa'at's "Cubicle" (1999), Joel Tan's *The Way We Go* (2014) and Carissa Foo's *If It Were Up to Mrs Dada* (2018), all featuring fast friends struggling to define their relationships and avoid straightforward displays of affection in the face of changes. Whereas the girls in these texts share the silent possibility of lesbianism, the friendship in *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life* is characterised by the yoking of an intimate friendliness with a mutually maintained silence which at once resists categorical demarcations on their relations and affords ambivalence. The inexpression in the film is not a reflection of the lesbian apparitional existence (as in Alfian, Foo, and Tan's works) but a mark of hesitation. Steph and Yokes are brimming with feelings and affection, yet evasive of expression—which, I argue, is a strategy that ensures both intensity and ambivalence concerning a relationship between girls who are navigating adolescence—one that Margaret Mead describes as the "unsettled, disturbed status of youth" (4). Part of the unsettling nature of adolescence has to do with the struggle between drives and control: "Every time the instinct says 'I will', the ego retorts 'Thou shalt not'" (A. Freud 154). This is particularly significant when we consider how the ego's stricture is amplified in the Catholic convent school setting of the film that promotes moderation and self-control, upholding existing routines and norms, whilst discouraging the exploration of fresh connections. Ironically, the necessity for enhanced discipline and control reveals the potential for unexpressed affection.

Whilst adolescence is characterised by restlessness, it is also a time when a girl has "no responsibility" and "a rich variety of emotional experience" (Mead 27). Even though Yokes has a variety of expressions, they do not quite accurately convey her feelings: she often pauses, says insensible things, and acts out, even denying Steph a proper and heartfelt farewell. In a recent interview, Ng candidly acknowledged that the only honest thing Yokes has said in the film is: "I just want to turn off my brain, and become a tree." Implicit in Ng's statement is the unreliability of the adolescent's expression, that Yokes too is unable to understand herself, just as the viewer and Steph cannot. With this in mind, rather than judging Yokes's incoherent words and acts as unbecoming, we may interpret them as rich, as gestural possibilities of the unsaid. I posit that the two bodily stances of *hesitating* and *acting out* are the precise inexpression that enables the girls to enter a new frontier, that their relationship is not subsumed into existing models of friendship. Yokes in particular hesitates to express the wordless understanding between Steph and herself which passes beyond formulaic expressions.

She also acts out, resisting the friendly relations expected of friends. In an attempt to evince the unspoken affections via the acts of hesitating and acting out, I first delineate the dynamics of the friendship. I then turn to the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Henri Bergson to reconsider hesitation and acting out as a primary and expansive expression that accommodates a transversal and nonhierarchical relationality between the friends. My study of Steph and Yokes's relationship draws from scholarship on female friendship, dating back to Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* (1978), and may be located within the more recent frame of girlfriend culture proposed in Alison Winch's *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (2013). With a discussion on friendship dynamics that are contingent on a renewed understanding of what it means to hesitate and act out, I will frame inexpression as a strategic aporia, in which the apparent lack of certainty and ineloquence becomes an advantage that enables the girls to evade traditional practices of friendship and assemble a multiplicity of meanings via interacting with other bodies (including objects and space) onscreen. Yokes's irrational acts, that is, her inexpression, I argue, are both retreatist and resisting, a passive-aggressive strategy that leaves room for the girls to circumvent the normative culture of school life and to explore the blurred edges of friendship as a way of relational self-definition. More, on a visual level, inexpression is a means of reaching out beyond the body and frame, to present a corporal assemblage in which meaning is no longer localised but dispersed, as if the characters are befriending the audience.

An Unequal Friendship

The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life (2016) explores the difficulty of human interaction between adolescent girls who are coming of age and navigating the throes of transition from secondary to tertiary education, the stress of the impending O Level, and the agony of a near friendship breakup. We understand characters through their processes of communication, which are often antagonistic and confusing, revealing the envy, competition, and inequality that undergird their friendship. At the outset of the film, Yokes and Steph are depicted to have different experiences of the fourth year of secondary education: one is dragging her feet into the examination hall, the other is transferring out of school. To Yokes's claims, "You get to skip O levels. You get to go to a new country," Steph replies, "At least, you don't have to leave everything behind, right?" Both are frustrated and indignant, their tone accusatory, trying to pin blame on the other for a predicament for which none is responsible. Whilst Steph's defense is her lack of choice, Yokes's antagonism is motivated by the envy of choice. She throws out You-statements, accompanied by a lifted chin and her body leaning forwards, to intimidate Steph into bowing down and feeling bad for "skipping" the examination and starting anew in another country without her. The cruel envy that calls out Steph's privilege is not utterly unproductive but, as Sianne Ngai argues, has the power to "recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and

institutionalized forms of inequality” (129). The critical implication of Yokes’s pettiness and puerile tantrums is the social inequality of the friendship, whereby one is anxious over the opportunities that are not afforded to her, fearing the inability to keep up with the other who is socially mobile.

That the girls are on unequal grounds is not an uncommon phenomenon in friendship. Winch states that relations between women are made up of a range of affects like “inferiority, jealousy, rivalry, competition” (5), and that anxiety arising from these manifests not only in the girl who is less privileged, but also in the one who is “less popular” (11). Indeed, Yokes has neither Steph’s financial nor social capital. She watches from the sidelines as Steph is embraced by Jasmine (Akeylah Rivero); she does not contribute to the collection of farewell messages and platitudes (*I’ll miss you STEPH!; KEEP IN TOUCH!; BYE BYE STEPHY!!!!*) that decorate Steph’s uniform. Yokes’s awareness of her best friend’s popularity and her own inferiority reaches a breaking point when she exclaims, “You get to make a lot of new friends. ‘Cause you’re so popular, right?” In addition to envy and the accusatory undertone, this final charge exposes the competitive nature of their friendship, in which Steph’s sociality highlights Yokes’s solitariness. The outburst causes her to spin around the examination hall until she collapses. It is Steph who draws near and cheers her up by drawing an egg yolk (representing Yokes) on her wrist. Steph’s nurturance and patience are contrasted with Yokes’s spite and lack of control. More generally, according to Leora Tanenbaum in her book *Catfight*, “the success of another woman translates into [one’s own] failure,” regardless of intentions (15). Still Yokes’s failure to restrain herself and her lack of clarity of emotions are more than a reflection of her deficient selfhood. Her outburst has to do with the feeling of being abandoned by her best friend who will leave her behind, effectively breaking the reciprocity that sustains the friendship and enables self-development.

In *The Social Sex: A History of Female Friendship*, Marilyn Yalom lists interdependence as a key ingredient of women’s friendships: “Women depend on one another from the time they are girls” and “traditionally have bonded together to help one another cope and survive” (345-6). Affection between women is forged by an interdependence which in turn allows the female self to grow. Janice Raymond, in her seminal study *A Passion for Friends*, identifies the workings of a “gyn/affection” between women where one discovers “the original vital Self” as “women affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to power” (7, 9). That self-creation is dependent on comradeship is a principle explained by Audre Lorde: “Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative” (17). Whilst Lorde speaks of agency that allows women to exist for themselves rather than for the patriarchal world, the importance of interdependency in female identity formation is applicable in *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life* where mutual investment in the friendship ensures a democratisation of intimacy and a shared space for growth. In this vein, when Steph departs Singapore, she is not only leaving Yokes alone to endure the stress of the O Level, but more saliently withdrawing from the dialogical affiliation that enables Yokes’s self-

development. The dissolving friendship disables access to “the original vital Self,” as Raymond argues. Just like the faded image of an egg yolk (Yokes) that Steph had drawn on her wrist (see Fig. 1), Yokes is lost without her best friend’s hand that is instrumental in her identity formation. She stands alone on the hill, without friends, as she is without a sense of self. Whilst Steph’s sociality promises new friends in a foreign land, the lone Yokes is unmoored, the exploration of self is impeded.

A glimpse of Yokes’s state of being is captured in the opening sequence. The film begins in medias res, after the friends have bidden farewell, with Yokes running up a hill, against a rapidly falling dusk.



Fig. 1

Fig. 2

In this sequence, her gaze is unfocused, the climb is aimless, and the sky hangs ominously (see Fig. 2). She feels the inked egg yolk that is fading—the last trace of Steph that is engraved on her wrist. The shaky handheld camera creates a dizzying effect that reflects Yokes’s apprehension. Unfolding onscreen is a palpable anxiety, a feeling of helplessness that results from having her foundation—her friendship with Steph—pulled away from beneath her. French novelist George Sand was one of the first to expound on “an immutable order” between adolescent girls: “once we had given a girl first place, we did not have the right to take it away” (685). Affection involves a dogged loyalty to a mutually erected safe space that has its own codes and order that are sacred and anchoring, averse to threats and changes. Although codes between women may be “flexible, private, and often semi-conscious,” Auerbach emphasises that quiet adherence to this “buried language” enables “a communal self-creation” (8-9). In the context of the film, Steph’s withdrawal from the friendship is a betrayal of the codes of conduct. This unsettles the order on which the friendship is built, and Yokes is forced to deracinate herself from the nurturing space of self-creation. The processes of making and understanding oneself are halted at a distinct age where young people are concerned with “initial identity formation” and the “need for trust in oneself and in others” (Erikson 128). On the brink of a major transition in her life, from secondary to tertiary education, Yokes is already facing a crisis of self, which Anna Freud points out culminates in adolescence where the young person builds “defensive methods” against the id and instinctual impulses (32), one that is exacerbated by the crumbling friendship.

The Hesitating Body

The crisis of self as experienced by Yokes breeds an existential anxiety that translates into a series of embodied and verbal hesitations, halting her self-expression and farewell to Steph. Yokes's inability to express herself is evident in her awkward gestures. For example, instead of a farewell message or embrace, she gives Steph a balloon in the hope that she will bring it up the plane. A bemused Steph has to explain to her that the balloon will explode. The obscure nature of Yokes's actions and her inability to control them are reiterated in the thirty-second dance where she clasps her head, then spins helplessly as though to expel pent-up emotions, only to prostrate on the ground. Unable to utter a word of endearment, Yokes relies on seeming irrational and childish acts that undermine her care for Steph. This is contrasted with Steph who mollifies Yokes's anxiety by sitting beside her—a proximity that allows Yokes to lean on her shoulder and whisper an apology. Whilst Yokes's capacity for care appears inferior compared to Steph's demonstration, I propose to reappraise her incomprehensible actions as *intentional*. To say that Yokes's actions are intentional is not to suggest that they are signs that may diagnose different registers of her inner state and problems, but phenomenologically speaking I want to conceive them as a means to make sense of the surrounding bodies, objects, and space as a way to uncover the body's potential for affecting and being affected. In other words, Yokes's inexpression and irrational acts disrupt the habitual and conventional patterns of interaction, forcing us to hesitate in the dance of incoherence with Yokes, to reevaluate our expectations of friendship and expression of love. Rather than a disorientated body amongst the neatly arranged tables, what appears onscreen is a *hesitating body*.

Hesitation refers to the act of pausing before uttering or doing something. From Latin *haesitātiōnem*, to hesitate is to stammer—a variant of the Germanic *stumm*, which means “to mute.” In a moment or an act of hesitation, there is a muteness. When Yokes watches Steph and Jasmine exchanging words of endearment, she hesitates to reproduce the pleasantries when Steph approaches her, choosing to throw Steph's textbooks instead. Hesitation occurs in the few seconds before she runs to the corridor: her gaze shifts quickly, from left to right, from where Steph and Jasmine are standing to where she would discard the books. Between what is conventionally accepted (as an expression of love to a friend) and what is inconceivably cruel, Yokes only knows to refuse the mode of communication between Steph and Jasmine, the clichés and platitudes as penned on Steph's uniform, concomitantly muting the habitual response that would have framed the present experience within pre-existing models of interaction between friends which comprise the historically and socially contingent aspects of life. At its most fundamental, hesitation is a lapse between two contexts. In the film, it serves as an interval between experience and its potential, be it prescriptive or prospecting. Hesitation disrupts the foreseeable development of experience. Consider, for example, the exchange between Steph and Jasmine, who is an acquaintance, that stands as a norm of interaction. Yokes watches them from afar, witnessing Jasmine utter words of gratitude to Steph and the two girls embracing. The static shot captures

Yokes's increasingly heavy breathing and unfocused eyes. She hesitates for nearly ten seconds before jumping off the tables and running to the corridor to throw out Steph's textbooks. Yokes's hesitation may be read as a resistance to fall back on stock phrases and platitudes, protective of the friendship that is more precious than an acquaintanceship. Arguably, the brutish and reactionary nature of her actions is reflective of the tremendous force necessary to combat the ease of habit and convenience of reproducing norms. Yokes may not have the words to describe the friendship or her feelings, but she resists the use of existing expressions, even at the risk of appearing as a body that is *acting out*.

From a Deleuzian perspective, Yokes's illogical actions are a series of "fits and starts" crucial to the process of reasoning. In the excess of "fits and starts," as opposed to speech, Yokes "seals and conceals a hidden language, and language forms a glorious body" (*Logic of Sense* 280). The hesitating body resists succumbing to a language that denotes, instead becoming language itself. For Deleuze, this body is truly "expressive," for it is moved "with respect to something that is purely expressed, pure motion or pure "spirit"—*sense* as a pre-individual singularity, or an intensity which comes back to itself through others" (299). In order for the self to return to itself, it must move in relation to other selves. In an ethological sense, one discovers the self by way of imitating, repeating, and adapting to others. Such movement, Deleuze emphasises, is not reflective of "our undergoing influences" but of "insufflation" and "merging" with others:

The dissolved self opens up to a series of roles, since it gives rise to an intensity which already comprehends difference in itself, the unequal in itself, and which penetrates all others, across and within multiple bodies. (298)

The self is a multiplied body, *acting out* of itself. Inequality is not merely outward in the friendship but a multivalence also exists within the self—this is evidenced in Yokes's fits and irrational acts, her moments of pauses and use of unkind words, for example. Rather than serving against her, this inexpression and her actions, then, are a result of what she has subjectively grasped; they are also a result of her merging with the other bodies of her experience. Therefore, an inquiry about "unspoken affection" has to begin with the latent presence of these bodies on screen. Or, to phrase it differently, how is the body multiplied and dispersed by the camera? To approach this question, we turn to the film's own behaviour, particularly how it frames shots and positions its subjects in order to capture the body's movement towards other bodies (including objects and spaces), as Deleuze describes of the hesitating body, by way of imitation and resemblance.

Ng's main strategy for articulating the friendship narrative is the use of medium shots to equally emphasise characters and their surroundings, such that the positioning of the subject in relation to space and other objects creates affective resonances where an immanent continuity between bodies is possible despite fragmentation. This has ontological value, for the resonances of bodies—albeit disjunctive and distinct from one another—on an immanent level enables a "fusional multiplicity," as Deleuze and Guattari put it, that

produces a new unity comprising mobile and constructive meanings (*A Thousand Plateaus* 179). The cinematic composition of Yokes's delirious dance, for instance, at once fragments the body with the medium shot and assembles its lived experience with the surrounding space and objects.



Fig. 3

Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Ng's framing of Yokes in the pirouette sequence fragments her body and the examination hall into two spaces: one, a veiled stage that corresponds to the opacity of Yokes's state of mind; two, a floor space invaded by bar-like lines (of the table legs) that confine her restless legs. The medium shot used in the first half of the sequence mainly captures Yokes's upper body, focusing on her clutching of her head and later her head thrown back as if in a *séance* (see Figs. 3 and 4). Whilst the veiled stage—we cannot see what is going on behind the curtain—is equally expressive of Yokes's inaccessible mind, pointing to a synonymic relation between body and surrounding space, the undrawn curtain is also symbolic of a stage that is closed off, unwelcoming to Yokes. Hostility pervades the second half of the dance sequence where the camera is lowered and shows Yokes dancing from waist down and finally falling to the floor. Visually, Yokes's fair legs are juxtaposed against the unmoving and stiff table legs, as though she is trying to escape the prison of the O Levels. More than reinforcing the sense of enclosure, Ng's continued use of the medium shot not only gives equivalence to body and space but also blurs the distinction between them.

Upon showing the upper portion of the stage, the camera switches angle to capture the floor space. The table legs (vertical), the colour divisions of the stage and the lines on the floor (horizontal) function as framing lines that place Yokes within a composition grid. Even as her loss of control exacerbates as the dance progresses, the camera tightens its framing and encloses Yokes within. Whilst Yokes seems to be engulfed by

the composition, I argue that she in fact moves away from being distinct from the surrounding space to become part of the framing lines, generating the body's own affective negotiation with space. The medium waist-down shot is atypical but consistent with Ng's emphasis on body language as a means of expression, rather than facial or verbal since affection is unspoken. It captures not only the movements of Yokes's legs but also her dress (see Fig. 5). As she spins out of control, the pinafore dress flies up around her forming a horizontal line, almost parallel to the lines on the floor in the scene. In the same manner, her legs contribute to the vertical dimension of the frame, albeit in a different degree from the table legs. Notably, Yokes dances in a space intentionally carved out for an absent table. She is the missing piece, one of the many lines that comprise the frame (see Fig. 6). The body that acts out and is unable to express itself in words becomes capable of framing the scene. It is not constrained by the frame but constructs its own variegated vertical and horizontal lines. As Deleuze writes in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, the frame is either a "preliminary to the existence of bodies whose essence they fix, or going as far as the power of existing bodies goes" (13). Indeed, what is presented is a united yet dissonant image of lines framed by the mobile and fragmented body, the table legs, the stage and curtain. To fortify this embodied framing, we turn to Steph's participation in the scene to show how another body may also be fragmented and capable of framing.

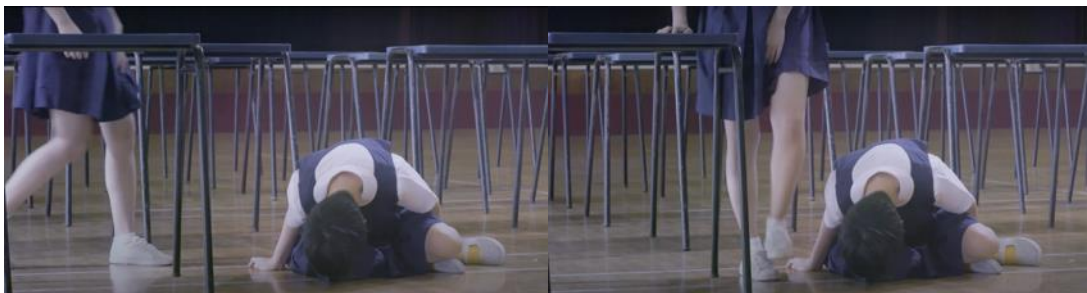


Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Unlike Yokes who dances in confusion, Steph walks measuredly. She emerges amongst the tables, and as her legs move across the screen, they are at first behind the table legs, then become more parallel to some of them (see Figs. 7 and 8). Hers is a shifting and embodied verticality. It is important to note that the camera maintains the static medium shot during her entrance, as if unperturbed by her presence. Because, as Deleuze reminds us, the body is synonymous with the frame. The image is mutually constructed and the camera remains still.

Affective resonances and mutual connection between body and surroundings are disrupted when coherent articulation and clarity of plot are reinstated as priorities. This disruption translates into a hesitation that happens shortly after Steph appears.



Fig. 9

The camera begins to shake when she bends down and sits beside Yokes to comfort her—a symbolic gesture that repositions Steph as Yokes’s friend, a generous and loving character who is no longer a filmic apparatus (see Fig. 9). It is within these few seconds that the camera shakes slightly and shifts to accommodate Steph and Yokes who revert to the norms of communication, engaging in a cycle of coaxing and apologising without addressing the passive-aggression and reasons for Yokes’s cruelty. The moment of hesitation jolts the audiences from the sense of camaraderie between frame and body, marking the shift in our attention from composition (bodies as assemblage) to characters (bodies as meaningful). In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson explains that it is when we “hesitate between two actions” and “pass through a series of states” that “the self grows, expands, and changes” (175). Rather than moving instantly from state to state, which is reflex born out of our evolved sophistication and speed that intelligibly connects two states, hesitation allows us to grasp meaning receptively. When the camera shakes, we are distracted from the unity of multiple bodies (the table legs, Yokes and Steph’s legs, for example) coalescing in one frame and reintroduced to the former sense of coherence offered by character and plot. The hesitating camera draws attention to the disjunction and exposes the limits of a harmony established by the girls’ reconciliation. Yokes’s apology and Steph’s magnanimity cannot ensure a sustained stability because separation is imminent. But when we consider the mutual inclusivity of the frame and body, a “composite unity” which involves “the recognition that subjectivity deploys itself as much beyond the individual” emerges (Bains 103). The film offers a kind of unity that is not reliant on intersubjectivity—a mode of interaction that is impossible for the girls who are unable to express themselves—but contingent on a transitive self that *acts out* of itself and into the surrounding space and objects.

Girls Acting Out

The affective capacity of Yokes’s actions challenges the conventional idea of acting out which “designate[s] a whole range of impulsive, anti-social or dangerous action [...] including enduring behavioural problems such as delinquency, drug addiction, and other psychosomatic illnesses” (Rowan 84). Through re-composing the body, the film conceptualises acting out as a way of extending the body outside its comfortable zone.

Rather than a self-limiting, anti-social behaviour, acting out is an indication of mobility. One is able to move out of a position that is overdetermined by the socio-cultural norms and codes of friendship surrounding its emergence, and then participate in the construction of new relations that have expressive forces alternative to the verbal and linguistic model of clarification. In other words, acting out, aside from its social connotations and from a compositional perspective, is evidence of a mobile subject position capable of multiple, non-teleological expressions that enable the girls to relate beyond standard practices of friendship that emphasise reciprocity, role-playing, and equal self-disclosure, for example. Self-disclosure, which is the common mode of relationality, is “a sign of the very special regard which each has for one another” (Thomas 217). In the short film, however, the friendship model between Yokes and Steph is not established in self-disclosure but seems to be contingent on Yokes’s whims and Steph’s accommodation. Yokes becomes “a sort of child-player” who, as Deleuze and Guattari describe, “no longer has to justify herself” (*What is Philosophy?* 72). Her acting out, in this regard, is part-practical, part-creative: she resists the paradigmatically interpersonal structure of interaction and steers the relationship towards one that is built on friends who attend to their own character and intentions in a more conscious manner than simply acting out in an irrational way. With the analytical meaning of acting out in mind, this section demonstrates how the narrative meaning of friendship is reconstructed as Yokes act out and Steph obliges.

In an early scene, when Yokes and Steph meet in the examination hall, they appear on opposite sides of each other, each occupying one side of the screen like leading lines that board up the audience’s view (see Fig. 10). The scene is predominantly structured by the swaths of blue and white: the girls’ bicoloured uniforms, the school desks, the bi-fold doors. They also function as lines that, as aforementioned in the earlier analysis, form a composition grid. The colours are expressive: the neutral white and dark blue are common school uniform colours; and the cool palette is a visual equivalence to the virtues of discipline and order of the institution. In this regard, the girls are not only embodying the disciplinary order but are also separated by institutional codes.

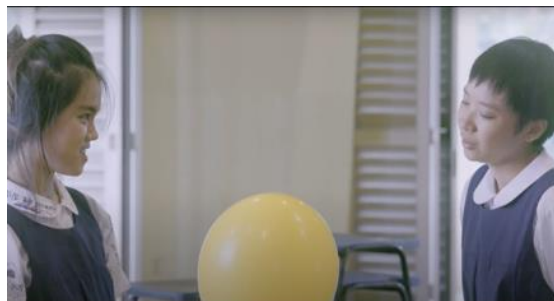


Fig. 10

The lingering static shot of the girls symbolically separated and sidelined by the disciplinary order is interrupted by a yellow balloon hovering in the middle (see Fig. 10). The balloon is Yokes’s farewell present

to Steph, one that she assumes Steph will be able to bring with her up the airplane. Right away the balloon is an odd choice, for as Steph replies, “How to bring it up the plane... It will explode.” Given her incomprehensible behaviour in the face of Steph’s impending departure, the farewell gift is not uncharacteristic of Yokes. Yet, more than an acting out that is mischievous or antagonistic, Yokes’s gifting of the balloon may be read as a means of self-enactment where she has agency to conduct herself as she wishes to be within the friendship.

Much of this mode of relationality between friends draws on Michael Oakeshott’s idea of civic friendship, where he describes how external actions which are often interpreted as acts of self-disclosure (secret sharing, for example) may in fact be significant of self-command. Even if one is unsure “about the sentiment in which he is acting,” the act of “choosing an action is always meaning to procure a satisfaction in a motive of some sort” (72). Sentiment is differentiated from motive which, as Peter Digeser explains in *Friendship Reconsidered*, is not an impulse but an “exhibition of intelligence” (78): “we permit ourselves to act on certain motives and not others” (79). Acting out is not the slip of a psychological phenomenon but an act of agency. Even along the lines of Freud in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through,” acting out is “a present-day force” not an “event of the past” (151). Whereas the process of remembering requires the subject to “put himself back into an earlier situation” and to “[give] an account of the mental processes belonging to it” (148), acting out is not invested in the recovery or return to the point of origin. Rather, that which is repressed or forgotten is continuously reproduced as an action. Acting out allows the subject “to *work through* it” (155). It is an act *of* and *for* the self. We can read Yokes’s actions, including her gifting the balloon and throwing books, as based around “self-command and not external success” (Digeser 80)—she is unconcerned about giving Steph a good farewell or leaving a good impression. Her failure to do all that is not itself a failure of her character, if we can perceive her actions as permissions to act out or enact the standard Yokes has set for herself, whether consciously or not, regarding her own feelings and sentiments toward Steph’s departure. This is friendship established by self-enactment, as Oakeshott and Digeser mean, where “the individuality of the friends is a prime motivation of the friendship” (76), where individuality is not negotiated vis-à-vis the other.

A Ballooning Friendliness

Yokes’s act of gifting the balloon to Steph may be a pursuit of her individuality, but as aforementioned the affective capacity of the body acting out props the balloon as an expressive detail in the *mise-en-scène* that is viewed through the lens of the friendship narrative set against the backdrop of an ascetic and disciplinary order. The exchange between the girls is shot with the balloon drifting in the middle. The colour yellow behaves differently from the white and blue suffusions in the background and on the sides (see Fig. 10). A

warm hue interrupts the sterile colour-coordinated scene comprising the girls' uniforms that remind one of rules and order, the school desks and bi-fold doors that foreshadow the imminent O Level examinations in which Steph will not participate. The association of the blue and white suffusions with discipline and institutional order goes beyond the contextual; in particular, the blue and white pinafore dress is immediately recognisable to the Singaporean audience, calling to mind the all-girls Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (CHIJ) schools in Singapore that pride themselves on strictures that attach value judgments to the presentability of one's appearance. As one alumna puts it, "your attire is reflective of your character or virtue" (Chew, "On the Joys and Complexities of Growing Up in An All-Girls School"). The affiliation with the Catholic convent establishes the girls' relationship on a disciplinary order that mortifies the flesh, as well as represses and exposes desires and expressions that deviate from standard affections between girls. It is thus of added significance that the relatively static shot of the girls in their convent pinafores cornered to each side of the screen, like blue-and-white pillars that uphold the sterile order of the institution, is disrupted by the yellow balloon bouncing in the air between them, functioning as the only undirected movement and sign of uninhibition. It is a symbol of drift and defiance from the order, one that points to possibilities and the lack of prescription.

In line with the argument about the bodies' ability to affect and be affected, transversing the lines that demarcate friendship, I want to suggest that the balloon expresses on the girls' behalfes their "unspoken affection." At first, Steph playfully smacks the balloon into the air towards Yokes's face; then, Yokes hits back. In the chaos of the exchange, we see their hands almost touching one another; but in actuality Steph and Yokes are hitting the balloon, never touching. Any contact is mediated by the balloon. Yet, rather than an inhibition, the balloon affords the girls an intimacy that is prohibited within the confines of the examination hall which is characterised by uniformity and structure. The sense of regulation commingles with a disquietude that fills the scene when at one point the camera shifts from the image of Steph and Yokes sitting on the floor to the gigantic black fan on the ceiling whose blades resemble those of a helicopter, spinning steadily and slowly, as though watching them from above. The school environment is likened to Foucault's prison: its disciplinary force is produced by "a strict time-table, a system of prohibitions and obligations, continual supervision, exhortations, religious readings" (121). The school becomes the space where the girls are "being fitted into the existing system of values and orders" and inherit moral values and principles of a civilised society (Flitner 228). Steph and Yokes are spatially and socially restrained; visually, their bodies are held captive to the sides of the screen. Where expression is limited, the balloon becomes the film's expressive tool. It disrupts the inertia of the scene by connecting Steph and Yokes, as the conduit to their friendship. In its buoyancy and lack of restraint, which is juxtaposed with the relative immobility of the girls, the balloon serves

as a potentiating dynamic that suspends the narrative of discipline and cuts through the blue-and-white regimen, activating a potential for the girls to resist the regulatory forces of the scene.

The expressive potential is fully realised when Steph accidentally releases the balloon into the air. The playful jostle ceases, and we follow the eyes of the girls, in search of the unmoored balloon which has heretofore expressed on the girls' behalfs an intimacy and joy. Because their heads are tilted in the same direction, their mouths dropping slightly with a gasp, their bodies seem to merge into one corporeal assemblage. This coalescence is encouraged by the movement of the camera that moves steadily from Steph to Yokes, one girl resonating with the other, instead of the previous frame that features them on the sides of the screen (see Figs. 11 and 12).

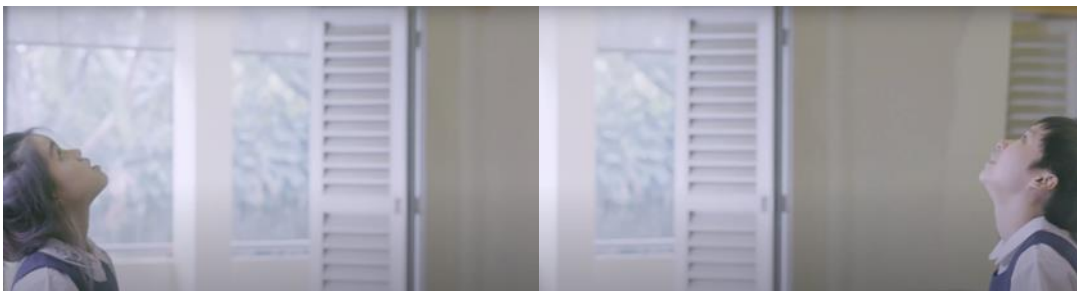


Fig. 11

Fig. 12

The choice to not track the balloon and instead focus on the girls individually is two-pronged. On the one hand, without the yellow suffusion, Steph and Yokes fall back into the blue-and-white regimen, separated and no longer sharing the screen. On the other hand, this manoeuvre strategically emphasises the palpable loss of the balloon. Its removal from the scene leaves the girls, as well as the audience, at a loss. Though they are never explicit about what the balloon means to them, the girls share the momentary sadness of losing the adhesive between them. Crucially, as the camera moves from one girl to the other, the affective echo of that loss permeates the screen and leaves the audience nonplussed, as Steph and Yokes are. Helplessness and sadness surrounding the girls' impending breakup dominate the scene. Presented here is what Deleuze and Guattari call an "uninterrupted continuum" of intensities (*A Thousand Plateaus* 179). For Deleuze, every intensity is "differential, by itself a difference" (*Difference and Repetition* 281); it is not repetitive but dynamic, coming together to form a continuum of variabilities. We participate in the longing for the intimacy that a few seconds ago was the balm for the estranged friends. The affect of loss circulates from the characters to the audience, in a similar manner as their friendship extends to the audience. We become part of the assemblage, "an expansive cartography of living" in which actions and feelings, and the friendship narrative are not limited and organised by the time and space of the frame (Kaufman 5).

Gladys Ng's *The Pursuit of a Happy Human Life* captures the essence of adolescent friendship between school girls. The environment that fosters the relationship between Steph and Yokes is also the order that seeks to regulate their affections. Unlike Jasmine who engages in a normative friendliness towards Steph,

Yokes acts out and hesitates. Yet rather than reducing the complexity of her actions to simply bad behaviour, Ng's short film allows for a reconceptualisation of *acting out* of oneself, as a means to pass the unspoken affection from body to body, such that meaning is not quite unspoken as it is constantly shifting. As David Hume reminds us of the nature of passion: "As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature" (410). Ng creates such movements, stringing together a multiplicity of expressions that are altogether rich and ungraspable for the adolescent girls. The takeaway here is the mobility and fusional, or impressionable, nature of the girls that are not disadvantageous to their maturity, neither do they serve as weak testimony to their friendship. Rather their unspoken affection reflects a certain freedom and expressiveness that arises from the *no-responsibility* adolescence, as Mead puts it. The friendship between Yokes and Steph is an adolescent one; their affection is not unspoken and ill-expressed as it is moveable, unable to be organised in a teleological manner or abide within a frame.

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