

CLARE BRANT (LONDON)

Philosophical playthings? Balloons and the play of ideas

The invention of the balloon in 1783 led to a brief craze and much play of ideas. From that original playfulness, Romantic poets use balloons for an aerial imagination that doubles up work and play. As balloons miniaturise into toys, associations between children and balloons are established which become philosophically rich in the 20thC. Using a selection of literature, art and films to explore what balloons convey as ludic objects, I suggest they carry philosophical and poetic functions that represent imagination at work – and at play.

CLARE BRANT is Professor of Eighteenth-Century Literature & Culture at King's College London, where she co-directs the Centre for Life-Writing Research. Her publications include Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Poetry (Palgrave 2006) which won the ESSE Book Award in 2008; four co-edited essay collections and numerous articles. She is the author of two volumes of poetry (for Shoestring Press) and a series of children's stories (for Thingley Press). In 2011 she made a short film with the BBC re-enacting a balloon flight from 1785.