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Filming Bitterness

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Abstract

The cinema of Wang Bing is a matter of historic necessity. On one hand, the temporal amplitude given to the shots and the film frame allows him to describe the organization of life of the most deprived in a changing system. But, on the other hand, a dialectical dimension establishes a dialogue with the past. Several of his movies deal with the dramatic episode of the famine of 1959–1962 to the camp of ‘re-education through labour’ of Jiabiangou (*Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*, *The Ditch*, and the project *Past in the Present*). In this cinema, strictly centred and constructed, the materials of images remind the fragility and the uncertainty of the reality. The video installation *The Man with no name*, which does not handle this period, also increases this effect of survival.

The true image of the past flits by.¹

The bitterness to which the title of this chapter alludes is like that of green tea. Although initially subtle, it can turn harsh, coarse or even unpleasant if too many leaves are left steeping for too long. It is also the bitterness we encounter in the films of Wang Bing, as well as that, historical this time, of the ‘speak bitterness’ campaign launched by the Communist Party of China during the land reforms.² The bitterness depicted today in Wang Bing’s films is both inspired by and at odds with the spirit of those meetings which were held so that that workers and peasants could speak out about what they had gone through and denounce their oppressors (bosses or land owners). It was an effort to place the voice of the people at the heart of Chinese revolutionary strategy. Taking people’s voices ‘to heart’ is precisely what Wang Bing does, for example, in his film *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*. Yet in doing so, he restores to this original project of freeing speech the opportunity of being listened to, something it had been denied. In his films the person who speaks is truly heard. His or her words serve neither to judge nor to condemn, but rather to remember.

¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and others, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 390.

² See Marie-Pierre Duhamel-Muller, ‘Récits d’amertume, Wang Bing, de He Fengming à Jiabiangou’, in *Trafic*, n° 78, summer 2011.



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It was in 1949, when the People's Republic of China was first established, that the new authorities decided to launch public meetings during which peasants were encouraged to speak out to express their grievances. During these campaigns for denouncing injustice, everyone had the right to speak. This societal practice of 'speaking bitterness' continued into the 1980s.³ In the early 1950s, complaints were geared primarily towards people who were external to the assembly (Japanese soldiers or nationalist party representatives). Little by little, the authorities appointed spokespeople among the peasants, inciting them to accuse members of their community of belonging to the class of 'land owners'. Those found guilty thus had to answer for certain facts or respond to remarks made against them before the assembly. Their houses were often searched and their possessions confiscated. The quest for material comfort was viewed as selfish and immoral behavior, which was anti-revolutionary. These 'speak bitterness' meetings later developed into 'struggle sessions' during which the accused or presumed 'rightists' were questioned, ill-treated and beaten as we are told by the prisoners of *The Ditch* and He Fengming in her lengthy spoken account.

In Wang Bing's films, narrating bitterness is not a quest to point fingers or avenge past injustice. Nor does he seek to victimize the individuals he films. Rather, he aims, as suggests Frédéric Sabouraud, to place himself at the service of reality.⁴ Part of this approach involves giving himself over to the bitter flavor of things, in full knowledge that it is futile simply to denounce bitterness. Exploiting the cinema to engage with such an experience and describe it appeals to the viewer's capacity for reflection and her memory as much as it does her feelings. This teaches us more about life than a trial would, and allows us to share this experience at a much deeper level. It is significant that Wang Bing never denounces directly. This is already apparent in *West of the Tracks*. We know that Wang Bing was shooting this film between December 1999 and April 2001, in order to depict the process of a historical industrial system collapsing.⁵ His chosen medium in no way resembles a film of denunciation; there is no propagandistic agenda. It represents, rather, an effort to describe. It is a film which aims to observe, and to take the time to reveal what we do not usually see. Long tracking shots through the snow are employed to capture the train's entrance into the factories. Wide shots of the furnaces reveal the gigantic scale of the site. Using long shots, the filmmaker follows workers along the corridors that lead from their rundown locker rooms to deserted warehouses. There is not a word on the causes of this industrial collapse, nor on the working conditions of the people employed there.

3 See Isabelle Thireau and Hu Linshan, *Les Ruses de la démocratie. Protester en Chine* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2010).

4 Frédéric Sabouraud, 'Wang Bing, entre histoire, mémoire et style', in *Trafic*, n° 78, summer 2011, p. 48.

5 These factories were built in 1934 to produce the armaments for the Japanese army. After the establishment of the People's Republic they were converted into smelting plants. This complex of blast furnaces prospered, and in the 1980s was running at full capacity. In the early 1990s, the companies began losing money. In late 1999, they closed one after the other.





The film is drawn-out and slow-paced, as if it were necessary to impose the slowness and patience of cinema in order to bring something to a pause. The remaining employees are struggling to keep on working, even though raw materials are become more and more scarce. In the first part (*Rust*), Wang Bing films their motions, their breaks, their conversations, the vacant rooms, the abandoned machinery. Despite its length, the film gives an impression of vulnerability and precariousness. Indeed, *West of the Tracks* escapes the adoption of any particular take on these events; the film is not driven by ideology, but rather by a pressing need to provide an account of a state of crisis. First, he must simply report—denunciation will of course come later, but in the initial phase showing how things are is fundamental. This is a preoccupation Wang Bing shares with certain Italian neorealist filmmakers. Their work displays similar awareness of an unbearable aspect within the real, and shows the ways in which people nonetheless manage to live with it. In *West of the Tracks*, the frame, length and manipulation of image contents do not serve to denounce or visually depict this unbearable element, but rather to make its existence bearable, to find ways to sustain its appearance and idea.

It should not be overlooked that Wang Wing was 22 at the time of the Tiananmen protests of 1989. He began filming ten years later, and completed *West of the Tracks* the year that China joined the World Trade Organization. Yet his films in no way seek to mimic the turmoil and divisiveness of the contemporary world. While they do indeed reflect the meandering course of Chinese history during the era of globalization, his aim is not so much to reproduce this history, as it is to invent a certain form of presence in the world, a way of inhabiting it and co-existing with it. This involves a very specific relationship to time, which inspires the filmmaker to film things in block units, in their entirety. Wang Bing films a great deal. He produced 300 hours of rushes for *West of the Tracks*, and 400 for '*Til Madness do us Part*. Of this huge volume of material, he retains, at the montage stage, homogeneous sections of footage in continuous scenes. The rigorous selection of filmed footage which occurs during the editing process stems from a refusal to manipulate images or shift them from their original contexts. The chosen sequences are always edited in accordance with the order in which they were shot. This approach to documentary filmmaking differs greatly from strategies employed by filmmakers such as Frederick Wiseman, for example, who rearranges all of his footage during montage to construct a storyline and narrate it. With Wang Bing, cinema, which, since its origins, has asserted itself as the art of montage and fragmentation, of cutting and ellipsis, retrieves a sense of linearity. The order of things and their entire, specific duration are fully respected, as the filmmaker explains in relation to *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*:

This is why I try to maintain regularity during both the montage and the filming by making as few changes as possible. The version of *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* for cinemas is three hours long. I cut a few of the takes. I put together an unabridged



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version for a gallery in Paris, which runs three hours and forty minutes, in which I didn't touch a thing so to speak. I made no cuts in her story, apart from the tape changes, because I felt I had no right to alter it. At the time, my role was simply that of an attentive listener. I tried as much as possible to recreate her personal temporality, which forms a whole in a world which is all her own.⁶

This almost primitive cinematographic style results in films which are both chronological and as complete as possible, and this accounts for their length. Some filmmakers might carry the practice of completeness to excess; Wang Bing does it with restraint. He respects the progression of things. Remaining true to the time they take to exist or to find full expression, he neither reduces nor extends them. These accounts need to unfold over a certain period of time in order to create the proper opportunity for listening to them. This is also true of the two fictional films he has thus far produced (*Brutality Factory* and *The Ditch*). More violent in plot than his documentaries, these films can be viewed in the same way that one listens to a narrator. It is in fact in this very way that the filmmaker himself listens to He Fengming speaking for hours on end. For him, time is what brings things into existence and allows us to share in them. He gives them over to us to contemplate so we truly sense their flavor. For time is, as Emmanuel Levinas tells us, 'the mortal being's mode of being'.⁷

Coming out one after another between 2007 and 2010, *Brutality Factory*, *Fengming* and *The Ditch* form part of a larger project which focuses on a brief yet dramatic period in Chinese History. Wang Bing began shooting *The Ditch* in 2004 after reading a collection of short stories by the author Yang Xianhui.⁸ He came across these texts when on his way to Paris to participate in a script-writing residency at the Ciné-Fondation of the Cannes Film Festival.⁹ His original project was set in a psychiatric hospital. This film was finally finished in 2013 ('Til Madness do us Part). But the discovery of Yang Xianhui's writings changed the course of his writing project. Yang Xianhui is a Chinese writer who was born in 1946 in Gansu. Following his studies, he was sent 'to the country' to work on a farm in the Gobi desert. He arrived there at the age of 21 as part of a land management and development team where he ended up staying for sixteen years as a peasant soldier, a salesman and finally a teacher. It was on this farm that Yang Xianhui met former rightists and heard about the Jiabiangou labor camp for the first time. He first visited the reeducation camp in 1997 and discovered, among other things, that the victims' remains had only been buried a decade or so previously upon the insistence of local peasants. After seeking out and meeting with hundreds of survivors, he wrote the short story 'Woman from Shanghai' in 2000,

6 Wang Bing, 'Je suis un conservateur', Interview with Zhang Yaxuan, in *Capricci*, p. 10.

7 Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 43.

8 See the first conversation with the filmmaker in this volume.

9 *Ibid.*





followed by a series of nineteen more stories, published in the collection *Farewell to Jiabiangou* in 2003.¹⁰ Presented as fictional narratives, these short stories are freely inspired, according to the author, by his conversations with the survivors.

Following their closure in 1960, the camps became a taboo topic in China, just like the famine which devastated the country in the late 1950s. This famine was one of the consequences of the industrial development strategies launched in 1958 to allow the 'Great Leap Forward' in the race to achieve industrial competitiveness. The peasants were simply assigned to the production of steel and collectivized agriculture. Within several years, the neglect of certain crops and grain requisitions caused a famine which would claim an estimated thirty-five million or more victims in three years.¹¹ Gansu was one of the two Chinese provinces to be most affected by the catastrophe.

To tackle these two forbidden topics head-on as do Yang Xianhui in his short stories and Wang Bing in some of his films, is a bold move, and a significant political stand. To turn one's gaze to events that fall outside the scope of official history is indicative of the imperative need to situate oneself within the inherited present. This desire to know and the necessity of taking a stand come from a place of lack or precariousness, and are precisely what will enable that which has been silenced and hidden to be disclosed and revealed. The aim here is not further discussion of the issue of censorship, or the challenging conditions under which these films were produced (for this, please see the interviews with Lihong Kong and the filmmaker contained in this volume), but rather, by calling into question the act of cinema in a literal sense (framing, montage, image content), to grasp the dialectical movement that these films allow us to explore from our position within the present.

For various reasons (mainly economic and logistical)¹² it took six years to produce the film *The Ditch*. The screenwriting, casting, set design, production, shooting and editing were suspended several times and interrupted by the shooting of other films

¹⁰ Yang Xianhui, *Woman from Shanghai: Tales of Survival From a Chinese Labor Camp*, trans. by Wen Huong (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

¹¹ On estimates of the number of victims, see Jean-Luc Domenach, '36 million de morts', in *L'Histoire*, 1 September 2012. 'But the Chinese authorities did all they could to hide the truth and only very slowly did people start talking. Outside China, two books played a key role: first, Jasper Becker's work which revealed the full scale of these events, but especially a book by Frank Dikötter which provided, for the first time, a remarkably lucid analysis of these events. Jasper Becker, *Hungry Ghosts, Mao's Secret Famine* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine, The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

¹² Wang Bing: 'Nobody in China will support films on this kind of topic, even today. [...] For me, the subject of *The Ditch* couldn't be treated as a documentary. With a minimal budget, this film was not going to be properly produced. That's why the economic pressure was so strong. The second problem was the film site. We needed to find an area in that region where we could build the entire set. Since we had no authorization, we had no certificate to work there and the local authorities wouldn't allow us there. So in order for the film to be produced, we had to be very strategic and use all resources possible to find new solutions every time.' Wang Bing, *Je suis un conservateur*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



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Personal photography of He Fengming, with her husband Jingchao.

on both similar and unrelated subjects. In addition to taking inspiration from the short stories of Yang Xianhui, Wang Bing also relied on the testimony of labor camp survivors. The film credits make reference to that of Ti Zhongzheng among others. Wang Bing also used a few rare archival documents. With regards to the challenges he faced in shooting this film, the filmmaker explains that:

Apart from the money and the film site, there is also the (hi)story itself, which is very tough, and which we did not directly experience. How is one to access the most direct information about this story in order to construct realist images? There are very few visual documents. I only found two photos. They come from Mingshio county (in the province of Gansu, n/t) and those people (the rightists send to the camps, n/t) are only in the blurry parts of the picture. There are some letters too.¹³

During the research phase for *The Ditch*, Wang Bing met with hundreds of people, including He Fengming, a journalist who had published her memoirs in a book entitled 1957: *How I Lived it* (not available in English translation). In it she relates her experience at the camps and the loss of her husband who was detained in Jiabiangou. Wang Bing shot her giving her account in 2007 (in France the film came out in 2012 along with *The Ditch*). For three hours, this elderly woman, seated across from the camera, framed in close-up and medium shots, tells the story of her life. She is forever

13 Ibid., See the letters and archival photographs included in this volume.





unable to forget the suffering she and her husband (also a journalist) both endured when they were deemed to be rightists in the 1960s, even though she had given up her studies in languages to volunteer in the communist brigades. Although she was very involved in the revolutionary movement, she was among the accused of the struggle sessions. She and her husband Jingchao were found to be rightists and condemned as intellectuals at the height of the events. They were sent to separate labor camps. In her memoirs, she describes her husband's willingness to be confined in Jiabiangou in order to erase this judgment as quickly as possible and in short, to recover his place in society:

The hardest thing to accept is that this all arose from a deliberate choice made by Jingchao. When the staff department announced the penalties that were being brought against him, someone else in charge, Wang Yi, told him that once dismissed, he could always find a way to make a living by going back home to work, or finding other means of subsistence. If he didn't want to try to make it on his own, he could always join a farm labor camp and get reeducated with a view to reentering the ranks of the people as quickly as possible, by ridding himself of this 'rightist' label.

[...]

The staff manager told him that reeducation through labor would help him get rid of his 'rightist' tag; and he naively allowed himself to believe that this was sincere advice. He chose to go to Juiquan, to the Jiabiangou farm, to prove how determined he was to leave his 'rightist' past behind him... because he wanted to start writing again. To do this, he had to demonstrate that he was not a 'rightist' and he would have gone through anything to achieve this. He thought things would go as planned; he didn't realize that an even more serious charge was about to be laid against him for subversive writings, and that he would face an even more severe form of persecution. Driven by a passion laden with suffering, he would soon be severely punished for his choice, *we* would be punished.¹⁴

When she was finally free to go and see him in Jiabiangou and bring him food, she learned upon her arrival that he had died of hunger several days earlier. We can see elements of this story in that of the female character in *The Ditch*. In watching *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*, one is struck by both the head-on nature of the shots and how few of them there are. Apart from the opening camera angle, which films He Fengming from behind on her way home at the end of the day, and the final shot of the film, in which, again with her back to us, she is writing at her desk in the bedroom before answering the phone, the entire film is composed of still shots in her living room. The 186-minute film contains only sixteen shots. Seated in a wide armchair facing the camera, she tells the filmmaker she is about to begin speaking. He approves off-camera and lets her speak, without asking questions or interrupting her until much later, when it begins to get dark, he asks: 'Would you mind if we turned on the light??'

There is no excess or exaggeration in this cinematic approach. Fengming's voice begins to tremble when she tells us how she learned that her husband was dead, but

¹⁴ He Fengming, 'Extraits de *Année 1957, Mon Vécu*', trad. by Pascale Wei-Guinot, in *Capricci. 1957: How I Lived it* (not available in English translation). My translation.





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there are no changes in the filmic devices used, no attempt to heighten this particular moment. The frame remains still, defined by the spatial elements laid down by the architecture, furniture, and day-to-day objects which fill the room: an oven, a picture frame on the wall, teacups on the table. The visual composition is restrained. A reverse shot of the window serves to highlight the austerity of the frame, formed by the contours and colors of Fengming's apartment.

The minimalism of the framing (an outdoor shot from behind, an entrance shot taken twice, a shot of the living room facing Fengming's armchair, a night shot of the window, close-up facial shots, medium close-up shots, a day shot of the window, a hallway shot) is complemented by the filmmaker's technical skill, no doubt stemming from his experience as a photographer. This has a dual purpose: the shots must be composed to suit the setting, while also respecting the temporality and variety of their contents. Indeed, as if she were looking at a photograph, the viewer is brought to reflect on what she sees and to question why she is seeing it from that specific perspective. The cinematic approach adopted by Wang Bing allows him to take a stance which is simultaneously rigorous and flexible. Rigorous in upholding his chosen discursive viewpoints and visual frame, yet relaxed in his attention to the subtleties of the image. Wang Bing's photographic skill thus complements his knowledge concerning when to crop or expand the frame to suit specific situations. Wang Bing has a unique way of filming people, of framing moving subjects, of finding his place alongside the real in time and space. Often working alone, Wang Bing uses a single camera. On occasions where he works with another cameraman, he advises him of his preferred angles and they take turns filming. He never uses two cameras simultaneously. This enables the steady unfolding of the image from a given point of view so as to capture the action in the depth of field. *West of the Tracks* was most certainly the film which taught Wang Bing how to exploit such practices, especially the scenes where he filmed groups of housing block inhabitants conversing in a store or the street (*Remnants*). In *Coal Money* (2008) he succeeds, for example, in capturing the conversations of groups of truckers and coal retailers at a bend in the road, even though the scene could not have been planned in advance. This attention paid to things and actions never undermines the frame or visual coherency. This flexibility comes from a posture of openness to different gazes and encounters. It is apparent in the camera's capacity to fall into step with the real, a phenomenon which Alexandre and Daniel Costanzo have named in relation to Wang Bing's cinema the 'striding principle', a method of filmmaking in which the one who films, the cameraman, 'adopts the pace of people as they make their way, in a sense leading us along with him to experience the raw banality of the real'.¹⁵ This effect is the result of this unique shooting method, in which the creative processes behind the framing are laid bare.

¹⁵ Costanzo, Alexandre & Daniel, 'The Principle of Moving On', in *Wang Bing*, Paris: Galerie Chantal Crousel.





In *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*, this focus on the frame and on the interplay between on and off-camera is constant. At the end of the film, He Fengming is putting around her flat. Night has fallen. She closes her bedroom curtains and sits down at her desk. The phone rings. This is the final shot, which lasts seven minutes. He Fengming stands up to answer it. 'Hang on, I have to get this', she says, as if to apologize for the fact that this event has interrupted the filming, when in fact it has only enhanced it. She sits on the edge of the bed, hidden by the wall of the hallway. The shot remains still and empty throughout the entire conversation.

Hello? Yes, speaking. No I didn't know that. Another survivor. That's right... Yes, he and my husband were at the same camp. Oh, about 74 I should think. No, he's older than me... I had two sons, the eldest passed away in 2003. Now I only have the younger one. Were you rehabilitated? Were you a rightist? No, I mean... Oh really? And you were rehabilitated after?... And your wage?... Yes. It was already fairly high back then. And during the Cultural Revolution they left you alone? Really? (laughs) Why don't you give me your name and phone number? Let me get a pen. (A moment later she re-enters the frame with pen and paper). Ok great. 'Zheng' like 'correct'? Shao Zhengxiang? Yes. Thank you for calling. Bye. (She stands up and finishes writing, then turns her back to the camera.) It was a call from Kunming. Another survivor. (Then she sits back down at her desk, her back to us, and continues writing.)

The viewer realizes that, not only did He Fengming write her memoirs, but she is also compiling information on the camps, and that part of her time is now taken up by the urgent need to gather the traces and people that can talk about these events. In her voice we hear pain, suffering and weariness. Once she has returned to sit at her desk, the frame is maintained for long enough for this body, viewed from behind, to accumulate a density that is temporal, historical and emotional. The film keeps its distance; once again, it simply provides an account. There is, however, a stance taken towards history. He Fengming was present at the 'Speak Bitterness' meetings of the 1950s. She lived through the struggle sessions. And then she turned her experience into a narrative.¹⁶ She is engaged in gathering information on the camps and continues to write. The film records her story and depicts this elderly woman in her tiny apartment as if to undermine the official form of 'Speaking Bitterness' and set her free.

In order to compile the memories of other survivors and to document this historical period as well as possible, Wang Bing is working on a separate project, which

¹⁶ The Chinese-American film critic Andrew Chan notes that 'her speech moves with the smooth progression one would expect from a narrative that has been previously constructed for the page. [...] It's tempting to read the film as a persecuted bourgeois intellectual's reclamation of *suku*, the communist practice that encouraged peasants to exercise political agency by airing their grievances in public'. (article available online on the site *reverseshot*): http://www.reverseshot.com/article/fengming_chinese_memoir (accessed 29 May 2013). Cited and translated into French by Marie-Pierre Duhamel-Muller, 'Récits d'amertume, Wang Bing, de He Fengming à Jiabiangou', in *Trafic*, n° 78, summer 2011. My translation.



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He Fengming in the late fifties.

is not yet finished. This lengthy documentary consisting of interviews on the history of these camps is currently entitled *Past in the Present*.¹⁷ The quest to fight against official historical amnesia therefore appears central to all of these historically-based films. When questioned on the topic of the irrepresentable and on whether or not any images of these camps remain, Wang Bing spontaneously replies:

With respect to whether or not we should address this subject, I think we should, because if we do not film this now it may be that in the future we will be unable to film at all. In fact, if we do not film events of the past we may find ourselves unable to modify events in the future; without a record of the past, change is not possible.¹⁸

The final words spoken into the camera by Fengming seem to echo Wang Bing's remarks: 'If I don't write, who will?' Images must exist 'in spite of all',¹⁹ despite the

17 We are publishing in the current volume a few extracts from Wang Bing's statement of intent for this film.

18 See the third conversation with the filmmaker in this volume.

19 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All, Four photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).





risks taken by those who create them and despite how unbearable they may be for the viewer. While cinema can show, tell, explain and portray, it is the viewer's role to take possession of these images.

Wang Bing also shot a short fictional film dealing with the same historical period. *Brutality Factory* (2007) shows, in just a few minutes, the torture that was also inflicted on the accused rightists. The main character is a woman who must disclose to her torturers the name of the place where her husband is hiding. She refuses, knowing he will be killed if she tells them. One of the head guards commands his henchmen to bury her alive. In the deserted factory where these acts of violence are committed, others are being accused and tortured, while one of the head guards puts on a record so that he won't hear the sounds of the victims' cries. The idea for this very violent short came during the shooting of *West of the Tracks*.

A few years ago, while I was talking to factory workers, they told me about the confrontations, interrogations and torture sessions which took place in their factory during the Cultural Revolution. One evening, as I was wandering around the enclosure of the deserted factory, I was suddenly gripped by fear and felt as though I were being watched and followed by some kind of ghost. Even today what really happened at that time is still only known to a handful of people who were present at these events or who lived through them. Over time, their stories turned into jokes, ghost stories or tales of horror, which is one way of remembering the past.²⁰

The story told in *Brutality Factory* foreshadows the violence of *The Ditch*. The still shots are filmed with a certain distance: the action unfolds in a deserted factory which reminds us of the site of Tie Xi Qu in *West of the Tracks*. A woman is beaten, blows are dealt to a prisoner who has been suspended, an anonymous naked body lying on the ground is washed clean by two torturers. We see no blood in these images, but the soundtrack is as evocative as that of a horror film.

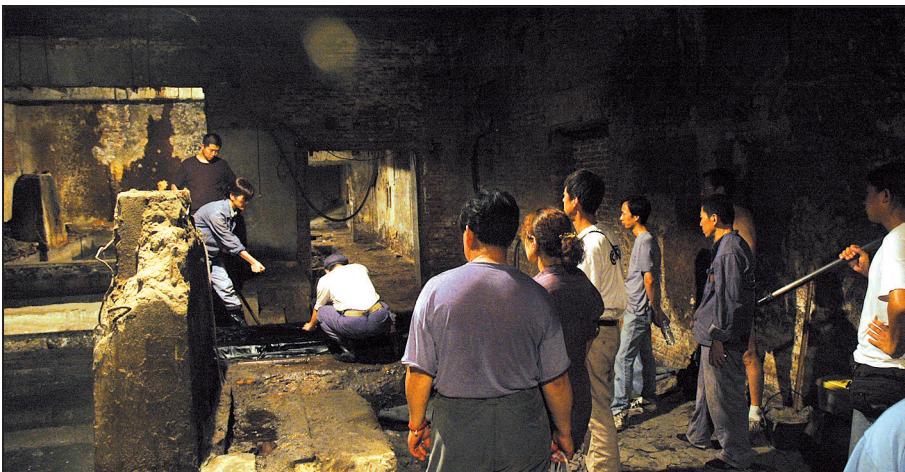
In *The Ditch*, which was shot in weather conditions which were highly challenging for the filmmaker and his team, horror scenes also abound. In order to portray this gruesome winter of 1960, Wang Bing filmed on-site in the region where the camps were located, at the edge of the Gobi desert. Most of the actors were amateurs, with the exception of the lead male and female roles. There are no torture scenes in this film. The story unfolds between the time when the prisoners arrive at the camp and the time they are released. The accused rightists must first carry out a certain number of manual tasks. Some of them, unable to withstand the physical conditions, die of exhaustion. Bit by bit, food rationing reaches draconian proportions and the men are excused from working in order to find their own food. They all set out into the desert in search of seeds or plants which might allow them to survive. An elderly man

20 Interview with Wang Bing available online: <http://www.cinemotions.com/article/12605> (accessed 30 November 2013). My translation.





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On the shooting of *Brutality Factory* (2006)

attempts to eat a rat. He dies overnight. Gradually, the number of deaths increases and the principle activity then consists in carrying the bodies further into the desert to bury them. Cases of cannibalism are reported and those found guilty are thrown into a pit. A young woman arrives from the city. She is hoping to help her imprisoned husband and brings him food. The other prisoners vainly attempt to conceal his death from her and his corpse, which has been partially eaten by others. She eventually finds him and is able to cremate his body. Shortly after a young prisoner attempts to escape with his teacher, the authorities finally decide to send the last remaining survivors home.

Wang Bing sometimes works under extreme technical conditions. He films without artificial lighting, at night, in dark tunnels, or, conversely, outdoors, with the sky in mid-frame, nearly overexposing the image. Because of this, the visual content is particularly sensory. *West of the Tracks*, for example, privileges the substance and textures of the elements (metal, rust, snow, flame, smoke, steam and water). *The Ditch* is a dryer film in which dust, sparse grass, clothing, blankets and emaciated bodies respond to the bitter wind that sweeps across the desert. One shot, which occurs about midway through the film, highlights this focus on visual matter. One morning, three guards enter the sleeping quarters to remove the bodies of those who have died overnight. One body is placed on the floor to be dealt with. The men cover him with a cotton blanket and lean over to wrap him up, now an unthinking act. The thick parkas and bomber hats they are wearing to protect them from the cold are covered in dust. The wide rays of light that penetrate the in-ground window of the dormitory indicate how low the sun is in the sky. The frame fills with dust, churned up by the wind. Superimposed on the forms of each of the three men's bodies are three diagonal rays





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Shooting of Brutality Factory (2006)

of light, thick with floating particles. The action lasts for two minutes, during which time this shower of dust fills up the frame, occupying our attention as much as the men's movements. A bit later, when the young woman goes into the desert to look for her husband's grave, the wind stirs up the sand, which mixes with her hair as it hits her coat, making her every bit as vulnerable as this floating visual substance. Surprisingly perhaps, for someone who is primarily a documentary filmmaker, we glimpse in scenes such as this the director's fascination for that which is invisible or fleeting. Finally, the length of his films, the rigor of his frames, and this manipulation of substances highlight the transience and vulnerability of things. All of these dark frames, the characters who disappear into the desert with their backs to us (or into the night in *Fengming* and '*Til Madness do us Part*') confer on Wang Bing's cinema a spectral quality. This manipulation of the real, of history and of memory imbues the visual substance with a kind of invisible lining which constantly suggests the fragility and uncertainty of the real. Yet this is not some form of visual romanticism. These floating



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substances simply live their immaterial lives in the image. Wang Bing asserts the power of the almost physical presence of these shapeless textures and transforms them into figures of thought. Their existence and their autonomy in the image capture the viewer's gaze, but also challenge it, gesturing to what cannot be signified in representation, but which the image nonetheless renders present.

In *The Man with No Name* (2009), physical reality takes precedence over the narration. In this film with no storyline, Wang Bing depicts the life of an unknown man at the outer limits of survival. It was by chance that the filmmaker met this man who does not speak and has no formal identity. The film opens with an establishing shot of a dilapidated house amidst a landscape of snow-covered ruins. The shot lasts for approximately thirty silent seconds, establishing the timeless, desolate setting of the film. The following scene presents us with a high-angle view of a man, climbing out of a hole dug in the ground. The entrance to his cave-like dwelling is protected by sheets and bags made of fabric and plastic. With some difficulty, the man clammers out and hoists himself to his knees, coughing. He is smoking, and wearing a fur hat. In the third scene we see him walking away down a series of tiny pathways worn into the grass. The camera follows him. He has a bag tucked under his arm. The camera films him disappearing into the distance. We observe this character for a long time, without fully grasping the significance of the various scenes. He carries out a number of what seem to us to be unidentified tasks, and it takes nearly forty-five minutes (half the running time) for us to understand that, as Georges Didi-Huberman explains in the text he devoted to this film, '*The Man with No Name*, tells the story of a man who is working, slowly, efficiently and in solitude, to create the conditions for his own survival'.²¹

In the fifteenth minute of the film, the man with no name is kneeling at the side of a road. Snow is falling. Using a thick piece of thread, he is busy stitching or mending the large white bag in which he carries earth or horse dung; he appears slightly left of center in the frame. Behind him, a fence made of large branches stands between a group of houses and the road. The grass at the edges of the road is yellow, dry and frozen. A few plastic bags are strewn across the ground, stuck to the grass. The hand-held camera re-centers the man slightly. A wobble of the camera draws momentary attention to the cameraman's presence. The lines formed by the road and fence, framed with a sideways tilt, create a diagonal line through the image. With the snow falling steadily, the man continues his stitching, as if he were ensconced at home. Off-screen sounds suggest the presence of barnyard animals and a bicycle approaching. We then see the cyclist cross the frame from left to right behind the character. She is wearing red gloves. This is the only other character in the film. The route taken by the bicycle emphasizes the composition of the frame and reinforces the diagonal line. It generates a moment of cinematographic tension between the man, who remains still despite

21 Didi-Huberman, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, op. cit., p. 241. All translations of this work are my own.





The Ditch

the cold, and the movement occurring behind him. Imperturbable, the man carries on with his task. The gentle sound of the falling snow heightens our sense of silence and the timeless tranquility of the character's activity. The shot is less than a minute long. The dry grass, the frozen road, the fence, the flat roof tiles of the house and the erratic curtain formed by the falling snow blur the boundaries between the steady and the fleeting, the firm and the supple, between solid and dotted lines and fuse into an almost pictorial composition, which is undermined by the instability of the hand-held camera. The attentive gaze of the person filming, probably crouching to align his frame with the filmed subject, mirrors the meticulous motions of the character, concentrating on sewing and knotting his bag with a piece of cord.

Produced by an art gallery, this film was exhibited as part of a video installation, rather than screened in cinemas (this is also the case for *Crude Oil*, which runs for fourteen hours, but *The Man with No Name* has the running time of a classic feature film: 97 minutes). Indeed, this film lends itself well to exhibition. Its focus on the description of actions is well-suited to the comings and goings of non-seated viewers. However, when viewed in short chunks its narrative impact is not the same as when it is viewed continuously.

This film draws attention to the circumstances under which it was filmed, making one wonder about the nature of the arrangement made between the filmmaker and his filmed subject. Interviews with the filmmaker and his producer teach us two things. First, the film was shot over several seasons after a kind of tacit understanding was reached with the character, who agreed to tolerate the director's presence. There was no communication between them, other than agreeing on the principle of spending



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The Man with No Name (2009)

time alongside one another, each man concentrating on his task at hand. The man with no name engaged in his own activities, and the filmmaker focused on his camera. Essentially, each person did what he could with what he had. This question of the relationship between the person filming and the filmed subject is also raised by the film *Three Sisters* in which Wang Bing films three children left to their own devices in a mountain village. In relation to this film, he explains that he did help the children, but admits that his presence probably did impact their living conditions, even though the film does not show this explicitly:

As a human being, I was sensitive to their material poverty, but I tried to avoid focusing on the misery of their situation, or arousing a sense of pity for them. Everyone has his or her own problems in life, and in today's society, it is very difficult to help others. I did come to their aid, but this kind of help has its limits. Every time we returned to the film site, we brought 50 50-kilo bags of rice because the people of these mountains didn't have any, as well as oil and clothing. We couldn't choose only to help this family; we had to give to the entire village. Still, our help wasn't life-changing for them. It's a delicate situation because even though we were helping them, we couldn't really do much. As a director, my job is primarily to make films and to expose this reality to the public. [...] I agree with you that I did change reality a bit. They eat their fill every day, and it's the rice that I brought them. But for me, the idea of a fictional film doesn't really exist. As a guest in their home, bringing them rice felt natural.²²

The living conditions of the man with no name, however, were not altered by the filming. From the interviews we in fact learn that the initial goal was not for this film to be

²² Interview with Wang Bing at the screening of *Alone* at the Festival des Trois Continents, Nantes, 2012, in *Revue électronique des cinémas d'Asie et d'ailleurs*: <http://www.sancho-asia.com/articles/wang-bing> (accessed 20 November 2013). My translation.





projected for viewers. It was intended for the compilation of a repertoire documenting different actions and movements. The filming of *The Man with No Name* took place during the preparation and filming of *The Ditch*. Wang Bing was not only searching for historical documents on reeducation camps, and individual testimony, he was also seeking out visual documents which might contribute to his *mise-en-scène*. The link between the two archival photographs that were brought to his attention and the visual composition of the film's beginning is clearly visible in the parallels that can be drawn between the images.²³ But it was difficult for Wang Bing to find examples to serve as inspiration for his actors. The encounter with this man in fact allowed him to discover certain gestures, attitudes and behavior which corresponded to the situations of characters in his film. The shots of him were therefore initially projected for the actors of *The Ditch* so that they might soak up his image before playing their roles as prisoners.

For those discovering *The Man with No Name* out of context and with no prior explanation, the film comes as a shock for aesthetic, human and historical reasons. Georges Didi-Huberman stresses the fact that this film is devoted to an exercise in historical materialism from the point of view of the common people and the downtrodden, so as to 'render visible, so as to expose their disempowerment itself and the power they nonetheless possess silently to transform the world'.²⁴ Didi-Huberman's article appeared in 2011. *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* was released in France in 2012. In this film, He Fengming describes in particular the field labor and land leveling work those accused of being rightists were forced to do. Now during her story, the images called to mind are the silent movements of *The Man with No Name*, which was released prior to *Fengming*. Suddenly this man's actions take on new significance. The film comes to replace the absent images of He Fengming's story, and we cannot help but wonder whether this man is a former rightist who was never rehabilitated. Perhaps his time at the labor camp trapped him in this obsessive task, or perhaps he has internalized the punishment that may have been his as the purpose of his existence. Or could this man have been a former guard, who stayed on at the deserted camp? More than fifty years after these events, these questions appear somewhat anachronistic. However, all of these possible readings are left hanging in our minds. Whether taken within its present context as a contemporary art installation, or viewed as a documentary about a marginal figure of contemporary China, the film might be seen to fulfill Aby Warburg's definition of the concept of survival or afterlife in art (*Nachleben*). Because of its contents, texture and camera movements, the film constructs a kind of crossroads of thought images, which then refers us to a 'constellation' of historical moments, or a 'constellation of tensions' to use Walter Benjamin's expression. It has the capacity to make us forget

23 See in this volume Wang Bing, 'On representation of the camps, the image as confirmation of reality'.

24 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.





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both the chronology of history and the destitute state of this man. When linked with *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* and *The Ditch*, *The Man with No Name* offers us the unique experience of an encounter with the past, thus allowing the viewer to see the present reality of this character force its way into the past of Chinese history. The film as a whole could therefore be considered as a dialectical image, that is, an image in which the here and now becomes marked by the past. Walter Benjamin defines it as an image made of opposites which give rise to a historical object and derives from a pause in the course of history:

Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. [...] The latter is identical with the historical object; it justifies its violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process.²⁵

The sense of bafflement provoked by *The Man with No Name* derives partly from the atemporal dimension of what the film depicts. Apart from the plastic bags used by the protagonist, the passing cyclist and the distant sounds of a vehicle engine from an off-screen road, the film offers no temporal markers. It brings us back to the archaic dimension of existence. The human being is reduced to a body to be nourished and kept at a certain temperature. The organization of chaos has to be constantly reinvented, no matter what era we live in, or what socio-economic regime defines our day-to-day lives. The course of time is thrown into turmoil by this film which throws an anachronistic glitch in the history of cinema. It imbues the present with a strange flavor, which incorporates the bitterness of the past. The contents of history are partially renewed by the motions of this man.

Siegfried Kracauer contemplated the possibility of the redemption of the historical real through cinema.²⁶ For him, this art has the capacity to grasp the flow of historical time. Because it can record time as it passes and reconstruct events through montage, it has the gift of being able to renew the contents of memory. Following the example of Proustian thought, cinema can render an image of time, a moment of pure time, rather than a sequence of mummified instants. Film thus has the capacity to rescue the past from the indifference and forgetfulness that threaten it. As we saw above, this quest for redemption is a part of Wang Bing's cinematic approach. However, despite this intention and the possibility of the dialectical image apparent in his work, time and duration also serve here as cinematographic devices for the expression of our condition of 'Being-toward-death' in the Heideggerian sense. While cinema can allow a convergence of different eras, the consciousness of human mortality still remains the ultimate orientation point. But the project of redemption is in no way contradicted

25 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 475.

26 Siegfried Kracauer, *Film Theory, The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).





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by this reality fact. It simply serves to remind us of our position as living beings in within the dialectical movement which cinema allows us to experience. We ultimately find ourselves in an ambiguous filmic position, one which addresses the past from within the present, while maintaining intact a filmic horizon of finitude. This view is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. Wang Bing goes beyond this binary conception of things by establishing a filmic relationship that challenges us to see things as they necessarily are.

