

**The Oxidation of the Documentary, The Politics of Rust in Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks***

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Theorists, scholars and critics have unanimously celebrated Wang Bing's first film *Tie Xi Qu* (*West of the Tracks*, 2003) as an exemplary film of the new millennium. According to Lu XinYu, the film is 'without question the greatest work to have come out of the Chinese documentary movement, and must be ranked among the most extraordinary achievements of world cinema in the new century'.<sup>1</sup> The film is considered an exemplary case of what has been functionally called post-socialist cinema. The subject matter of the film, the decline of the industrial district of Tie Xi in the Manchurian city of Shenyang, illustrates the main preoccupation of this cinema: the destruction of the social fabric in the post-Tiananmen period, years known in China as 'the era of *zhuanxing*' ('transformation'). The literature on the subject has pointed out that the common motif of post-socialist cinema is urban and industrial demolition. The main characters in both documentary and fiction films are 'the bulldozer, the building crane and the debris of urban ruins as carrying a poignant social indexicality'.<sup>2</sup> The erasure of socialist or traditional modes of life in the context

of the accelerated turn towards a market economy constitutes the common concern of post-socialist films.

More specifically, *West of the Tracks*, together with films such as *Last Train Home* (Lixin Fan, 2009) or *24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2008), belong to a group of films visualizing the precarization of the workers' status in China. As Maurice Meissner has emphasized, the Chinese authorities have particularly repressed the visibility of 'the labour question'.<sup>3</sup> The new independent Chinese cinema has developed, in this context, an exceptional critical visualization of labour struggles. Post-socialist cinema makes visible the scale of this conflict: the precarization of the world's largest industrial proletariat is producing 'the world's largest and most rapidly growing army of unemployed'.<sup>4</sup> 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', that is, the combination of State control and capitalist economic policies, has fundamentally guaranteed the supply to the industry of a vast number of unprotected, disciplined and low-paid workers. Slavoj Žižek can thus define contemporary China as 'the ideal capitalist state: freedom for the capital, with the state doing the dirty job of controlling the workers'.<sup>5</sup>

The literature on *West of the Tracks* understands that the film is exceptional in its ability to depict the size of the social catastrophe the worldwide regime of the profit proliferates. For Lu XinYu, the film depicts 'the ruin of industrial civilisation' and 'the dusk of an entire social world, together with all the hopes and ideals that created it'.<sup>6</sup> For Chris Berry, it communicates 'the ruination of socialist modernity' and can therefore be regarded as 'an act of mourning'.<sup>7</sup> For Andrew Ross, it records 'the death throes of a socialist mode of production where labour was coextensive with all other aspects of human welfare', 'the

extinction of a mass industrial personality for whom labour was a livelihood in the fullest sense of the term'.<sup>8</sup>

Dusk, death, extinction: the literature spares no earth-shattering epithet to interpret *West of the Tracks* as an exemplary representation of the end of the socialist industrial system. The grand scale of the factories committed to film by Wang Bing can only prove the reality of the catastrophe in all its magnitude. As though the dimensions of Tie Xi lent the appropriate operatic background, all the better to sing, once more, the funeral song confirming the end of socialism. In this essay, I move away from this obituary-like interpretation of *West of the Tracks*. In my view the insistence on a thematic of extinction, apart from leaving aside the complexities of the Chinese industrial history, makes the audiovisual politics of the film difficult to see and hear. This problematic interpretation can be extended to the reception of the rest of Wang's growing filmography.<sup>9</sup> I am concerned here with the singularity of Wang's documentary practice, a singularity that in its subtlety and determination elicits an active interrogation of dominant interpretations of the images of the world.

The literature on *West of the Tracks* has been sensitive to the tragic dimension of the events Wang Big records. However it has left untouched, by omission, the historical viewpoint that has accepted the inevitability of this tragic end. From this dominant viewpoint – what Jacques Derrida referred to as 'the new Gospel'<sup>10</sup> – a film like *West of the Tracks* has value only as a telling representation of the inevitable, the proof of a disappearance taken to be incontrovertible, that of the socialist world. But it is not social ruins that play the leading role in *West of the Tracks*, but the pervasive phenomenon of oxidation. What the film lays bare is rust, that is to say, a permanent anticipation of the

ruin. And this, above all, with a view to showing its fundamentally intrusive power: rust in the factory walls, in the machinery, in the train tracks, in the households. Moreover, rust is not a simple motif but it impregnates every take of the film. To understand *West of the Tracks* as a process of oxidation, the film itself as a site-in-change, gives rise to questions concerning the capacities of the documentary image, capacities that always cast the image within a political sphere: what in the film contravenes the prevailing Gospel about the extinction of socialism? How can the film be seen to introduce a note of ambiguity? How can Wang's documentary practice be seen to oxidize consensual representations?

The China of the *zhuanxing* era has become a privileged scene for contemporary film-makers to reiterate a standard sociological purpose of the documentary image, its function as a provider of stability. The social, political and economical transformation of China offers to documentary cinema the opportunity to rehearse, once again, functions such as to document what is about to disappear and to learn about what is about to emerge. The particularly vertiginous pace of the Chinese transformation appears to naturalize all the more these functions and the ends toward which they are driven: to confirm, always again, the end of socialism. Despite the pace of ruination in *Tie Xi*, we can understand that *West of the Tracks* does not simply confirm the logic of preservation and instruction that conventionally binds together documentary image and transformation. On the contrary, the film makes time (nine hours), it finds the time to oxidize a standard definition of the documentary image, thereby disclosing other capacities. This is the singular politics of rust at work in the film: a politics that makes the documentary not simply a site of change,

an instrument for the documentation of change (decline, extinction, dusk), but a site-in-change oxidizing the solidity of the social ideal of good representation. Wang is concerned in *West of the Tracks* with decay and how to document it, but also with the capacities of the moving image to oxidize itself in order to disclose a second life or possibility for the relation between social realities and documentary images. In my view, the singularity of Wang's inventive documentary practice lies in this politics of rust, a politics generating with each film audiovisual fields of possibility that call into question hasty equations between what we see (in this case, the degradation of Tie Xi) and what we are given to understand (the end of socialism).

### *Observationalism*

In order to understand *West of the Tracks* as a process of oxidation it is necessary to analyse the way in which the film develops and radicalizes its observational mode of representation. Observationalism, one of the dominant forms of documentary cinema, is a form that is not immune to the tensions troubling the documentary with regard to realities-in-change. The observational has been at the centre of numerous polemics between its advocates and those who consider it a naive approach, if not an inadequate form for the methodological, epistemological and aesthetic ambitions of documentary cinema. For Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, the discussion around the observational has both 'conflated and reduced the meaning of observation to a narrow ocular strategy with a tall order of negative features: voyeurism, objectification, surveillance, assumed transparency, concealed ideology, lack of reflexivity, quasi-scientific objectivity'.<sup>11</sup> Grimshaw and Ravetz defend the observational not as a mode of vision predicated on distance and mastery but, in

more humble terms, as a skilled practice allowing observers to encounter the world ‘actively, passionately, concretely – while at the same time, relinquishing the desire to control, circumscribe or appropriate it’.<sup>12</sup> This understanding is useful to account for Wang Bing's sensibility with regard to the industrial complex of Tie Xi and its inhabitants.

Observational forms cede ‘control over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode [of documentary representation]’.<sup>13</sup> This ‘ceding control’ entails that the observer avoids speaking for or on behalf of the observed. The critics of the observational have often disdained this stance avoiding a directly interventionist approach as a false guarantee of impartiality or as the result of a naive understanding that sees the world as real insofar as it is untouched by any external agency. Grimshaw and Ravetz have taken issue with this simplification and affirmed instead the observational as a field of negotiation between the observer and the observed. Observational film-makers are to develop a skilled practice ‘to insert themselves into the world, relinquishing their privileged perspective in favour of an openness to being shaped by particular situations and relationships they encounter’.<sup>14</sup> In my own view, observational film-makers are engaged in a practice of becoming witnesses: they are not simply actors in a situation, nor mere external observers. As witnesses, with all the ambiguity that this figure implies, they are to negotiate their position within the observed (via their silence, their bodily presence, the camera's presence). The articulation of separation and participation in observational documentaries, following different politics, troubles any simple equation of observation with detachment, neutrality, false modesty.

The observationalism of *West of the Tracks*, and other contemporary Chinese films, has not been exempt from interpretations understanding it as a transparent language that lets the reality of social change speak for itself. It has indeed been interpreted as a sort of non-authoritative, free form in the context of China's particular audio-visual regime. *West of the Tracks* is considered an exemplary case of the Chinese New Documentary Movement, an ensemble of post-1989 documentary practices sharing common characteristics: production independent from the State, focus on contemporary China instead of on historical events, local specificity, unscripted spontaneity, and use of lightweight technology. In China, the observational style of these documentaries has been called 'on-the-spot realism' (*jishi zhuyi*). The unscripted quality of these documentaries, their use of a handheld camera, of natural light and their focus on social issues constitute a form of novelty in the context of Chinese audiovisual culture. These documentaries have broken with the form of illustrated lectures that has historically dominated Chinese documentary cinema and are defying the State-controlled documentary production wherein social themes are marginalised by official media. 'On-the-spot realism' is, according to its interpreters, a 'free-flowing style' working 'against the old, rigid aspects of Maoist utopianism and established political ideologies in China'.<sup>15</sup>

But if the Chinese New Documentary Movement is interested in observational representation, it is not because these film-makers have a naive faith in an ideal of pure observation or in the liberation of documentary forms. It is because of the singular capacities of observational documentary forms to intervene in the social world. As Hartmut Bitomsky has pointed out, observational cinema does not simply respect the peaceful flow of reality, but resembles a military strategy

engaged in the combat of truth. That is to say, the conventions of observational cinema 'stem directly from the logistics of the war documentary'.<sup>16</sup> Portable cameras, film sensitive to natural light and a minimal recording unit reduce the technical burden of the filming process and maximize its capacities to follow and record the always unpredictable course of action. The observational camera intervenes in a manner analogous to a military surveillance operation: it is mobile, more or less undetectable, and yet ever-present. Observational film-makers are not disinterested observers; rather, they act like silent soldiers in the trenches. These military qualities allow the observational camera to remain at a safe distance, but also guarantee the constant and penetrating presence of the film-maker in the battlefield of reality. The observational form thereby lends to the film-makers' practice both a silent non-interventionism and a relentless presence.

The observational language of *West of the Tracks* develops in a singular way this double capacity: for all its discreet non-interventionism, it nevertheless at no point seeks to disguise the signs of the film-maker's bodily presence within the setting being filmed. Georges Didi-Huberman has suggested Wang's filming approach gives voice to a 'humble' form of discourse.<sup>17</sup> Armed with a rented mini-DV camera that he holds against his chest, Wang is able to capture, exhaustively, every detail in these factories: the different shades of red in the rusting walls, the various densities of steam coming out of the machinery or of the workers' baths, the vast array of noises, movements and conversations resounding throughout the immense industrial complex. He films all of the workers' everyday life; we not only see them working, but eating, discussing, drinking, taking a shower, waiting. More, the images of *West of the Tracks*

constantly make visible and audible a discreet but ever-present body, that of Wang himself. We occasionally see his shadow, hear his footsteps. More occasionally still, a worker talks to Wang who, from behind the camera, mumbles a minimal response. But, furthermore, Wang films with the mini-camera against his chest, recording with exactitude all of his bodily movements. His body operates as the support structure of the film. The images become an index of his presence in the Tie Xi factories; they make visible his absence from the frame. In this way, this film is also a first person documentary.

These *physical images* make clear that the problem observational cinema inhabits is not so much the question of a pure observation before any intervention, but rather a question of corporeal vision. The understanding of vision as a bodily experience has historically raised questions about the reliability of observation as a mode of knowing. Epistemological uncertainty makes observation operational as a site of contestation. Observational cinema can be understood as a cinematic site where it is possible for a subject (the film-maker, the spectator) to articulate other relations between vision, body and knowledge; a site where a politics of vision, dominant or emancipatory, is at stake. These are the stakes that concern me in the following pages, first with regard to the position of the film-maker within the filmed events, and secondly with regard to the capacities of these images to oxidize the production of the factories of Tie Xi as knowable objects.

### *Mute Witness*

There is a figure that acts the incarnation of this epistemological uncertainty across the history of Western culture: that of the witness. The witness does not

simply remain exterior to the event but is ‘a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it’.<sup>18</sup> The implication of the witness within the event makes his or her word both credible and partial. The witness incarnates the problematic relation between the authority of the lived experience and the credibility of its expression. It is necessary to discuss this figure to fully appreciate observation as an active form of witnessing. The corporeal camera work in *West of the Tracks*, despite – and perhaps even because of – its humility, oxidizes the safe patina of the film-maker as observer and makes visible the film-maker as witness. Between observer and witness, observational film-makers oscillate between the inside and the outside of the event. Between participation and non-intervention they can claim to occupy an objective and subjective position simultaneously. This is the field of possibility wherein observational forms can operate. To think of observational cinema in relation to the act of witnessing is to think about documentary cinema at large as a site within which these relations do not have a definitive protocol, where they can be re-articulated and re-interpreted in different ways.

In *West of the Tracks*, Wang is not any witness; his position can be determined as at once ubiquitous and mute. The observational film-maker, the film-maker who refuses to speak in the name of the filmed event, wields the strange powers of the silent eyewitness, the one who stolidly *observes silence* in relation to a lived-and-filmed experience. But how are we to listen to the silence of the mute witness? Silence encourages belief in the observational as a representational mode that does not seek to deceive with words, that does not divert the spectator's attention from the *silent voice* of the visible. The logic of this silent

voice is particularly powerful because it operates by deciphering (assigning) an immanent sense in the mute body of the witness. It is a sense the witness embodies more than argues, lives more than knows. To follow this logic is to understand that the observational mode creates a scene of visibility where the mute witness is the living proof that certifies in his or her flesh the obviousness of a unique sense. As Jacques Rancière has pointed out, to assign an immanent sense to the mute witness most often reproduces dominant interpretations of what there is to see in the observable world.<sup>19</sup> To make the mute witness speak, to make sense of their murmuring silence, can only follow and confirm a pre-determined interpretative schema.

This interpretation of the mute witness operates implicitly in most of the literature dedicated to *West of the Tracks*. This literature praises Wang's silent, disciplined, intense immersion for its capacity to access the reality of the Tie Xi factories. For example, the camera of *West of the Tracks* registers the long duration of this immersion (Wang stayed intermittently two years in Tie Xi). Season after season, the images tell us that Wang is present and mute. The camera registers how Wang's body has endured, like the workers he films, the cold temperatures of the Manchurian winter, the long waiting hours with nothing to do, the desolate immensity of the industrial complex. He has endured and yet he, a discreet hero, does not accede to speech. But his difficult breathing, his different step rhythms, the hesitating camera movements *speaks more truly than words* of a body that *suffers*. The Latin form of 'to suffer', *sufferire*, denotes not simply the experience of something unpleasant but more generally 'to support', 'to carry', 'to bear'. Wang is an eyewitness who does not simply observe but *suffers* the hardships of life in Tie Xi. His silence does not

lie but carries the infinite non-verbal signs of a real *suffering*. The corporeal camera work of *West of the Tracks* is credible because it makes visible a silent body, Wang's, which has paid in its flesh for the right to be believed. But what are we to believe? What sense is there in the silent in-visibility of Wang Bing's breathing presence? For the literature on *West of the Tracks*, the corporeal camera work and absence of commentary are transparent forms that reveal, ideally (without words), what we already know. *West of the Tracks* is an elegy to the working class, a film that verifies the ruinous state of socialism. To represent this disappearance, Wang Bing appropriately remains mute and present. Wang is neither a distant observer, nor a manipulative interventionist. The critical literature can therefore claim for the film another efficacy: the audiovisual inscription of Wang's bodily endurance *suffers, bearing* the truth of the tragic end of socialism.

But the witnessing operation at work in *West of the Tracks* can be interpreted from very different grounds. Without glorifying muteness, without filling it up with a predetermined interpretation, the visualization of the film-maker's silent suffering does not simply confirm the agony of the socialist factory. Very differently, and perhaps more simply, the silent presence of the observational film-maker makes visible and audible an endless operation of approximation to the site of the factory. Wang's muteness is not an absolute silence. Apart from the film itself, as we have seen, the images continuously murmur an interminable, hesitant, yet alert presence. These impurities (breathings, echoes, the sound of steps in the snow), this quasi-silence or rusted silence, speak of the infinity of the task Wang is engaged in – the filming of Tie Xi. The images of *West of the Tracks* vibrate with every movement and register every sound of the

film-maker's body, verifying the ghostly presence of a witness who precariously but determinedly meanders around Tie Xi. More than an act of revelation, the film is a *physical exercise* of approach, never complete, to the factories. The murmuring body of the mute film-maker shows us that 'to bear witness is to tell *in spite of all* that which it is *impossible* to tell entirely'.<sup>20</sup>

The film is literally an exercise. Wang started to film Tie Xi because he wanted to practice with his rented camera. He filmed three hundred hours. This amount of footage indicates the ambiguity of the filming experience. It is an exhaustive effort to document every corner of this vast, rusting industrial complex before it disappears. The formidable duration of the filming, and of the film itself, the time it takes in each take, express exhaustion, or rather an oxidation. Wang films *everything* of Tie Xi but this *everything* (the factories) appears always too vast, too endless and too distant to be apprehended.

The sequences in which he follows the workers around the industrial labyrinth best exemplify the ambiguity of this observational experience. Wang is repeatedly behind the workers, filming their backs, following them wherever they take him. He carries out the shadowing of the workers with the patience of a hunter. But to tenaciously follow the workers does not guarantee an appropriate observing method for capturing a significant moment. To follow someone else's footsteps is also a way of being absent in the trace of the other. The long tracking sequences of *West of the Tracks* oxidize the standard function of recording the ephemeral. They make visible the endless and obstinate approach to a site and its inhabitants of a witness who is never completely present nor absent, who refuses to anticipate but humbly immerses himself in the rhythms of the factory, in its invitations and interruptions.

The more Wang follows the workers, the longer the takes last, and the more he endures, then the more the unfinished nature of his approach to the factory becomes apparent. There belongs to these sequences a disruptive duration that continuously oxidizes a sociological purpose of observation. This relentless oxidation does not necessarily mean that the representation of Tie Xi, the bearing witness to its decline, is impossible. Rather, it affirms a capacity of observational cinema irreducible to that of representation, a capacity to intervene in different ways in the visualization and interpretation of the site in question in an entirely other form. *West of the Tracks* constructs the partial, strange, contested image of a rusting factory. The factory is not represented as an original site, a pure ruin that an observer must penetrate and decipher, but as an already stratified, already complex configuration that a witness (the filmmaker, the spectator) can ceaselessly approach.

#### *Knowing/Unknowing the Factory*

Wang has described very precisely his encounter with the industrial complex of Tie Xi as a difficult experience that both stimulated and challenged his film work. The description Wang Bing gives of what attracted him to the industrial complex of Tie Xi in Shenyang, the principal setting of *West of the Tracks*, is evocative of this discontent:

When I was a student, my university was next to Tie Xi Qu. My personal relation with this site has always been of a nostalgic nature. I did not know the place very well; I often visited it, to see, to have a walk. I do not know why I started to take photographs of it. There were all these gigantic factories, all

these workers. It was immense and empty. There, one felt lost. One did not know what to do. It was a very cold place.<sup>21</sup>

That the factory leaves Wang *not knowing what to do* is not immobilising, but rather speaks of the generative processes of this encounter. Wang engages with the factory as a site-in-transformation that puts cinema's protocols of efficacy to the test. The encounter with the factory articulated by the film provides an occasion to experiment with the powers of the camera. The process of making *West of the Tracks* requires thinking the knowledge relations and affective transactions between film-maker, spectators and filmed world from the affirmative grounds of this *not knowing*.

The political significance of *West of the Tracks* does not simply lie in the representation of the workers left behind by the transformations of the Chinese socio-economic landscape, but rather in the oxidation (which is something other than a simple break) of this social function and its associated epistemic positions, as they pertain to the film-maker, the spectator and the social actors. Wang Bing understands his role in standard sociological terms; he does not shy away from the roles of recorder and voice-giver. He affirms that his initial intention in *West of the Tracks* was to film 'the typical Chinese of the low social level' in order to show how 'they carry themselves with dignity in whatever situation'.<sup>22</sup> The film makes visible, in the social tradition of documentary cinema, how the other half lives. At the same time, *West of the Tracks* is a film that makes visible the strange ambiguities of sociological observation. Wang Bing affirms that when he started to film he did not have any rational filmmaking strategy. More or less unintentionally, there is in the film a

representational process that constantly corrodes the perimeters of sociological purpose, leaving the observational form porous to a non-sociological interpretation of its capacities. At stake here is a documentary cinema that broaches its particular context of social transformation by dismantling the very protocols by which such a context would ordinarily be addressed. It is in this sense that I speak of this process as one of oxidation.

The rust at work in *West of the Tracks* challenges the characterization of the observational as the mode that facilitates, with no trouble, the identification of the spectators with the social actors and/or the camera's gaze. The formal features of the observational documentary operate in the film not so much as smooth strategies for empathy but as rusty means diverting and distracting identification. This is the case with the long take, the filming technique privileged by observational documentaries and Wang. The long take is most often considered the appropriate means to represent lived reality, by minimizing intervention (montage). Following this understanding of the long take as a guarantee of temporal verisimilitude various film-makers have rejected it. But can the latter be otherwise? Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others, understands that the long take does not make the representation of life clearer, more credible, recognisable for the spectators but, on the contrary, 'infinite, unstable, uncertain, indescribable'.<sup>23</sup> The long take enables 'a certain kind of intelligibility that is different from an answer'; it resists 'constructing a singular meaning to what is before the camera; instead the long take is expansive'.<sup>24</sup> The long take transfers to the screen *the continuum of reality* in all its discontinuous ambiguity.

The long takes of *West of the Tracks* are *long* long takes. They are complex entities that, through their length, expose the spectators to the exuberance of rust covering the factories-in-conflict of Tie Xi. In them, repeated interruptions, abrupt changes and competing centres of attention make it difficult to stabilize and isolate the sense of the filming and filmed actions. The rust of the camera's gaze makes it difficult for the spectators to focus on and simply identify with the place of address or with the social actors. The workers appear in these *long* long takes not so much as social actors but as nameless ghosts wandering around the space in question. The workers are ghostly figures who nevertheless speak and periodically argue their case; we hear and overhear discourses and sentences such as: 'next thing you know, the Chinese Communist Party will be renaming itself the Republican Party'; 'what kind of society is this anyway?'; 'survival of the fittest' and so on. And yet, save for the episode focused on the life of Old Du, a man who lives at the margins of the industrial complex, Wang avoids any individualized intimate portrait of the workers. As Wang has declared: 'My film is not about off-post workers at all, and if somebody thinks it is about off-post workers I'd say he [*sic*] probably did not get to understand my film.'<sup>25</sup> Instead, he admits: 'The factory is my protagonist.'<sup>26</sup> *West of the Tracks* organizes a politics of rust that is not merely directed towards a sociological recognition and empathetic denunciation of the workers' situation in contemporary China. The stretching of time in the film is the result of an exhaustive observation that does not make the industrial space and its inhabitants more and more knowable, but more and more suspenseful. Duration continuously oxidizes in this film sociological intentions, it continuously delays the expected representation of the factory in ruins. The oxidation at work in this

observational approach makes the combination and variability of different processes of identification and dis-identification possible. It is in this manner that the film oxidizes any simple understanding of temporal realism and makes these factories visible and audible for the spectators as a site-in-conflict.

The representational rust of *West of the Tracks* emphasizes the strangeness of the Tie Xi factories and the unstable position of the film-maker in his endless documentation of this site. The rust of the camera's gaze makes it difficult to determine a pleasurable position of mastery for the spectator to settle into, for a proper reproduction of knowledge to happen. And yet, whilst this is the case, the camera's advance does not simply condemn the spectator to an encounter with the impossibility of knowledge and sense making. The oxidation at work across the film calls for an interpretation of the affective learning transactions between film-maker, spectator and factory irreducible to either the *pleasurable* affect of mastery or the *resigned* affect of fatalism in the face of an apparent impossibility (the impossibility of knowing the factory). *West of the Tracks* relentlessly maps an industrial site that becomes increasingly unfamiliar. It is the paradox that lends the film all its force as an affective learning experience.

The determined camera work, the *suffering* of the film-maker, the *long long* takes speak of an endless approach to the socialist factory. The film is a resolute exercise of approach, not a revelation or a demonstration of the factory's death. Its observational sensibility radicalizes the film into oxidizing the factory and the workers as objects of knowledge, and the film-maker and spectators as subjects of knowledge. The known factory (the one that has disappeared with the end of socialism) appears under a different light in these long nine hours of cinema. There is neither a confirmation nor a simple break with the pre-

determined industrial narrative already familiar to the spectator. More than conquering or mourning a (fake) position of mastery, the politics of rust at work in the film allow the spectators to weave into the fabric of what they know endless images and incomplete sounds. These images and sounds disclose the factory as a workers' site with which to oxidize the production of thinkable objects (the factory, the workers), with which to oxidize the practice of thinking as a mode of production. These images and sounds are exceptional not because they are poignant representations of the disappearance of a (socialist) mode of being, but rather because they generate an audiovisual experience with which to de-industrialise our thought away from consensual interpretations of the present.

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Xin-Yu, 'Ruins of the Future', *New Left Review*, N 31, London, 2005, p 126

<sup>2</sup> Zhang, Zhen, 'Bearing Witness, Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of Transformation', in Zhen Zhang, ed, *The Urban Generation, Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, p 3

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Meissner, *Mao's China and After, a History of the People's Republic*, Free Press, New York, 1999, p 543

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p 533

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction' in Tse-Tung, Mao, *On Practice and Contradiction*, Verso, London, 2007, p 18

<sup>6</sup> Lu Xin-Yu, 'Ruins of the Future', op cit pp 125-136

<sup>7</sup> Berry, Chris, 'Leaving the Factory: Thoughts on *West of the Tracks*' in Sandhu, Sukhdev (ed.), *Leaving the Factory: Wang Bing's Tie Xi Qu*, Texte und Töne, New York NY, 2009, p 20

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Ross, 'The Filming of Desindustrialisation'. Ibid p 43

<sup>9</sup> See in particular *He Fengming* (2007), *A Journal of Crude Oil* (2008), *Man with No Name* (2010), *Three Sisters* (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p 70

<sup>11</sup> Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009, p 115

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p 5

<sup>13</sup> Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991, p 38

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- <sup>14</sup> Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, op cit p X
- <sup>15</sup> Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, eds, *The New Chinese Documentary*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2010, p 15
- <sup>16</sup> Hartmut Bitomsky, 'Cinéma, Vidéo et Histoire' in *Face à l'Histoire 1933-1996, L'Artiste Moderne devant l'Événement Historique*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1996, p 49
- <sup>17</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p 252
- <sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p 17
- <sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis, 1994, p 57
- <sup>20</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, pp 104-105
- <sup>21</sup> Dominique Païni, 'La Traversée de la Chine, un entretien avec Wang Bing', in Wang Bing, *West of the Tracks*, MK2 Editions, Paris, 2004
- <sup>22</sup> Wang Bing quoted by Ji Lie, 'Wang Bing's West of the Tracks, Salvaging the Rubble of Utopia', *Jump Cut - A Review of Contemporary Media*, N 50, Spring 2008
- <sup>23</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Observations of the Long Take', *October*, Vol 13, 1980, p 5
- <sup>24</sup> Kissel, Laura, 'The Terrain of the Long Take', *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol 7, 2008, p 351
- <sup>25</sup> Wang Bing quoted by Lu Xinyu, 'West of the Tracks and the New Documentary Movement in Contemporary China', in Sandhu, Sukhev, op cit, p 3
- <sup>26</sup> Wang Bing quoted by Lu Xinyu, 'West of the Tracks: History and Class-Consciousness' in Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel, op cit, p 60