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RUINS OF THE FUTURE

Class and History in Wang Bing's Tiexi District

IN THE LONG opening shot of *West of the Tracks*, the camera stares from the cabin of a small goods train moving slowly through snow-muffled, abandoned factories. A few ghostly figures flit under a gloomy sky. The only sound in a silent landscape is the creak of its wheels. These three minutes are like a rite of passage into history. We are entering another world, one that has already been destroyed: a ruin of industrial civilization.

Tiexi—'West of the Tracks'—is a district of Shenyang, the city once known as Mukden. For fifty years it was China's oldest and largest industrial base, a fortress of the socialist planned economy. The origins of the zone go back to the 1930s, when Japan seized Manchuria and constructed a military-industrial complex for its further advance into China. Factories were built in the south of Mukden, producing weaponry for the Kwantung Army and machinery for large-scale military enterprises, and workers' housing grew around them. After Liberation in 1949, the USSR supplied China with additional industrial equipment dismantled from Germany at the end of the war, in what were known as the 156 Investment Projects of Soviet aid, most of which were located in the North-East. Favourably situated close to Russia, and building on the industrial foundations left by Japan, Tiexi became a pioneer example of Soviet-style planning in a region that served as an engine of socialist modernization for the country as a whole. As late as 1980, around a million workers were employed in the plants of Tiexi, and even today the

state owns three-quarters of assets in the province of Liaoning, of which Shenyang is the capital.

In the Reform Era, as China's path of development shifted from a planned to a market economy, Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy concentrated investment first in the Pearl River Delta and then around the Lower Yangzi, with a special focus on Shanghai–Pudong. But while South and Central China were shifting to market mechanisms, the North-East still depended on command planning, with a high proportion of its output of steel and machinery transferred out of the area at low prices to the state, and its enterprises subject to heavy taxes. Not thirty but fifty years of the PRC's planned economy was made to bear the cost of the twenty years of its market economy. By the early 1990s, some of the plants in Tiexi were already starting to decline, and by the end of the decade most of its factories had closed. In 2002, the 16th Congress of the CCP announced that market reforms would rejuvenate the North-East industrial region, transforming it into an area of high-tech, capital-intensive enterprises. But the central government is neither willing nor able to shoulder the investments necessary for such a change, hoping instead that foreign capital will step into the breach. The reality is that Chinese industrial development is heavily dependent on the import of capital goods, which now account for two-thirds of total investment in fixed assets. No ready solution to the plight of the North-East is in sight. The region's oil and coal reserves are seriously depleted. In Liaoning Province alone the jobless number some 2.5 million; labour protests and street demonstrations have multiplied, as mass unemployment becomes an acute social problem.

It was into this scene that Wang Bing, a young film graduate in his early thirties who was a stranger to the area—he had visited Shenyang once in 1993, but knew no-one in the city—arrived in late 1999. He had never made a film before. Wandering around Tiexi in somewhat low spirits, he rented a small DV camera. A year and a half later, he had shot 300 hours of footage about the district. Out of this material he created a monumental trilogy. *West of the Tracks* is a documentary that runs for a total of nine hours, divided into three parts of descending length—4:3:2—whose English-language titles are 'Rust', 'Remnants: Pretty Girl Street' and 'Rails'. It 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.

Its subject is epic—the dusk of an entire social world, together with all the hopes and ideals that created it. The fate of the industrial working class in what is widely believed to be an electronic age is a theme that has inspired films in many countries—France and Britain particularly come to mind—not to speak of the remarkable photography of Sebastião Salgado of Brazil. But no other such work has a power remotely comparable to *West of the Tracks*. Technically, the arrival of digital video, freeing the director for a one-man working style, allowed Wang Bing to complete his film in total independence, without obligation to studios, the state or any other institution. But what raises *West of the Tracks* to the level of great art is the use he has made of this emancipation. A generation younger than the pioneers of the new documentary movement in China, Wang Bing shares their concern with the lower depths of society. But he is consciously an heir of world cinema in a way they could not be. At film school, according to his own account, among the major influences on him were Pasolini, Tarkovsky, Fassbinder, Godard. The formal boldness and self-confidence of *West of the Tracks* comes out of this tradition. Structurally, the trilogy is an awesome composition, a modernist narrative conceived with calm and deliberation on the grandest scale. Visually, it has a painterly imagination and intensity equal to its architectonic ambition. In China it has taken us all by surprise, like a majestic being confronting us out of nowhere.

I. RUST

Inasmuch as industry sets itself 'objectives', it is in the decisive, i.e. historical, dialectical meaning of the word, only the object, not the subject of the natural laws governing society.

Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

Out of the dense maze of plants in Tiexi, with a purpose-built industrial railroad winding through them, Wang Bing picked three to film. The first was the Shenyang Foundry, built by the Japanese under the puppet Manchukuo state in 1934, which remains the most famous factory in Tiexi. The Foundry has three huge chimneys, the first dating from the 1930s, the other two from the 1960s, that were long a virtual icon of the industrial North-East. When Wang Bing started shooting, it was still in normal operation. The second plant he chose was the Electric Cable Factory, also first built by the Japanese and then reconstructed by

the Russians, that produced vital equipment for China's power-supply system. By 1999, 90 per cent of its workers were already off-post—the official euphemism for 'temporary' unemployment on reduced pay—with only middle-level cadres and above still at work. The third factory was the Shenyang Steel Rolling Mill, which, like a number of others in Tiexi awaiting formal approval for bankruptcy, was virtually abandoned, with only a few people remaining on site as guards.

By the time he finished shooting, all three plants had closed. Wang Bing captured the precise moment at which the Shenyang Foundry received its death sentence. He was filming a worker lying on a bench during a break and talking about his experiences, from the time he went to primary school till he was sent to the countryside in the late 1960s. The worker recounts his life story, his relations with society and his view of himself, quite unaware—as was the director—that within minutes his destiny was about to change. Suddenly a supervisor walks in and announces that the factory has been closed. The scene, caught live, made a profound impression on Wang Bing. But though *West of the Tracks* conveys an unforgettable sense of working lives in North-East China, the true protagonist of its first part, in Wang Bing's words, is the factory itself, as industrial reality and social ideal.

Heavy industry in China, as the film shows, was pieced together from various parts of a wider space, from Japan to Russia and Germany; reminding us that Chinese industrialization cannot be separated from Western industrial history, but was an episode in a worldwide process. The furnaces of Shenyang implied the pre-existence, and legitimacy, of the evolutionary atlas of Western industrial civilization—which would also, it might be said, predetermine their fall. For does not today's Tiexi merely repeat the decline of the rustbelt in the American Midwest or of the Ruhr in Germany? The same historical rationality appears to unfold remorselessly across space and time, and no-one can escape its compulsion. As Lukács put it, in a dialectical and historical sense industry is the object of a social-natural law. It is in the spirit of this objectivity that Wang Bing constructs a narrative of the factories of Tiexi. There are no characters or intrigues threading through 'Rust' as in traditional movies. Rather, it is the process of production itself that becomes the main plot of the film. This, the first and longest part of the trilogy, has the most complex structure, though it is filmed strictly according to factory routines and working procedures.

First comes copper. We see the rough smelting of electrolytic coppers, their loading, electrolysis, and then return to rough-smelting, revolving and refining. Next, lead: from welding in a workshop, to the lead-tower and another workshop for processing, then on to the workers' break-room, and exit from the factory at the end of the day. After that comes the now idle Electric Cable Plant—and back to the previously omitted process of lead electrolysis and lead casting, before returning to the lead-tower again. This completes a narrative that makes up the first two hours of the film. The next two hours depict the closing down of the factories. The camera starts again from the copper section of the Foundry. Halfway through, it jumps to the workshops for zinc, cutting off when they are due for closure, before going back to copper, where electrolysis—which we saw at the very beginning of the cycle—becomes the last section to shut down. With every workshop now empty, a few workers take a final shower. The entire Foundry—in which so many people spent so much of their lives—has been closed.

After the story of copper, the film doubles back to finish the narrative of lead. Once the Foundry has closed, lead workers are dispatched to a country hospital 20 miles away for detoxification. One of them drowns in a pond nearby. In the Electric Cable Factory, where even caretakers have been forced to take long leave since no heating expenses can be afforded, people are shovelling half-metre-thick ice in a freezing workshop. The film now turns to depict the demolition of the Steel Rolling Mill. It ends by following a worker—whom we have seen at the start of the film having his hair cut in the breakroom of the copper-smelting workshop—going home on the factory train through the snow-bound wilderness of a now derelict industrial district. Step by step, the film thus completes two interwoven narrative cycles—the cycle of production within the factories, and the life-cycle of the factories themselves, closing in icy silence and stillness.

Running through both cycles is the second structural thread of 'Rust': the work and life of those who labour in the plants. In the formal organization of this part of *West of the Tracks*, theirs is pointedly a supporting role. The factory has its own rhythm of life. The steel and iron machinery, the smelting furnace, the conveyor belt, the crane, move and roar like so many automatic giants, their huge mass making the human beings beneath them seem tiny and insignificant. The workers appear mere appendages of this vast complex. This is what the film then explores:

the relationship between the individual lives of the workers and the various industrial routines they face, the inner truths laid bare in the most exterior textures of daily existence. We see workers in a breakroom listening to a radio announcement of joint-stock reform, and then discussing their prospects of unemployment, their wages, their pensions. They chat, play cards, eat meals, shower, brawl, swear, tell dirty jokes and watch porn movies. In the break rooms their work and their outside life are both joined and held apart. Wang Bing's focus is highly specific: on a particular set of relationships, in a particular span of time, in a particular country. 'Rust' does not on the whole individuate the workers it follows. They wash in the same showers, wear the same clothes, use the same lunch box, talk about the same things.

Although some may tell their life-stories, here they are not otherwise identified: they compose a collective humanity whose destiny forms another polyphonic structure within the film, contrasting and echoing the fate of the factories themselves. What seems trivial, boring or fragmentary in their existence is integrated into an overall narrative in which the idea of the factory is counterpointed with elements of human life, as individual experiences are overwhelmed by the flow-lines of history. This comprehensive sense of a common fate finds its most shocking expression in the repeated scenes of bathing and showering in the factory, as different workers expose their bodies to the camera with the same numbed gaze. The human form is reduced to an object of indifference. The limp, naked genitals figure its castration. Such exposure has nothing to do with the standards or otherwise of any civilization. Civilization and desire have vanished. All that is left is the impotent human body, emasculated by the formidable factory machine, and the instinct that can no longer be realized by it. The workers sent for detoxification sit without the slightest show of feeling in front of erotic scenes of coupling in a pornographic film. Reified, the human body has become alien.

Wang Bing has remarked that a director's first work is often particularly sensitive to the world, as an unfamiliar landscape in which much still remains to be recognized or understood. At times the imagery of 'Rust' recalls the aesthetic of the machine in Antonioni's *Red Desert*, where the nameless fear in the heart of the heroine is like the unbanishable ghost in an industrial civilization. In the visual metaphors of *West of the Tracks*, we may sense a similar feeling of loss and despair. When we enter an enormous, empty factory and a crane suddenly roars into life and rises

threateningly into the air, it is as though we were walking through an ominous valley and were startled by the cry of some strange bird ascending from its floor. But what if, confronted with the vast objectivity of world history, such a shock were the beginning of our salvation?

Yet the monumentalism of Wang Bing's industrial imagery has an ambiguity foreign to Antonioni, which reflects a quite distinct history. For frame after frame, within foundry or factory, is of arresting splendour, composed in an atmospheric spirit closer to Turner than any recent director—a semi-abstract world of flaring light, drizzling steam, flows of golden metal, towering heights criss-crossed by slanting megaliths, tapering into darkness. This is not the cold beauty of a film like *The Red Desert*, but one of eerie warmth and energy, intensified by the white-clad wilderness outside. The tremendous power of 'Rust' lies in the tension between the bleak substance of its theme and these glowing forms. In an interview, Wang Bing has explained that when he first saw the plants of Tiexi, he was strongly drawn to them, for 'the factories, with their vast scale and texture, have an attractive force like that of a person's past ideals'. This insight is a key to the film. *West of the Tracks* is quite unlike Soviet films of the 1930s that celebrated the mills and furnaces of the Five-Year Plans. Its tone is not heroic. Not even elegiac. Today the factories have become the ruins of an ideal. But the memory of that ideal is not extinguished in the film; it lives on in the majesty of these images, because it is rooted in the peculiarities of *this* industry and those who laboured in it.

For the drive towards a modernity capable of resisting the global hegemony of capital created, in the socialist countries of the Third World, a working class whose history and consciousness inevitably differed from those of its counterparts in the West. Under the pressure of foreign gunboats, it was impossible for China to rely on a 'free' market to modernize its economy, and as early as the Western Affairs (*yang wu*) Self-Strengthening Movement of the 1860–90s, it was clear to reformers that a war industry would be essential if the country was to retain its independence. By the early 20th century, not just Marxists but liberals like Hu Shi—in fact virtually all Chinese intellectuals—agreed not only that industrialization was a prerequisite of modernity, but that it could not be successfully accomplished without true sovereignty. Prior to the People's Republic, no government was equal to either task. But under Mao's leadership, an advanced industrial base was created, bringing into

being a working class that was hailed as, and in a real measure felt itself to be, the masters of modernization and the builders of independence. This sense formed the subjectivity of the class, and is the reason why so many Chinese workers today cherish Mao's memory—not because they are nostalgic for his dictatorship, but because they associate him with the nationalist pride of a Third World resistance to the domination of Western capitalism.

Since energy and siderurgy constituted the essential sinews of industry, oil and steel workers in the North-East became the archetype of this class after 1949. This was in any case a unique geopolitical region. Homeland of the Qing dynasty, the headquarters of the Japanese assault on China, theatre of the PLA's first great victories in the Civil War, birthplace of the first generation of engineering and petroleum workers in the New China, the base area for Chinese volunteer troops to cross the Yalu River and valiantly 'Aid Korea and Resist America': it has been a historical battlefield for over a century, wreathed in gunsmoke and soaked in blood. Symbolically, in Tiexi, a large number of rusty shells left behind by the Japanese were recently discovered beneath demolished buildings, as well as underground constructions suspected of being military hospitals. *West of the Tracks* contains many traces of these historical vicissitudes. In filming it, Wang Bing was continually asking himself: why did we build such big factories here? Why did this become the dream of the age? What made so many individuals willingly sacrifice themselves to realize it? Why did we want to create a world that has now collapsed? 'Rust' does not allow us to escape the torture of these questions.

2. REMNANTS: PRETTY GIRL STREET

In the ruin, history has physically merged with the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory therefore declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.

Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*

The second part of *West of the Tracks* is entitled 'Remnants: Pretty Girl Street'. The name of the street comes from a legend that the maidservant of a rich family was buried here, so it was called Housemaid's Grave. Later the name changed to Pretty Girl Street, implying it was a haunt of

prostitutes. In keeping with this allusion to women of low social position, the local residents were typically marginal people. From the 1930s to the 1950s, most were workers who had migrated from the south to find employment in Japanese factories. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some sent-down youths returning from the countryside also settled there. At the end of the 1990s, the majority of its inhabitants were workers from plants in Tiexi district. As Wang Bing's camera tracks along the street, we see nothing but low, dilapidated shacks, inside which crouch sick mothers, exhausted or disoriented fathers, aged grandparents, and restless youngsters. This shabby, formless landscape, without depth or elevation, lacks any of the dramatic shapes or colours, let alone scale, of the factories in Part One. We are as if in their underside.

But reversing the structure of 'Rust', amidst these deteriorated dwellings 'Remnants' focuses on expressions of human vitality. Its first half follows a group of 17 or 18-year-olds who have finished school, but not found jobs, as they loaf around a neighbourhood littered with snow and rubbish. Their youthful impulses, desires, quarrels, laughter bring a touch of bright colour to the gloomy background. Still embodiments of life and hope, they represent the most energetic element in a declining area. According to his own account, they offered the director a certain mirror to his own past, as well as a set of troubling questions about their future. Watching these children wandering around the street all day long, the viewer is bound to wonder, as does Wang Bing: what will become of them? Their vague longings—born out of instinct or intuition, without any knowledge of the world—are touching, but also disquieting. For what chance have any of them of realizing their dreams? Are they even in a position to formulate some? An exchange between two of the boys runs as follows:

- You ask me what to do. I don't know what to do.
- So you have no dream at all—just like me.
- Then why the hell do you criticize me?
- What's your dream?
- I'm trying to talk to you.
- Can you get food from talking?

The boy who says he has no dream does so, in Wang Bing's words, with an 'extremely charming smile: like a flower briefly blooming in the frost'. The most popular girl in the group is abandoned by all the boys after

she breaks up with her boyfriend: a prolonged shot shows her standing alone, after everyone else has left, as if youth itself were deserting her.

Without any sharp break, the second half of 'Remnants' observes the death of the street, as the closure of factories in Tiexi is followed by demolition of the neighbourhood where its workers live, to make way for commercial development. Such clearances are uprooting communities of the labouring poor all over China today, where urban speculators or local authorities—there is often no clear line between them—are flattening traditional neighbourhoods and pockets of popular life to build malls and high-rises. In *West of the Tracks* we watch the first part of the process, as pressure mounts on now defenceless working-class families to give up their homes and be dispersed to wherever alternative dwellings can be found. Some are resigned and comply, a few others try to resist. The end is the same in either case: the trucks arrive, the developers' hard-faced bailiffs pile the families and their (often piteous) belongings into them, and off they go. After the factories come the homes: we watch as the final quietus descends upon Tiexi. This working class has disintegrated. The power of these scenes, shocking in their casual ruthlessness, comes from the understatement of Wang Bing's recording of them. The film needs no pathos. What it shows is enough. On the vast material ruins of Tiexi lie the wordless spiritual ruins of the working class, as desolate as the sky after fireworks. Its memory becomes like shards of firecrackers scattered in the snow, deepening the darkness and void.

3. RAILS

The iron road . . . whose embankments and cuttings, bridges and stations formed a body of public building beside which the pyramids and the Roman aqueducts and even the Great Wall of China paled into provincialism, was the very symbol of man's triumph through technology.

Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*

The film ends as it began, with the train still moving slowly through Tiexi. Historically, the locomotive was a ubiquitous symbol of dynamism in the optimistic documentaries made by avant-garde directors between the wars, extolling modern industry and the progress it represented—works like Grierson's *Industrial Britain*, Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City* or Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm: Donbass Symphony*. Ruttmann also started

his film with a train, travelling through open fields in the early morning. With wires skipping on both sides and rails opening and closing underneath, we speed into the awakening city and its industrial districts. The sequence is a heady celebration of a new age. In the metropolis, every kind of machinery gradually starts into motion. Human beings spring into action with increasing rapidity, as if driven by some magic power. Watching *West of the Tracks*, I was repeatedly reminded of this great work from another time. But here, the train has become the opposite of its image in the classic documentary. The small industrial wagons rumble drearily through a wasteland of decayed factories, over and over again, until the railroad itself becomes no more than a memento of a rust-ridden past. The plants have been closed down, but the train still wanders through the empty, absurd space of their debris. The factories and people are gone, but the railroad persists like the dead soul of the ruins around it. In this snow-covered land, surrounded by buildings in decay, its journeys no longer symbolize the progress of history or humanity. They have become a ceremony of mourning for their decline.

Yet in this most reduced of all conditions, the film takes an unexpected turn. Hitherto, its narrative has been austere and impersonal: giving individuals their voices in a collective fate, but never singling them out by name or dwelling on them. In 'Rails' this suddenly alters. The final two hours of *West of the Tracks* portray a father and son whose lives depend on the trains. They are not employees of the railroad, and have no official relationship to it. Like many others in contemporary China, they are marginals drifting below the surface of the social order, of no fixed abode and on no household register, seeking a precarious, sub-legal foothold in crevices of the system. One-eyed Du and his son survive by doing menial jobs for the railwaymen who have come to tolerate them, and by selling coal picked up or stolen from the train. The father owns nothing in the world, but hardships have strengthened him and given him a certain cunning. He has his own view of society and those around him, and makes a great effort to create a minimal space for himself and his child in the unstable eddies of life. But his 17-year-old son, whose mother went off when he was very young, is withdrawn and silent, visibly the product of an abnormal environment that has left him highly vulnerable to the outside world.

In the course of Wang Bing's filming, the father was arrested for stealing coal and sent to a detention centre. What follows is an astonishing

sequence of *cinéma vérité*. Left alone at night in the little hovel where they live, the son finds a package wrapped in plastic bags. When he opens it, we see a pile of photos: one of the whole family, another of his mother when she was young, leaning against a haystack and smiling warmly at the world. Suddenly a clock on the wall strikes eleven times, and the camera swings slowly away from the photos towards it. When it swings back, tears are glittering on the orphan's face. The next day, we follow his desperate journey to the detention centre to release his father. In a heart-rending scene, the old man is finally allowed to go, and the two return together to their tiny, bleak room, alone in the world again. Given the strictly controlled, rational, sober narration of the whole trilogy, in which every shot is handled with the utmost discretion, this scene is like an open wound, exposing the director's own feelings about what he has shown. 'I would very much like to affirm the value of life', Wang Bing has said, 'but confronted with the reality of it, I feel so powerless that I become more and more sceptical'.

At the end of the film, the train is still travelling through the blurred shadows of the factory district. As if in the white night of the century, desolate buildings emerge and recede as in a dream, farther and farther away. We look out at the railroad gradually extending behind us. At this moment, snowflakes start to fall silently on the camera lens, in a shade of grey somewhere between light and darkness. The sky and earth become obscured. It is the twilight before history is clarified. As it journeys on through this ambiguity, to what kind of future is the train taking us?

Translated by J. X. Zhang

Previous articles in this series have been Tony Wood on the cinema of Aleksei German (NLR 7), Silvana Silvestri on Gianni Amelio (NLR 10), Leo Chanjen Chen on Edward Yang (NLR 11), David Murphy on Ousmane Sembene (NLR 16) and Michael Witt on Jean-Luc Godard (NLR 29).