

Collecting the Ashes of Time: The Temporality and Materiality of Industrial Ruins in Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*

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The enigmatic and evocative characteristics of ruins (for example, ruined monuments, gardens, tombs, or steles) and the visual representations of ruins by painting, photography, and cinema, have been explored and elucidated by philosophers, theorists, art historians, and film scholars over decades or even centuries. The romantic tendency to aestheticize ruins in terms of their innate beauty as objects of venerable decay (Schonle, 2006: 649-669; Makarius, 2004: 81, 84, 108) has been contested by Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 1977) in the modern period, since war catastrophes and human disasters which have resulted in vast ruins in the 20th Century make the aesthetic appreciation of ruins problematic. Most of the prominent cinematic renderings (both fictional and non-fictional) of war ruins and calamities emerged after World War II, including Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania anno zero*, 1948) and *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954), Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), and Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (1948).¹ The cinematic exploration and representation of ruins has persisted until the present, expanding and enriching the spectator's viewing experience and providing a unique opportunity for the profound contemplation of temporality and materiality.

As the visibility of industrial ruins that evoke a recent industrial past becomes a conspicuous modern and contemporary phenomenon, commanding attention and fascination against the backdrop of the general trend of deindustrialization in a global context, the establishment of industrial museums in Europe, the U.S., and China reflects an intention to conserve and revisit the modern heritage. Visual documentation and representation constitute another channel for preserving industrial ruins. In terms of the cinematic transfiguration and reconstruction of contemporary ruins, Jia Zhangke's feature film *Still Life* (2005) and *24 City* (2008), and Jennifer Baichwal's documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) serve as good examples in which to contemplate the eerily stunning visual quality and ambiguous meaning of industrial ruins.²

Furthermore, with its mobility and vitality, immediacy and spontaneity, digital video serves as a new and vigorous medium in which to represent industrial ruins. One of the most outstanding examples of this new medium is Chinese filmmaker Wang Bing's nine-hour documentary *West of the Tracks* (2002), which records the slow demise of several factories in the industrial Tiexi ("west of the tracks") District, in Shenyang, a heavy industry base in

Northeast China. With its epic range and scale, *West of the Tracks* is divided into three parts of descending length: *Rust*, four hours long, mainly portrays the factories and workers within the industrial space; *Remnants*, three hours long, illustrates the dislocation of worker housing and young people's wanderings and struggles; *Rails*, two-hours long, depicts the freight train traversing the desolate industrial landscape and a dispossessed father and son living on the railroad. The three parts perform as three poles, structuring a stable four-dimensional temporal and spatial configuration; the one-and-a-half-year-long (1999-2001) shooting process and 300 hours of footage allow the three to complement one another and provide a sense of objectivity (Wang, 2002). The protagonists of *West of the Tracks* are the closing or closed factories located in Tiexi district, highlighted in the first part, *Rust*. Although the factories are not all at the same stage of ruin, the various industrial architectures, rusty machinery, and idling workers all evoke an atmosphere of obsolescence, and their materiality has eroded or transformed over time.

Consequently, temporalities and materiality in *West of the Tracks*' depiction of industrial ruins are layered in interdependent and even inseparable ways. The tripartite temporality (past, present, and future) evoked by the industrial ruins is intertwined and overlapped with the cyclical and repeatable time of production processes within the factory space, and with the linear, progressive, historical time outside of the industrial space. The materiality of the industrial ruins bears and makes visible the trace of time's passage. The disfigured and dysfunctional forms of the ruins, however, evoke a disconcerting uncanniness, seeming to undermine the social order and blur clear-cut temporal boundaries. In Andreas Schonle's words, they "derive [their] power and promise from [their] refusal to be assimilated in the surrounding symbolic order" (Schonle, 2006: 654), thus releasing energy and creativity; ruins are sites "in which the becomings of new forms, ordering and aesthetics can emerge" (Edensor, 2005: 15). Nonetheless, the physical resistance of industrial ruins is ephemeral and doomed to failure; their destiny of being demolished or transformed into industrial museums, residential neighborhoods, or commercial districts is inevitable, even if they are not yet matured and decayed enough.

The multiple layers, stages, and aspects of the evolution of industrial ruins—their earlier, fully functional lives, process of formation, transient, and unstable existence, and afterlife—converge under the gaze of the digital camera and the filmmaker's presence, becoming standardized and immortalized in *West of the Tracks*, and evoking a strong sense of history and encouraging the imagination of the recent past. The lifespan of the ruins in *West of the Tracks* is transitory in human history (a couple of years), while the duration of the documentary is relatively long (nine hours); this sets up a thought-provoking tension between the evanescent materiality of industrial ruins and the imperviousness of digital imagery to material degradation.

Because they are captured at the pivotal historical moment of transition from a socialist planned economy to a market economy (1999-2001), the appearance and disappearance of industrial ruins in *West of the Tracks* are endowed with the historical specificity of the enormous economic and social transformation taking place in China. Therefore, *West of the Tracks* is imbued with a monumental quality reflected in its extensive pictorial description, intensive cinematic expression, and conscientious documentation and preservation of the ruins. By bearing witness to the slow death and demolition of the factories, *West of the Tracks* itself achieves the status of a ruin or relic by stabilizing and immortalizing ruins in digital images that survive indefinitely after the industrial landscape captured in the images has vanished. As a documentary, one of the functions of *West of the Tracks* is analogous to that of an industrial museum: it attracts the public gaze and enables the spectator to revisit the eliminated industrial ruins out of their original context, while incorporating parts of the past into the layers of the present. Unlike industrial museums, however, the spectator of *West of the Tracks* can only conceive of the industrial ruins through digital images, replacing first-hand sensory experience with imagination and mental constructs. In this sense, "ruin" becomes a psychic state and an incorporeal experience.

Temporality and Refrain

The multiple temporalities discussed above comprise what we might call a polyphonic structure in *West of the Tracks*, mingling and converging most strikingly in the perpetual tension of ruined industrial spaces. Michel Makarius has argued that the main theme within this interweaving is a kind of abstract time in which the past revives and determines the present: "If ruins stand as the guardians of time," he writes, "this time itself is no longer something concrete—a time woven by history whose ultimate proof they might somehow embody—but an absolute time, a pure reminiscence, like the 'involuntary memory' that revivifies long-lost scenes from childhood" (Makarius, 2004:8). However, since the formation and disappearance of ruins in the various factories on which *West of the Tracks* focuses are non-synchronous and distinct, the complexly intertwined temporalities actually traverse across many strata: cycles (seasonal alternations and production procedures, for instance); progressive historical time; and multi-directional human temporalities, including workers' factory routines, the return of the past in recollection (when, for example, a worker tells his life story in front of the camera), the retrospective perception of the lived, and its projection into the future.

The industrial ruins in *West of the Tracks* create a powerful illusion of an eternal present: time has been visualized and mediated, and the present has been prioritized. This sense of eternal present ruptures the sense of historical flow in the film and freezes time in the instant, under the camera's gaze. The

journey of the freight train then, penetrates the derelict industrial space, animating the stagnation with its mobility and dynamism. The cinematic language of *West of the Tracks* echoes its sense of disruptive temporality in other ways as well. Its static long shots foster the illusion of stagnation in the frozen instant. Certain sequences, like those depicting the working process or workers' naked, bathing bodies are repeated. Fragmentary time markers (subtitles, for example, reading "Chinese New Year, March 2001") generate disorientation. In addition, as we revisit the same places in order to explore their transformation over time, as well as refrain and progress, the uncanny feeling evoked by the ruins is enhanced by hand-held camera movement. Yet the overall structure of *West of the Tracks* is chronological and predictable, with an overtone of lament based in the sense that these factories and industrial ruins are ineluctably destined for destruction and obliteration—the ultimate negation of their materiality.

West of the Tracks begins its narrative with a 15-second static image, a bird's-eye view of a white, snow-covered industrial landscape that looks almost like a black and white still photograph. It evokes an eerie and bleak tranquility except for the tiny human figures slowly traversing the space and the dense



Fig. 1. A bird's-eye view of a white, snow-clad industrial landscape evokes an eerie and bleak tranquility.

smoke coming from a smokestack on the right edge of the frame. This general visual impression of the industrial sites in Tiexi District is followed by lengthy texts introducing the history and current situation of the factories, accompanied by off-screen machine noise. After this solemn prelude comes a six-minute sequence composed of six mobile shots from a locomotive freight train, presenting a floating overview of the skeletons of ruined factory buildings as if skirting the depths of a mystery. The train maps the industrial space and connects the factories, since its function is to transport raw materials to the plants and ship the finished products to other areas. Serving as a visual metaphor, the train helps structure the time and space of the documentary (Wang Bing, 2002). More precisely, the sense of journeying provided by the mobility of the train underlies a temporal dynamic by spatializing and sublimating time.

The journey in the sequence is not a direct and unmediated encounter between the camera/spectator's gaze and the industrial landscape, since the camera is put inside the train car and shoots through the glass of the window. Snowflakes blowing on the window assault and obscure the camera's vision, as the camera's gaze invades the unfamiliar industrial world. In this way, the window flecked with melting snowflakes acts as a semi-translucent, mediating screen creating a layered screen space. The snowflakes, by appearing to move in the opposite direction of the train, clash on the doubled screen and evoke an illusion of interaction between the documented world and the recording camera. The spectator remains comfortably aware of the existence of the camera and identifies with its gaze, reinforcing a sense of intimacy with the represented world and the immediacy of the present moment.

Again, Michel Makarius has been a key exponent of the significance of this presentness in the temporality of industrial ruins: "Today, this temporal trinity [the past, the present and the future] is being eaten away by a wholesale acceleration that funnels past and future into a single perpetual 'instant'" (Makarius, 2004: 8). Historical depth and anticipation of the future are fused in an absolute present imprisoned in a single instant. We cannot find many intense sentiments about the past or the future from the workers in *West of the Tracks*. They tell their youth stories and explain their current plight in a dispassionate manner, and rarely discuss the future; their present predicament becomes part of their daily existence and mental state. The instantaneous and immediate nature of the digital video that *West of the Tracks* employs enhances the illusion of an eternal present, especially when confronting the silent, functionless, and deserted ruins. By moving from the exterior, mobile view of the ruins from the freight train to interior observation within the abandoned factories, the exploration and representation of these ruins grows more intimate and substantial. The barren, solitary ruined space captured by these latter images seems to be petrified in time, their fate

suspended in a frozen present. Is this a timeless space, or a non-space? Is it capable of escaping from history and physically resisting the fleetingness and instability of time? Yet the ruins here are not totally derelict: human interventions—for example, the government's policies determining the ruins' fate, the scavengers rummaging around in them, or the filmmaker documenting with his digital camera—never cease. The movement of the handheld camera, too, together with a few moving objects within the frame, readily illustrate the passage of time and undermine the illusion of frozen time. Therefore, time seems to resume its flow after a brief repose.



Fig. 2. The workers explain their current plight in a dispassionate manner, and rarely discuss the future.

In a broader sense, these continuities and breaks in temporality are dialectically intertwined. Because, as Makarius puts it, "the growth of industrial society... entailed a 'traumatic rupture in time'" (Makarius, 2004: 8), the ruined results of industrialization and deindustrialization become symptoms, functioning as the signature of a historical rupture; but such breaks rest paradoxically on the continuous presence of the past within the present (Schonle, 2006: 652-653). In *West of the Tracks*, both industrial structures and workers' bodies and lifestyles, which bear the fragmentary traces of a socialist past, have been incorporated into an everlasting historical flow. The crasure of even these traces of history promise to generate a new rupture—the vanished parts of the city are, in Robert Harbison's formulation, "like missing decades in a history" (Harbison, 1991: 111).

The fragmentary, disorienting temporal structure of *West of the Tracks* echoes the complexity of this interplay between rupture and continuity through constant repetition, refrain, and temporal ellipsis. The sequences from different

seasons, months, and years often have significant gaps between them and are intercut inconsistently, although the ceaselessly moving train seems to serve to some extent as a moving thread that sutures these lacunae. Time in the workplaces that are still in operation and have not yet been abandoned and ruined generally unfolds in cycles and repetitions. This is sometimes contrary to progressive historical time, though there are technological progressions and production accumulation. Factory routine has its own rhythm of life, as Wang Bing explains: "I tried to design the structure, style and contents of the documentary in the beginning, but during the process of shooting, I found that I could not decide the tempo, since things have their own cycles, and you have to wait for the right moment" (Wang, 2002). The standardized temporal patterns of production procedures, day and night shifts, and alternations between work and leisure (shown in intercuts between plant and break room) form a mechanical rhythm. In the break rooms and bathrooms, the workers lounge around, chat roughhouse, and play cards or chess; time seems to slow down and extend. The rhythm of work emerges from the intersection between rationalized machine movements (the smelting furnace, the conveyor belt, and the crane) and the organic bodily movements of the workers. *West of the Tracks* strictly follows production procedure, respecting its operations and describing it through the perspective and experience of the workers.



Fig. 3. In the break rooms, the workers play cards; time seems to slow down and extend.

The natural cycle of seasons has little impact on the working environment because most factory workshops must be kept at a constant temperature (Li), but the seasons are significant in rendering the industrial landscape in various striking palettes. The austere pictorial beauty of the industrial ruins is enhanced by snow and by the solemn, tranquil, melancholic atmosphere that accompanies it. Unlike the other three seasons, winter imposes a mysterious aura, as Lv Xinyu claims, "the film 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" (Lv, 2005: 129).



Fig. 4. A sense of dullness and tediousness—a characteristic element of the modern industrial world.

These cycles resonate with the film's strategic refrains of certain sequences and returns to specific sites after their closure and abandonment. In the repeating sequences, the camera usually follows a worker to a particular space, such as the break room, bathroom, or office, attempting to connect the inanimate spaces with an active and subjective view. The excessive sequences of production operation, of workers' naked bodies, and of their dawdling in break rooms achieve a strong, accumulation effect, connoting a sense of dullness and tediousness—a characteristic element of the modern industrial world. The revisitations, however, are more evocative and intriguing. In this

repeated process, the camera traces the same paths it has filmed before and becomes a habitual part of the ruined scene, intervening in its temporality and spatiality and revealing or implicating memories from previous narrative sequences. Schonle's work is particularly applicable here: "Ruins, in particular industrial ones, sometimes display skeletons of their former buildings, revealing fragments of the structural frame that underpinned them. And, of course, some still contain objects, detritus, and decorations that bear testimony to a history of inhabitation... They give the past a palpable density, despite failing to represent any particular moment of the past" (Schonle, 2006: 649). The ghostly images bear mobile and energetic witness. They construct a juxtaposition between the mobility of the camera and the stillness of the ruins, but also conceptually animate the static landscape with a kinetic perspective.

As a visual representation of industrial ruins, *West of the Tracks* uses a distinctive cinematic style and the digital medium itself to raise questions about the perception and interpretation of time. Is epic historical time compressed or suspended in the nine-hour documentary? Do the static, suspended long takes with long-shot composition distend time? The tiny and flexible digital camera moves spontaneously; sometimes the usually unpremeditated shots even appear to be out of focus, lending the documentary an amateurish quality. Yet *West of the Tracks* invests compelling energy and strong intention in directly confronting, intervening in, and preserving aspects of the reality it addresses. Wang Bing is aware of the urgency and significance of his rapidly transitioning subject: "in documentary, you have to operate extremely quickly and record what's immediately in front of you" (Wang). *West of the Tracks* consciously elaborates a three-dimensional, dynamic visual world through horizontal, vertical, inward, and outward camera movements, abundant panning and tracking shots, and dizzying zooms in and out. Consequently, time and space have been crystallized.

The formation, maturation, and vanishing of industrial ruins work changes in their corporeal dimensions—their materiality—into time, whether the process is one of incremental decay or deliberate destruction. The industrial ruin's life span is short and doomed, however, as Robert Harbison suggests, "industrial ruins are most special in this: though large and powerful they feel extremely vulnerable. No one is going to keep them just for a spectacle, so the richer they become as ruins, the nearer and surer their demolition approaches. Old ruins only *look* doomed anymore, these plants and factories *are*" (Harbison, 1991: 121). Eventual negation of the materiality of the ruins is the logical end of the process.

Materiality and Ruination

The industrial area in *West of the Tracks* is physically located in the Tiexi ("west of the track") District of Shenyang, with the railway track rumbling

through it. The isolated and discordant industrial landscape consists of decrepit buildings, gigantic, cold machinery, and uniformed workers, and is part of the urban space and of the city's visual archive. It is woven into the fabric of urban history, its materiality bearing the trace of fleeting time. The physicality of these industrial places is constantly subject to human intervention, and influenced by the people inhabiting it. They are places, as Antoine Picon points out, "where nature seems to have obliterated itself or at least yielded to man-made artifact" (Picon, 2000: 65). In addition, the materiality of the industrial landscape is also subjugated to human sensory impressions and mental constructs. Vision, sound (or its absence), smell, and the sense of palpability all contribute to the complicated appreciation and perception of industrial ruins. The stark ruins in *West of the Tracks* exude a haunting aura of the past; endowed with an eerie beauty despite their apparent crudeness, they exude a silent pathos. Their picturesque quality and the ambiguous meanings it provokes only exist through the promise of their anticipated disappearance, as Harbison argues: "this ugliness does not become beautiful until one realizes that all these signs tell us it will be swept away" (Harbison, 1991: 122).



Fig. 5. The decrepit shanties, part of the isolated industrial landscape, are woven into the fabric of urban history.

The condensed life span and manifestly transitory nature of the ruins strengthens their spectacular corporeal quality in its condensed life span. Lu Xinyu points in particular to "the tremendous power" of "Rust" (first part in *West of the Tracks*), which "lies in the tension between the bleak substance of

its theme and these glowing forms” (Lv, 2005: 131). The abundant texture of light, color, and sound that envelope industrial workplaces releases an unbounded vitality and implication of danger. The weathered surfaces of rusty metal walls, dark brown buildings, and broken, blocked windows are silent carriers of this past, and their color tone still alters according to seasonal changes: white in winter; and green, brown, or grey in other seasons. Inside the space of the factory, the visual splendor created by the contrast between dark night and bright red flame is intensified by the juxtaposition of strangely luminescent colored lights (red, orange, blue, green, and yellow) and the blinding glare of welding, producing a surreal and mysterious atmosphere. The omnipresence of the smog and steam that often obscure this vision enhances the mystery and the threat of poison and violence. In Harbison’s words, “when working, they are images of hell—noisy, smelly, dark—with suggestions of violence about to surface—mechanical thrashings felt through the rumbling ground, emissions of smoke like anger, sudden changes like attacks” (Harbison, 1991: 122). The handheld camera repeatedly approaches a whirlwind of rising smog or steam, and is eventually enveloped by the mysterious haze. This technique articulates an intimacy between the solid camera and the intangible smoke, emphasizing the proximity of the danger of being poisoned.³

If the spectator identifies with the camera, he or she is surrounded not only by the ubiquitous smoke and the visual spectacle within it, but also by the factory’s penetrating polyphony. This expressive soundscape forms the workplace’s aural materiality. The orchestration of the various timbres, tones, and pitches of the pervasive machinic cacophony, indistinct human voices, the distant train whistle, and the sound of flowing water in the bathroom, creates an acoustical exuberance equivalent to its visual counterpart. The propagandist song “Marching to the New Age” and official announcements, broadcast from a factory loudspeaker, imply a kind of dull, monotone authority, a ubiquitous, disembodied sound. Yet silence is also a significant component in this soundscape, evoking powerful emotion and imagination. This is especially true of the film’s ruined landscapes, as the violence that the factory formerly contained is directed against itself and “the mammoth has changed,” as Harbison writes, “from aggressor to victim and now earns our wistful affection” (Harbison, 1991: 122).

The obsolescence of industrial ruins generally depends, of course, on the absence of human bodies, but there is a sense in which the decay of those bodies is caught up in the decay of architecture and machinery. In *West of the Tracks*, the bodies of workers convey the exterior texture of their everyday existence, bearing the trace of a past ideal. The workers also accept the presence of the camera and the filmmaker as part of their daily existence instead of treating them as intruders, as Wang Bing recalls: “they didn’t care about me,

they were only interested in their own lives, not me...I became part of their lives during that time [of shooting the film], but what I was doing was not their concern” (Wang, 2002). The workers display their naked bodies to the camera—talking to the camera, chatting or playing chess with fellow workers, in break rooms and the bathroom—without embarrassment. For them, being naked is a natural state, a part of everyday existence and mundane activity. These are autonomous and subjective bodies, undisguised by social status; they are not to be read as objectified human bodies.⁴



Fig. 6. The factory’s expressive soundscape forms the workplace’s aural materiality.

This naturalistic attitude helps to minimize the inherently voyeuristic tendency of the camera’s gaze. It also has a more important function: to reveal and emphasize the workers’ strong desire to carefully cleanse their bodies as an instinctive tactic of self-protection, since the toxic air of their workplace continually poisons them. Although the daily bathing becomes a kind of ritual, however, they can only sanitize the body’s surface. The lead workers are dispatched to a country hospital for detoxification after the closure of the factory; once their ruined bodies have been entirely detoxified, and the “normal” order of the human body has been restored. Paradoxically, however, the elimination of the poisonous traces of factory work is accompanied by a

rupture in life's flow, and the workers' role as the embodiment or vestige of a past socialist ideal comes to an end.

The almost identical naked bodies, along with bodies dressing in almost identical green or blue uniforms, suggest the communal body of the working class. Wang Bing is interested in this collectivization and uniformity as a process shaped by and inherited from a specific historical and social period, and he explores its complexity by probing into the details of everyday life. The workers share the same life rhythms and the same physical environment, bathe in the same tub, wear the same uniforms, use similar lunchboxes, and talk about the same issues (Wang, 2002). They also, of course, share a common fate, not only with each other but also with the very factory that is poisoning them: abandonment, and a slide into oblivion. To further reflect this sense of collectivization, *West of the Tracks* employs an unusually large number of long shots that portray the workers, at a respectful distance, as a group working in the plants or chatting and playing in the break room, rather than as distinct individuals.⁵



Fig. 7. The daily bathing becomes a cleansing and self-protection ritual.

What kind of relationship does this collective human body construct with the factory and its machinery? Is the human body subordinate to or objectified and alienated by the vast and seemingly intimidating machinery? I

would argue that there is both intimacy and tension in this relationship—a complexity that a mechanical Marxist reading is likely to reduce or misinterpret.⁶ It is true that the juxtaposition and contrast between the organic human body and the marble-like qualities of the machinery may reveal tension and inequality. The human body has to control and tame the monstrous machine, taking the risk of being harmed by it, and *West of the Tracks* includes a depiction of a mishap in the copper smelting plant and a reference to a worker's broken hand. It is also the case that, beyond enduring these bodily wounds, the working class must bear spiritual loss and despair, while the industrial ruins only suffer physically. However, the human body and machinery are interdependent; they energize and humanize each other, and in fact define and identify with each other. Further, their destinies are closely intertwined: without the presence of the workers, the factory and machinery are merely inanimate wastelands; without the factory and machinery, the workers lose their identity. Their daily rhythms and life cycles intermingle in *West of the Tracks*, to the extent that human figures often appear to melt into the monumental industrial landscape. Finally, however, the final severing of their destinies is inevitable; only the objects abandoned by the workers bear the trace of their former existence within the industrial sites.

The various objects in the film contain many traces of historical vicissitudes, and are correlated with different temporalities. When many factories are still in operation, the murky break rooms with their identical furniture and dirty walls, the workers' outdated thermoses, porcelain enamel mugs, aluminum lunch boxes, the old fashioned green or blue uniforms the workers wear, and their sloppy postures, expressions, and rhetoric are all remnants of the socialist period, incarnating the remembered past. In another temporality—after the abandonment of the factories—the “found objects” observed by the camera are recontextualized as semi-obliterated trash, excesses of materiality littering the empty break rooms and vast factory floor. A discarded umbrella, ID card, pictures, and old accounting sheets, along with the faded posters and slogans left on the roughened wall, are all, in Picon's words, “relegated to obsolescence, a bit like the living dead who endlessly haunt the landscape, preventing it from ever becoming peaceful again. We have gone from ruin to rust, from trace to waste” (Picon, 2000:77).

The returning camera haunting the ruins and the ghostly images haunting the spectator's eyes and mind converge in a particularly powerful way in a sequence 66 minutes into *West of the Tracks*. The filmmaker revisits the obsolete Shenyang metal factory two years after its closure. The three-minute and 20-second long sequence is composed of eight shots, which I will catalogue here.

1. 04'37-06'30.⁷ The first take, almost two-minutes long, consists of elaborate camera movements: the camera moves along and passes by slogans on the red brick wall, panning and sweeping to unfold a panoramic view of the



Fig. 8. The human body, the abandoned objects, and the forlorn industrial space, have gone from ruin to rust, from trace to waste.

deserted workshop. It then ascends upstairs, entering an empty break room and observing open green metal lockers and scattered trash in a resumption of the obsessive searching it conducted downstairs. Sometimes the images are out of focus due to constant, speedy movement and the alternating distance of the subjects. The footsteps of the filmmaker crackling in the snow are audible.

2. 06'30-06'48. The history of the factory is introduced by text on the screen.

3. 06'48-07'07. A long shot juxtaposes the flow of water with the deadly silence of the inactive machinery.

4. 07'08-07'13. An old slogan on the wall reads, "individual safety benefits everyone; careful craftsmanship means quality products."

5. 07'13-07'23. We see a low-angle view of a colossal chimney towering under the sky, preserving its grandeur and pride. The camera then pans left, revealing the wind blowing snow off the rooftop. The contrast here is between the stillness of the chimney and the mobility of the wind and snow; nature seems to take over the previously human-occupied environment.

6. 07'24-07'36. The camera moves speedily along through the workshop, then stops and observes the decayed architectural space and dead machinery. Sunlight permeates through the broken windows, a luminous illusion; silence; time seems to freeze.

7. 07'37-07'45. With a withered branch in the foreground on the lower edge of the frame, the camera shows a snow-covered view. Smoke drifts from a chimney on the right edge of the frame, and the distant whistle of the train (though it is visually absent) denotes the passage of time.

8. 07'46-07'57. Subtitle: "January 2000." A high-angle view of the chimneys and factory buildings of the Shenyang electric cable factory; the sound of water is interwoven with the noise of machinery.

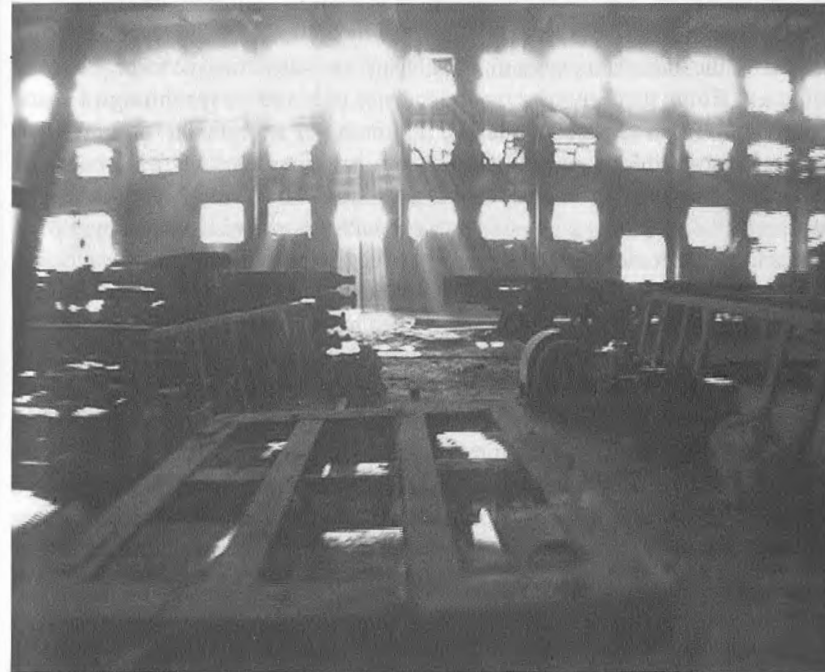


Fig. 9. The decayed architectural space and dead machinery; a luminous illusion; silence; time seems to freeze.

This visually and aurally compelling sequence articulates the presence of the camera and the filmmaker and inspires contemplation of the tensions and conformities between form, content, and the digital medium. The instability of the shaky camerawork resonates with the instability of the ruins. The imbalance between a weighty, epic subject and the documenting apparatus (the light, tiny digital camera), the tension between the grand narrative and its private, even intimate representation, and the contrast between the materiality

of the ruins and the virtuality of the digital image, allow no clear-cut resolutions. To borrow from Wu Hung: “as a photographic image, it self-consciously preserves the transience of the present in a stable and reproducible form” (Wu, 1998: 60).

Conclusion

The temporality and materiality of industrial ruins are not only intrinsic concepts in this film; they are also invoked by a powerful, spontaneous encounter between the ruins, the camera, the filmmaker, and the “trace” left by the physical presence of that filmmaker. “Trace” evokes both temporality and materiality through its rich connotations of movements and footprints. As Wu Hung points out, “when someone is searching for traces of the past, he also leaves his own footprints along the way” (Wu, 27). The vast scale and texture of the industrial places in Tiexi District exude attractive force for Wang Bing as a filmmaker, inviting the trajectories of his footsteps through a space that is both the immense and dense. Beginning as an outsider⁸ and intruder, Wang Bing gradually participates in and becomes part of the process of ruination through his attentive and persistent observation and empathy. However, he minimizes his subjective intervention and, for the most part, conceals his presence, only suggesting it occasionally. He allows the subjects to address him or the camera directly, but he remains as silent behind the lens as the ruins themselves. However, the trace he leaves is, as Wu Hung puts it, “itself an external sign of ruins, always encourage[ing] visualization and representation” (Wu, 28).

The representation of industrial ruins in *West of the Tracks* not only preserves and stabilizes the ruins in digital images by turning the private meditation of the filmmaker into public display, but also provokes a subjective viewing experience on the part of the spectator. The result is an imaginary fullness based on objective vacuity: “ruins,” writes Schonle, “emancipate us from social constraints, free our senses and desires, and enable introspection” (Schonle, 2006: 650). As a disordered and unstable form, ruins are released from normative temporal and spatial orders, providing possibilities for social critique and resistance as well as introspection. In *West of the Tracks*, the industrial ruins become the ruins of utopia, the negation of an ideological ideal.⁹ “As residues of a past that has been rejected by the modern world, or as by-products of economic progress, ruins can become the site of a critique of the ideology of progress itself as of the ever-more-stringent forward movement of history” (Schonle, 2006: 653).

With their picturesque but uncanny visual quality, the ruins, deprived of their social function, become a pure, extraordinary form and exude a disordered—and disordering—poetics. By uprooting and exploring this poetic of ruins, *West of the Tracks* imbues it with another layer of individuality and

uniqueness. Makarius again: “the presence of a ruin creates a world with colors, atmosphere, and ghosts of its own, tearing itself off the past like a page ripped from a calendar. Hence the ruin is more than a fragment. By freeing it and endowing it with autonomy, writers and artists made it a genuine work of art” (Makarius, 2004: 147). In light of this, can we perceive ruins as autonomous entities? In any case, the documentary *West of the Tracks* certainly becomes an autonomous piece of ruin in its own right, transcending time and materiality.

Endnotes

- 1 Documentaries on war ruins in China include Japanese filmmaker Fumio Kaimei’s propagandist documentary *Shanghai* (1937) and Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens’ *The 400 Million* (1938).
- 2 Although *Still Life* is not about industrial ruins, the brief visual depiction of the ruined factory of Yunyang in the film is compelling; *24 City* is possibly inspired by *West of the Tracks* in its depiction of the ruins of a deserted state-owned factory in Sichuan province and its interviews with workers and their offspring.
- 3 A foreman in *West of the Tracks* warns the filmmaker that he should wear a face mask to protect himself from being poisoned by the toxic air in the work place.
- 4 Here I am responding to Lv Xinyu’s claim that: “different workers expose their bodies to the camera with the same numbed gaze. The human form is reduced to an object of indifference” (Lv, 2005: 130).
- 5 The key exception here is an interview sequence in which a single worker tells his personal story.
- 6 Here I am again responding to Lv Xinyu’s argument. She relates the naked male body to civilization, desire, and impotency, finding it to be “emasculated by the formidable factory machine, and the instinct that can no longer be realized by it ... The workers appear mere appendages of this vast complex” (Lv, 2005: 130).
- 7 Time marker as noted in Disc 2.
- 8 Wang Bing is originally from Xian; he was drawn to the factory area while attending college in Shenyang. From Michel Makarius’s perspective, “an outsider is more sensitive to a landscape he is discovering for the first time than one who has been surrounded by it since childhood” (Makarius, 2004: 64).
- 9 Wang Bing explains in an interview: “it is the ideal of that historical period. The whole country worked toward that direction, sacrificing the individuals and serving the cause. They attempted to create a world, but the world finally collapsed. I want to represent the ordinary people, and their relation with the society, as well as their trace of life” (Wang, 2002).

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Music and Meaning in the Independence-Era Malaysian Films of P. Ramlee

Andrew Clay McGraw

(With contributions by Azti Nezia Suriyanti Azmi)

Independence-era Malaysia boasted a robust film industry that produced hundreds of films per year between the late 1950s and early 1960s. The multi-instrumentalist, singer, composer, actor, and director P. Ramlee was the most productive and popular figure in this scene. Today Ramlee is lauded as one of Malaysia's and Singapore's most important cultural figures. In this article we argue that Ramlee's film music served to score the topography of ethnic relations in independence-era Malaysia. In Ramlee's films, which featured almost exclusively Malay casts and cultural contexts, inter-ethnic relations were heard more often than seen. Ramlee's music stood in a complex if sometimes contradictory relationship to the representation of modern Malay culture and class in his films. While upper class Westernized Malay characters were inevitably portrayed as betraying traditional values, Westernized Malay music (and vice versa) served as the soundtrack for modern, working class Malaysians rooted in traditional cultural mores.

In this article we first outline the socio-historical context of Ramlee's films, paying especial attention to the connections between early Malay film and the *bangsawan* folk theater form. In our discussion of the development of Malay film and the Malay studio industry, we see intercultural interactions that echo those that surrounded the development of *bangsawan*. After contextualizing the scene and providing a concise biographical background on Ramlee, we focus on three aspects of his films' soundtracks: 1. The role of non-diegetic (background) music in conveying emotive meaning and the ways in which Ramlee's scores function differently from those of other international film genres; 2. The role of (primarily diegetic) music, often performed by Ramlee himself, in defining and describing emergent Malay notions of modernity and class relations; 3. The role of both diegetic and non-diegetic music in representing Malay cultural others. Here we develop upon the important recent work on international film music studies by Slobin (2008) and Gorbman (in Born, 2000). Finally, we discuss the recent growth of Ramlee hagiography or "tribute culture" in the form of film re-releases, books, documentaries, and the production of a high-profile biographical musical that demonstrate a nostalgic attitude among young, liberal Malaysians for the social world Ramlee proposed but which was never realized, as Malaysia re-oriented itself as an increasingly conservative Islamic state following Ramlee's death.