

ASIA PROGRAMME

THE PHANTOM IMAGE. THE FILMMAKER WANG BING AND THE ARCHEOLOGY OF THE MEMORY IN CHINA

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The majority of Wang Bing's (born in 1963) filming locations are situated in rural regions, often on the countryside like the Dongbei (north-east), the Gansu (North-west), or the Yunnan (south-west). The filmmaker meets with "little" people. Workers, former political prisoners, alienated and farmers: all explain the professional¹, familial², social, material, or moral precariousness, the forced loneliness, sometimes linked to political persecutions³, or the choice of a complete detachment towards society. All of these themes constitute the main subjects of his movies. The specificity of Wang Bing's realism, compared to his contemporaries' one⁴, lies, at the same time, in the total absence of every writing work before the filming and the use of the camera⁵. The recording tool, directly in the extension on the body (to the shoulder, single-handedly, on the knee), build the image at the same time as the movie takes shape and scripts itself. *Wild* filming method in the style of a Godard; the revolution brought by the use of a numerical camera multiply, moreover, the technical possibilities. This wandering of the lens, in turns qualified of "advanced principles"⁶ or of following the camera, substantiates on the screen the artist's desire to understand. The filmmaker pursues the reality of his subject; accompany it, without any other form of preparation. This continuing reference to the gesture, to the body of the one recording, leads us to consider the work of Wang Bing in its entire preformative dimension: he never ceases leading the spectator into a dynamic of movement, the temporality of which exceeds the work. From this pursuit of a subject from a clip to another, from these long-cut plans, while the camera keeps moving, this accompanying movement brings the experience of the ground as an

¹ We think of : *L'Argent du Charbon* (2009), *Crude Oil* (2008), *A l'Ouest des Rails* (2003).

² We think of: *Les Trois Sœurs* (2012)

³ Here we think of: *L'Homme Sans Nom* (2009) *Fengming. Chronique d'une Femme chinoise* (2007) or *Le Fossé* (2010)

⁴ Here we think of Jia Zhangke, Yu Lik-wai, Wang Xiaoshuai, Wang Chao or Zhao Liang. To understand the context, please read: Anderson Marston, *The limits of realism: Chinese fiction in the revolutionary period*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990; Hou Hanru, *On the mid-ground*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002; Wu Hung, Philipps Christopher, *Between Past and Future: New Chinese Photography and Video*, New York, Chicago: International Center of Photography and Smart Museum of Art, 2004; Gunn Edward, *Rendering the Regional: Local Language in Contemporary Chinese Media*, Honolulu, University of Hawa'i Press, 2005; Chu Yingchi, *Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony*, London, Routledge, 2007; Berry Chris, Lü Xinyu, Rofel Lisa (dir°), *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010; Judith Pernin, *Images en mouvement. Pratiques indépendantes du documentaire en Chine (1990-2010)*, thèse de doctorat (dir°) Jacques Aumont and Michel Bonnin, EHESS, 2012

⁵ Antony Fiant, *Wang Bing. Un geste documentaire de notre temps*, Laval, Warm, 2019

⁶ See « Le Principe d'Avancée Wang Bing » by Alexandre Costanzo in *Time is a Book [le Temps est un Livre]*, Paris, Galerie Chantal Crouzel, 2009, pp. 1-12.

expanse to survey, as a support to a known and horizontal initiatory travel. However, this more vertical link of the individual to his land also found its place in Wang Bing's cinema. From *L'Homme Sans Nom* (the main character lives thanks to the picking, sheltered by a cavity in the ground) to *L'Argent du Charbon* (the camera lingers over the charcoal blocs charged and discharged before they finally get sold), the fertile land, land which is also the one of the dead, is omnipresent. How to interpret the recurrences of appearances of this ground in the light of a specifically Chinese cultural and social context?

To try to answer it, we must ask ourselves about the history and social imagination of this country. Since the second half of the 20th century, it is the one of a totalitarian punctuated by serious internal crisis⁷ (Hundred Flowers Movement (1956), Great Leap Forward (1958), Cultural Revolution (1966), Tiananmen Massacres (1989) ...), which has made tens of millions of deaths, without a work of memory not being able to be freely undertaken. To the rest, the political questions are not reunited. China is completely controlled by a Communist State-Party and does not tolerate any form of dissidence. Now, its metamorphosis does not belong to the inherited categories of the past century concerning the very deep nature of its regime. Each year, the latter transforms in an authoritarian and nationalist Cybercracy. The intrusiveness, the instrumentalization of the facts and lies put up in State's principles – as recently shown by the Covid-19 crisis by Beijing's authorities – became the norm⁸. The approach of a Wang Bing aiming, as we shall see, to rehabilitate the words of the victims purged during the time of Mao Zedong is all the more courageous. The social imaginary of China has been deeply affected by these disruptions. By “social Chinese imaginary”, here we must understand the imagery conveyed by the dominant discourse. In other words, the part of the official discourse (coming from the current power and aiming at structuring the public space) that impregnates the Chinese collective consciousness but also the whole buried memorial

⁷ Jean-Philippe Béja, Michel Bonnin and Alain Peyraube, *Le Tremblement de terre de Pékin (Préface de Simon Leys)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991 ; Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *La Dernière Révolution de Mao. Histoire de la Révolution culturelle (1966-1976)*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009 ; Yang Jisheng, *Stèles. La Grande Famine en Chine (1958-1961)*, Paris, Seuil, 2012 ; Lucien Bianco, *La récidive. Révolution russe, révolution chinoise*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014 ; Michel Bonnin, *Génération perdue. Le mouvement d'envoi des jeunes instruits à la campagne en Chine, 1968-1980*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004

⁸ Emmanuel Lincot, « *La résistible ascension de la Chine. Part. 1 : un régime mutant (avec Emmanuel Veron)* », Le Grand Continent, may-june 2020 : <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/05/14/la-resistible-ascension-de-la-chine-pt-1-un-regime-mutant/>

realities that this discourse tries to mask and more particularly in its silences relatively to the large scale purges that the country has known during its recent history⁹. For the historian, the stake of this analysis may also be to try to understand the social imagination of the Chinese to which we must link the notion of “believing”¹⁰, in the very materiality of the image which is given to us to see. Indeed, the goal is to have a better understanding of the relationship we have to the power of these sometimes-haunting images on which the principle and the work of this great filmmaker are based.

DIALOGUE WITH THE PHANTOMS¹¹

His work proceeds of the genealogy or even of the archaeology. Indeed, in the manner of Claude Lanzmann¹² or Joshua Oppenheimer¹³, he does not hesitate to call upon historical witnesses who become, themselves, actors of their own history. For all that, the use of fiction is not foreign to the work of Wang Bing either. Thus, *Le Fossé* (2010) reports the deportation, in the middle of the Gobi Desert, of the so-named “**rightists**” (opponents of the Party directives), following the end of the Hundred Flowers Movement (1956). Their role is interpreted, in this context, by professional actors; it is so fiction, moreover, on the taboo subject of the universe of Chinese concentration camp of the *laogai*¹⁴. This questioning of the memory through a historical reconstitution is reminiscent of the approach of Rithy Pann, for some of his films, on the massacres perpetrated by the Red Khmer regime in Cambodia¹⁵. This tensioning between historical facts and fiction opens up on an imaginary. It is the imaginary of all the outcasts of China, the disappeared, of whom only one image stays. Phantom. The work of Wang Bing does not limit itself, as we understood, to only be a documentary. Apart from the criticism dimension, true Ariane

⁹ Here we think of remarkable *Dead Souls* (2018) of Wang Bing.

¹⁰ Unlike the ethnologist or the sociologist, the historian only indirectly reaches the interpretations and representations given by the culture of the time. It is by drawing inspiration from this approach that the medievalist Jean-Claude Schmitt explored the notion of believing through the iconographic history of gestures in the West: Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La Raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990

¹¹ Marie Laureillard, Vincent Durand-Dastès, *Fantômes dans l'Extrême-Orient d'hier et d'aujourd'hui – Tome 2*, Paris, INALCO, 2017

¹² *Shoah* (1985) tells the massacre of the European Jewish populations by Nazis during World War II.

¹³ *The Act of Killing* (2012) tells the massacres perpetrated by the Indonesian dictatorship against the Chinese communities between others.

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Domenach, *L'archipel oublié*, Paris, Fayard, 1992

¹⁵ See also *L'Image manquante* (2013)

thread going across his entire production, Wang Bing cares about rehabilitating the nameless, the voiceless. The people that history has sacrificed. Yet, their spirits haunt the alive. It is here one of the biggest topics of the contemporary Chinese art of these past thirty years, which is often associated with the ruins theme. It reflects a society losing its bearings, a regime of historicity that crumbles between a dark past and a future that is more uncertain than ever¹⁶.

In *L'Homme sans Nom* (2009), Wang Bing shows us a man in his forties, living alone, wandering, sometimes sheltered by his underground hides, dug out of the ground, and accomplishing tasks necessary to his most elementary daily needs. In a remarkable analysis of the movie in the epilogue of *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Georges Didi-Hubermann talk to us about the length of the plans, the temporality of the movie adjusted on the slow gesture of the isolation. He lets us observe each detail of this meticulous choreography of the surviving¹⁷. The strange appearance that animates it is that of a ghost. Like a phantom, it seems to warn us about the past and future things. One of the dimensions of this “strangeness” (in Chinese qiguai), of this disturbing otherness, obviously lies in the encounter of this character with our own temporality. The closeness and farness effects are part of this aura. It is for Wang Bing a proper modality to his cinematographic language: any transmission linked to an experience seeks to know the distance from the near, but the near can be difficult to grasp precisely because of its blinding proximity. *“In all cases, it was about observing, studying, respecting, and finally admiring men exercising their intelligence and their experience in the fight for existence with very little help”*¹⁸.

Not happy to give back a face, a human figure that could permit to recognize this land as alike, Wang Bing takes the time, by alternating *give-to-see* and *go see* that is specific to him, to make us appreciate the precision of his gesture. It is worth accompanying, dialogue more often muted yes, which falls under a spiritual tradition, aesthetic even, designating

¹⁶ Emmanuel Lincot, *Peinture et pouvoir en Chine : une histoire culturelle (1979-2009)*, Paris, You Feng, 2010

¹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman in : « L'Homme Sans Nom », epilog of L'Œil de l'Histoire, Tome 4: *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Paris, Minuit, 2012

¹⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman in : « L'Homme Sans Nom », epilog of L'Œil de l'Histoire, Tome 4 : *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Paris, Minuit, 2012, p. 243

everything that exceeds the speaking, and goes “far beyond the words” (in Chinese *yan wei yan*). *Fengming. Chronique d’une Femme chinoise (2007)* fits into this logic. In this movie, we witness a fixed shot of an old lady long monologue. Her life has succumbed to the underworld of ideological harassment, the Maoism. It means, indoctrination, denunciation, and forced divorce, pariah life with the humiliation of not being like others, of not eating enough. The bundle, in reality, of millions of others, that we guess through the misty gaze of the one whose flow of speech stops and then starts again in a grin that says it all about those years of lead.

THE IMAGE IS WHAT IT HIDES

They look like any other exiled of these camps that have immersed the communist world, Soviet first¹⁹, in the clutch of absolute horror. All of these “phantoms” (*gui* in Chinese) can be guessed through this harrowing testimony, almost unreal. The very word “phantom”, *gui*, is the homonym of a verb meaning, in Chinese, “go back home” in reference, in particular, to the spirits of dead people coming to disrupt the community of the alive. Those very special dead, through the imperfection more than the sanctity, always rebel against the oblivion. Wang Bing manages to convoke them with sobriety in the choice of the plan which is no less prodigiously rich in its power of expression. The more we get closer to the raw reality of all these tragic facts, the more the liberation degree seems to widen to the point where the inexpressible can be represented. Wang Bing here pursues through other means – those permitted by the cinema – a thought which, in the past, was also dear to Han Feizi (280-233 av. J.-C.). The political history has learned from this ancient Chinese thinker, his radical positions on the need to impose the state policy on the society to maintain its cohesion. Han Feizi was also the author of a text on the relation to reality. As emphasized by Yolaine Escande, it shows “fundamental difference between China and the West on the concern of aesthetic references”. Let listen to him:

¹⁹ Nicolas Werth, *La route de la Kolyma*, Paris, Belin, 2012 ; Lucien Bianco, *La récidive. Révolution russe, révolution chinoise*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014

“Once upon a time there was a traveller who made paintings for the King of Qi. He asked him, “What is the most difficult to paint? «Dogs and horses are the most difficult,” he replied. - And what is easier? - Spirits and demons are the easiest. Because dogs and horses are known to men. We have them in front of us from morning to night. You cannot make them perfectly conform [lei]; this is why they are difficult. Whereas spirits and demons have no form. We don't have them in front of us. Thus, they are easy to represent”²⁰.

What does it mean? It means that the things shown are always what we hide. Thus, in *Argent Amer*, Wang Bing follows two teenagers letting behind the rice fields of Yunnan to join the Textile Industry Factories of Guangzhou Province. During the first thirteen minutes of the movie, the camera does not linger on the moving landscape or the movement of the train. In this same dynamic of *following* described by Georges Didi Huberman, the camera is content to record the gestures of the passengers. The whole sequence denounces the marking contrast between accustomed activities and the transport infrastructure: the space of the train is found entirely changed. The attention is given to the persistence of daily habits within the wagon itself, the card game that continues, the residue of dust on the handful of beans, and dried fruits carried away for the trip ... Already we can guess, through those movements, the subtle tricks, tactics of resistance by which our two boys will divert objects and codes, and will reclaim space to use it in their way. Everything talks about what has been left, and that the two young boys brought with them through these “arts of doing”²¹, using the language of Michel de Certeau, which was bequeathed to them. All those phantoms accompanying them and that Wang Bing reveals in some plans, by the “relic”²² of the gestures which are given to us to see. The apprehensiveness also, that is both theirs and their elders.

Between this artwork and *Farrebique* (1946), a remarkable movie by Georges Rouquier on the decline of the French rural world, there would be more of a rapprochement. Not so much on the consequences of the industrialization but on this way of associating the banality of everyday life to the in-between of a completely different scene situated

²⁰ Yolaine Escande, *L'Art en Chine. Traduction de Yolaine Escande*, Paris, Hermann, 2001, p. 167

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien. Arts de faire*. Volume 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1990

²² Georges Didi- Huberman, *L'Image survivante*, Paris, Minuit, 2002

between two worlds: the visible and the invisible. By collecting the comings and goings of these persons in the softness way, the artist confronts us with the contemporary Chinese crisis in all its brutality. By doing this, he shows us the pugnacity and vivacity of the daily habits and observes the way they keep appearing everywhere, finding fertility in every ground (static ground or moving ground). Therefore, the artist asks us the same question as our contemporary philosophers²³, and if he does not bring a definitive answer, at least he suggests a way of looking at it.

Wang Bing's artwork is not widely distributed in China. On the other hand, it meets a great success in France. While offering alternative representations of the limiting visualizations of the official Chinese discourse, the filmmaker work thus acts as a testimony, beyond the frontiers of the country. Wang Bing, represented as a video maker in France by the Chantal Crousel Gallery, sees his work exist next to others like Gabriel Orozco, Abraham Cruzvillegas, or Oscar Tuazon. Wandering art, poetics of construction site, and romanticism of precarious housing or ruin... The aesthetic buildings convoked by the space of the gallery, their histories, or their connections sometimes lead to problematic or overly reductive misinterpretations in the reception of his work. We can see through this artwork a form of social realism. A terminology that the filmmaker would not deny. It is also symptomatic that Wang Bing has refused any affiliation with post-socialist cinema²⁴. Wang Bing explores the limits of the subject and of society at the same time. This almost indissoluble, almost inadmissible aspect of the work also poses a challenge for the European artistic and film scene.

Not particularly claiming to be from the cinema, he explains that the artists around him in his early days were mostly plastic artists, painters, sculptors. Between filmed performance and feature film, the experimental work of the filmmaker finds its place neither in the Chinese cinema market nor on the artistic scene. In *L'Épilogue de l'Homme Sans Nom*, Georges Didi Hubermann, while admitting his relative ignorance about the

²³ We think of Bruno Latour, *Où Atterrir ? : Comment s'Orienter en Politique*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017

²⁴ The movement (1976-1981) brought together, among others, the screenwriters, directors and critics Bai Hua, Zheng Dongtian, Rao Shuguang, Xie Jin, Chen Xihe... The resulting works will be censored when Deng Xiaoping takes the leadership of the Party.

Chinese society, intuitively says that the image should be read thanks to a method of “trend interpretation”²⁵:

*"Something like convergence lines - towards the question of the peoples - that one could draw from these simple gestures considered closely, on the body of the humblest and the loneliest of men"*²⁶.

Convergence lines, without any verbal explanation being given, as the world of ghost remains quiet. Wang Bing reduces every narrative structure. It is a “subtractive cinema”²⁷. A cinema of hesitant reading, resisting every form of expected dramaturgy, a cinema of opacity not giving us a lot of information about the intentions of the people filmed, their pasts and characters. In its absence of further dialogue, of contextualization, the work confronts us with our desires and our inability to understand and so, leaves room to other modes of empathy. Beyond “understanding”, we “live alongside” this world, tragic but also steeped in poetry, saturated with the unspoken and receptive to the choice of a slow pace. We are also used to²⁸ this choice with a certain cinema of the last communist years coming from Eastern Europe and its filmmaker Bela Tarr. It is through the fields of industrial ruins that the movie *L'Ouest des rails* (2003), an almost phantasmic world, the one of the old Manchuria workers, leads us. World of ghosts, a creaking which also refers us to the State Party propaganda, which long ago, had praised the merits of the working class. It has passed away and with it the promise of singing tomorrow.

Wang Bing patiently recreates for us the history by pacing up and down these steel cathedrals that are the disused factories, impersonal vestiges whose gigantism eventually fades to show only those faces altered by the hard ordeals of work. Let’s look at a little closer: to be disturbing, they send us no less, now that we are touching their reality, a message of peace. However, these men have been exploited, betrayed. Yet, no hatred

²⁵ Here, Georges Didi-Huberman refers to the notion as brought up by François Jullien in *Le Détour et l'Accès. Strategies of Meaning in China, in Greece*, Paris, Grasset, 1997

²⁶ See Georges Didi-Huberman dans « L'Homme Sans Nom », epilog of L'Œil de l'Histoire, Tome 4 : *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Minuit, 2012, pp. 255

²⁷ See Antony Fiant, *Pour un Cinéma Contemporain Soustractif*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, collection « Esthétiques hors cadre », 2014

²⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Bela Tarr, Le temps d'après*, Paris, Capricci, 2011

animates them. Who are they, thus, to have freed themselves from (social) revenge, nihilism, bitterness? Their image acts as a strong antidote against the venom of propaganda used by the regime. It has a talisman value and lends itself to a spiritual interpretation. The visual language mastered by Wang Bing always seems to echo these rituals whose ambivalence operates as a shift in the situation. The factories filmed by Wang Bing are less the emblem of a glorious history than a sanctuary. And like a holy place, angels protect it. It is the same observation with the alienated from the movie *A la folie* (2013) that the movie maker gently broaches by returning the prejudices that pursue them.

The movie maker seems to tell us that it is important to have the courage to keep the eyes open. When the gaze becomes vision and Wang Bing helps us perceive the unseen image. Phantom image as we say of an intercessor who, alone, can reveal these worlds we thought was submerged...

SUMMARY

Wang Bing is one of the most powerful Chinese filmmakers of his generation. He is a social filmmaker who brings awareness on his country's contemporary history as well as on the taboo one of the Maoist purges. Of this period or of the social upheavals incurred, only the official history written by the State Party and by a dictatorship can be accessed. That leaves very little room for the expression of the nameless, the marginalized. Their voices are weak and when the filmmaker let them out by first showing us fragile and spectral bodies, we go back to a world of forgotten memories. A ghost populated world – both demons and good spirits – that the filmmaker let us have a catch of by submitting the following recurrent question: Which one of these worlds is the most believable? The visible or the invisible one? Wang Bing bet on the gap that slowly accompanies us in the mysteries of the Chinese society. The filmmaker involves himself into a true archaeology. This one permits, thanks to a visual kind of archaeology, to reconnect with gestures that

we thought disappeared, stories calling older ones. Just images or rather images looking even more just that they are phantom images. They give to this cinematographic universe a whole other status gifted by the documentary cinema. It truly is a work of art. ■

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