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The limits of representation: Wang Bing's labour camp films

ABSTRACT

1. *This article proposes to compare two films by Wang Bing – his documentary He*
2. *Fengming (2007) and feature film The Ditch (2010) – from the perspective of their*
3. *implicit ethics of representation. The two films are part of one original project: after*
4. *its publication in 2001, Wang Bing bought the rights to Yang Xianhui's collection of*
5. *reportage literature Chronicles of Jiabiangou, devoted to a labour camp in Gansu,*
6. *where several hundred 'rightists' died of famine in 1959–1960. He Fengming, whose*
7. *husband died in Jiabiangou, was one of his interviewees: her testimony stood out so*
8. *strongly that Wang Bing used it as material for a stand-alone documentary. This*
9. *individual testimony, filmed in a markedly undramatic style, contrasts with the*
10. *theatrical mode adopted by Wang in the 2010 feature film, raising many fundamen-*
11. *tal questions about the representation of suffering, the conceptualization of history,*
12. *and the relationship between factual and fictional accounts of history.*
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The well-known Chinese documentary director Wang Bing regularly mentions in interviews that he has long held an interest in the episodes of recent Chinese history usually left out of textbooks. Indeed this interest was most probably already a driving force behind his documentation of the privatization of the massive historical state-owned Shenyang industries in

KEYWORDS

Wang Bing
labour camp films
Anti-rightist
movement
documentary
fictionalization
ethics of representa-
tion.

1. In particular Yang Jisheng's collection of interviews and documents published in Hong Kong (2008).
2. Unless otherwise referenced, biographical elements about Wang Bing are drawn from a series of interviews with the director, in particular on 12–13 August 2010.
3. For an alternative view, see the essays in *Theorizing Documentary* (Renov 1993) in particular the famous piece by Trinh T. Minh-ha, arguing that there is no relevant distinction between the two genres. Michael Chanan's recent essay is helpful in situating the distinction at the level of the addressee: for him, fiction addresses the viewer as a private individual, documentary as a citizen (2007: v–vi).

Tiexiqu/West of Tracks (Wang Bing 2002). But it was when reading a collection of short narratives based on interviews with survivors of a labour camp in Gansu (*Chronicles of Jiabiangou; Jiabiangou jishi* by Yang Xianhui: Yang 2008) around 2003 that Wang Bing first had the idea of making a film about the victims of the Anti-rightist movement and quickly bought the rights to Yang's book. A direct consequence of the Hundred Flower Movement of 1956, when intellectuals were encouraged to criticize the Party's shortcomings since 1949, this historical episode represents Mao's first large-scale campaign against intellectuals and other 'anti-socialist' elements: in 1957, almost a decade before the Cultural Revolution, designated 'Rightists' were sent to labour camps (reform through labour camps, or *laogai* had been in use since 1949 for certain categories of criminals; re-education through labour camps, or *laojiao*, were specifically created to house Rightists in 1957), where harsh conditions were compounded by the famine of the Great Leap Forward. Yang's book, a collection of 'chronicles' based on interviews with rightists who survived the deathly famine in the labour camp of Jiabiangou (Gansu) in 1960, in retrospect appears as a milestone, the first of several unofficial investigations or works of oral history dedicated to the Anti-rightist movement and the famine of the Great Leap Forward.¹ In the preface, Yang sets out the importance of Jiabiangou as a camp where rightists starved to death, with less than half of the prisoners surviving.

Thus inspired, Wang Bing over the following years proceeded to seek out most of the Jiabiangou survivors himself and collect filmed interviews with the intention of writing a screenplay for a feature film.² One of the interviewees was He Fengming, now a retired journalist living in Lanzhou (Gansu), whose story had appeared as one of the narratives in Yang's collection, and who had herself written a full-fledged book of memoirs on her own. Her testimony to Wang Bing proved so eloquent that it became a documentary in its own right, entitled *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (*He Fengming*, 2007), several years before Wang Bing was able to put together the funding to make the feature, titled simply *Jiabiangou/The Ditch* (2010). As part of the same project, the two films are therefore best discussed together. Wang Bing's treatment of history in these two films, building on his previous experiments with portraying isolated individuals against the background of collective historical developments in *West of Tracks*, raises a number of interesting questions about the implications of approaching a violent historical episode through documentary or fiction. While the documentary *He Fengming* is based on a single long interview, eschewing any use of archival images and even less fictional reconstructions, *The Ditch* by contrast uses actors, scripted dialogue and striking camerawork to flesh out the historical episode it portrays. It immediately begs the question of what Wang Bing, breaking with the careful iconoclasm of *He Fengming*, may have hoped to achieve by representing a historical episode like Jiabiangou in images.

The broader issues of representing or constructing history in documentary and fiction, intersecting with a distinct though related debate on history and memory, would merit a discussion far beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that this piece situates itself within the framework articulated, among others, by Bill Nichols, in which documentary is not simply considered 'a fiction like any other' (1991: 108), hence that it is relevant to discuss some differences between *The Ditch* and *Fengming* in terms of genre.³ Nor does this essay claim to redefine these boundaries, recognizing 'that the categories and boundaries surrounding documentary and reality, fact and fiction, defy hard

and fast definition' (Nichols 1994: xiii). The focus is rather on a more narrow question poignantly raised by Wang Bing's two films: the ethical implications of representing a labour or death camp, both in documentary or in fiction. Claude Lanzmann's position is perhaps the most well-known, advocating an absolute iconoclasm in representing the Holocaust, and opposing both fictional re-enactment and archival illustration: 'The Holocaust is unique in that it surrounds itself with a circle of fire, a limit that may not be crossed because a certain degree of horror cannot be transmitted. To purport to do so makes one guilty of the gravest form of transgression' (Lanzmann 1994).⁴ Wang Bing, who is well acquainted with Lanzmann's work, seems to have remembered some of his ideas when making the documentary *He Fengming*, which functions as a kind of ethical foundation for *Jiabiangou*, a carefully calibrated fictional re-enactment which transgresses Lanzmann's taboo but at the same time seeks to incorporate the critique of representation. This article will therefore successively examine the two films, dwelling more particularly on the ethical implications of the director's aesthetic choices.⁵ In this sense the reference to Lanzmann's work in the present article is not meant to function as an 'orthodoxy of correct representation' (Huysen 2003: 19) but rather as a framework for discussion.⁶ The idea of an ethics of representation will be both discussed in reference to critical reflections by Lanzmann and replaced within the context of Wang Bing's *œuvre*.

HE FENGMING: THE DE-DRAMATIZATION OF A DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

While Yang Xianhui's book in general, including the piece devoted to He Fengming's story (she appears under the name He Sang in the piece 'A Visit to Wang Jingchao'), stands out by its careful exclusion of any strong emotion that may have appeared in the interviews it is based on, Wang Bing's *He Fengming*, by contrast, features the eponymous protagonist stridently expressing her contentious claim to rectifying the injustices she sees herself as having fallen victim to, delivering 'a persecuted bourgeois intellectual's reclamation of *suku*, the Communist practice that encouraged peasants to exercise political agency by airing their grievances in public', as Andrew Chan insightfully notes (2008; see also Duhamel-Müller 2010). Her pathos-laden epic of revolutionary fervour, dashed hopes and unbroken belief in the Party is ushered in by the pronouncement, made after she foregoes the place she is offered at a university to join a newly established newspaper after the 'Liberation' of Lanzhou: 'My revolutionary career had begun'. With her cathartic outpour of emotion and resentment accumulated over decades, she is a clear heir to the tradition of 'scar literature'. In which intellectuals, appearing as helpless victims, seek recognition from the authorities who have 'wronged' them, thus also implicitly recognizing the latter's legitimacy. Yang Xianhui breaks with this tradition in using clinical, detached descriptions of violence and suffering; and we may hypothesize that Wang Bing, faced with his interviewee's emotional monologue, similarly devised a strategy to frame or resist this emotion.

On one level, it is true that, far from being a long, rambling interview, *He Fengming* has a carefully devised dramatic structure. Leaving aside a few shots at the beginning and end, as well as no more than two or three cuts to other parts of the apartment, over nine-tenths of the film consist of full frontal views of He Fengming sitting in an armchair in her living room. However, Wang Bing uses three different frames, one that takes in the entire width of

4. Unless otherwise referenced, translations from French sources are my own. For a general critique of representation in film, see Shohat and Stam (1994: 182–88); for more scholarly discussions of the problem of representing the Holocaust, see for example: Bartov (1996: 139–86); LaCapra (1998); Lang (2000); and Rothberg (2000). For further discussion of Lanzmann's position, see Felman (1992).
5. For further theoretical background on the ethics of representation, see the chapter entitled 'Axiographics: Ethical space in documentary film' (Nichols 1991: 76–103), in which the author discusses how documentary film is confronted with the question of transforming 'historical place' into 'ethical space', an approach germane to the one developed in this article.
6. Huysen's book provides a good overview of the debate on history and memory in the introduction (2003: 1–10). He takes issue with the critique of the commodification of memory as a symptom of society's modernist desire to forget the past; on the contrary, for him the ubiquity of memory points to a newly felt anxiety about the linear temporality of modernity in which the past disappears at an increasing speed.

7. *Caiyou riji/Crude Oil*, 2008 is a documentary installation made by setting up a camera on a table in the workers' resting quarters of an oil platform in Qinghai. The fourteen hours of the film entirely reflect real time, without any significant cuts, recording the workers' movements entering and leaving the room as well as long periods during which the room is empty and nothing happens.
8. Reclaiming suppressed memories of the Maoist era is arguably one of the main sources of inspiration for many independent documentary directors in China. Hu Jie is one of the most prominent, having made the two seminal films *Wo sui siqu/Though I Am Gone*, 2006 and *Xunzhao Lin Zhao zhi hun/In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul*, 2004, two works Wang Bing professes to be familiar with and that predate his own. On Hu Jie, see Li (2009).

the living room wall, one that is about the breadth of the armchair, and finally a close-up of He Fengming's face, which he uses only for one long sequence, that runs approximately from 1:35 to 1:50 of the three-hour film. The dramatic peak of the film comes within this sequence, at around 1:40, just after its exact middle point: in her narrative, He Fengming finally reaches Jiabangou labour camp where she hopes to rescue her husband from the famine, only to find that he has died one week earlier. The climax in He Fengming's lament, highlighted by her tone and visible emotional involvement, is therefore aptly reflected in the imperceptible build-up to a closer focus on He's face.

The other important structural element is Wang Bing's use of natural light, which reflects his fascination with real time, particularly apparent in *Crude Oil*,⁷ but also in certain parts of *West of Tracks*. The film begins at dusk, when the camera follows He Fengming home, a sequence followed by the long build-up to the climax of her husband Wang Jingchao's death (actually filmed on the following day, but which segues seamlessly from the first sequence). During this time it gets darker and darker: at the end of the first hour the room is too dark to see and He Fengming gets up to switch on the ceiling light. The climax therefore takes place in the deep of night under an artificial neon lamp not unlike the ones used in police stations or prisons, where 'confessions' of a different nature may be extracted. The long narrative of suffering and reproach, in which the Anti-rightist movement is followed by added humiliation during the Cultural Revolution, the illness of He's son and the death of her mother while she is confined to a peasant's home in a remote village in Gansu, all take place under the neon lighting of a never-ending night. Finally, after two hours and 45 minutes, she is rehabilitated and returns to Lanzhou – in 1978. At this point, the film cuts to the enclosed balcony in the bright sunlight of the next day, in a compelling image of the end of Maoism: the sunlight shines through the window, but outside one can still make out steel bars. The final part of the film, a kind of epilogue, consists of approximately fifteen minutes narrating He's efforts at contacting survivors and locating her husband's tomb, told in broad daylight, and a final five minutes filmed in the evening, during which the camera moves away from her, observing her sideways through a door, as if on its way out, in a reminder of the opening sequence.

However, the film cannot simply be described as a skilful dramatization. Wang Bing, just like Yang Xianhui, is preoccupied with avoiding pathos. The tendency to dramatization is therefore at the same time counteracted by various devices aimed at de-dramatization. As noted by several critics, Wang Bing chooses not to include any visual record (photographs, footage) of the past, not unlike in Claude Lanzmann's work, which he is familiar with, having met Lanzmann in Paris and received a dedicated copy of *Shoah* (1985). On the contrary, he frames the narrative within the most banal of visual contexts: a standardized apartment, cluttered not with personal mementos, as in Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (2008), but with the random objects of everyday life.⁸ The introductory sequence during which the camera follows He Fengming, seen from behind, into a dingy work-unit housing compound and up the dark staircase to her apartment, almost suggests he has picked a random person on the street to follow.

Despite the previously noted changes in frame, Wang Bing chooses a minimal though carefully calculated role for his camera, which is set on the table and 'left' to record He's monologue, while Wang (contrary to Lanzmann in *Shoah*) never intervenes. He thus creates a defining tension between the

1. dramatic structure of the overstated, subjective narrative and a camera which
 2. stubbornly refuses to budge from its detached, 'objective' position on the
 3. coffee table – this tension, or duel, may well be what keeps the viewer glued to
 4. the screen. When He Fengming goes to the bathroom, the camera continues
 5. to film the empty chair, in a kind of Brechtian demystification that operates
 6. by revealing 'the ropes' behind He Fengming's 'act'. In this way, rather than
 7. dramatic authenticity, the film chooses to highlight the randomness of a banal
 8. existence: the contrast between the dramatic past and the everyday routine is
 9. particularly underscored by the ringing telephone in the final sequence, which
 10. allows the camera to randomly capture a conversation with another survivor.
 11. In this way, He Fengming's long monologue is both faithfully and respectfully
 12. presented, complete with her own dramatic effects, heightened by the editing,
 13. but at the same time also 'distantiated', resisted by the non-involvement of
 14. the camera, and transformed into an object for reflection (*fansi* 反思).

15. While Wang Bing, in an interview with Robert Koehler, underlines that
 16. He Fengming lives in the past, likening her home to a tomb (2007), the whole
 17. form of the film is conceived to reframe this terrifyingly unfamiliar past within
 18. a familiar and banal present, allowing him to suggest how close the revolu-
 19. tionary past remains to the surface of China's apparently pacified contem-
 20. porary society. Just as in *Baoli gongchang/Brutality Factory*, 2007, Wang Bing's
 21. short film within the omnibus *State of the World* (2007) project, the repressed
 22. past is never very far from the surface of the seemingly innocuous present. In
 23. this context, the dedication of the film to *gemingzhe he bei gemingzhe* 革命者
 24. 和被革命者/'the revolutionaries and the revolutionized'⁹ reflects the tension
 25. that runs throughout the visual narrative: it accommodates enough empathy
 26. to recapture He Fengming's career as both revolutionary and victim; but by
 27. juxtaposing and thus suggesting the symmetry or reversibility between her
 28. two identities, it also introduces a critical distance with her narrative, rein-
 29. forced by the camera's refusal to become 'implicated' in her story. It suggests,
 30. if not an equivalency between victims and perpetrators, at least an implicit
 31. connection between them and their respective aspirations, a common belong-
 32. ing to the 'revolutionary times' that produced them, in sharp contrast with the
 33. main character's confident assertion of right and wrong. In this sense, Wang
 34. Bing seems to point towards a more radical insight that goes beyond the Anti-
 35. rightist Movement of the Cultural Revolution: it is the revolutionary spirit that
 36. has made several generations of Chinese citizens into victims, in a vicious
 37. cycle that his own generation must somehow attempt to break out of.

THE DITCH: REALISTIC RE-ENACTMENT AND SURREAL 'DISTANTIATION'

42. *The Ditch*, released in 2010, is the long-awaited fictional pendant to *He*
 43. *Fengming* in which Wang Bing, building on his earlier experiment in *Brutality*
 44. *Factory*, undertakes a full-fledged fictional re-enactment of the past – the
 45. labour or death camp of Jiabiangou – in images. While the documentary
 46. focused on a single interview, the feature is adapted from several narratives
 47. (each based on one interview) in Yang Xianhui's book, as well as by other
 48. survivors interviewed by Wang Bing (he mentions one named Ti Zhongzheng
 49. in the opening credits), and shot in what most critics have described as a
 50. 'vérité' style inspired by documentary aesthetics, with amateur or semi-pro-
 51. fessional actors. Because of their close connection, it may be useful to provide
 52. some background on the original book to understand better how Wang Bing

9. The full text of the English subtitle in the version of the film shown in Hong Kong reads: *Ci yingpian jin xian gei shenghuo zai geming shiqi de gemingzhe he bei gemingzhe* 此影片謹獻給生活在革命時期的革命者和被革命者/'This film is dedicated to all those who lived through the revolution, those who made it and who suffered it'.

10. Some, but not all of these stories appear in the English translation published under the title *The Woman from Shanghai* (Yang 2009).
11. For further discussion, see Sebastian Veg, 'Testimony, history and ethics: The memory of Jiabianguo prison camp', manuscript under review.

adapted and displaced the aspects he was most interested in. Yang's book is cited as a *changpian xiaoshuo* 'novel' in the opening credits of the film, a somewhat problematic characterization which points to one of Wang Bing's obvious difficulties in making the film: *Chronicles of Jiabianguo* is in fact a collection of nineteen novella-length pieces (between 30 and 50 pages in Chinese), each of which focuses on one character, with little connection between pieces, except in a few specific cases. The film, by contrast, attempts to build one central narrative, while at the same time including details from a number of other pieces, but which serve more to flesh out the background. Wang Bing relies mainly on three of Yang's stories, from which he extracts and juxtaposes episodes: the displacement of prisoners from Jiabianguo proper to the deadly camp in remote Mingshui (where the narrative of the film is set), which took place in the Autumn of 1960 (*Farewell to Jiabianguo*); a former policeman (old Chen) used as a 'crutch' (*guaigun* 拐棍, i.e. a kapo) by the camp director and put in charge of the dispensary, who listens to dying inmates' thoughts (*Dispensary Number 1*); the story of a woman come to rescue her husband but who finds him dead (like He Fengming) and insists on giving him a proper burial (*Woman from Shanghai*). He also uses shorter fragments from several other stories: an episode of cannibalism (*The Train Conductor*); a scene in which hunger compels a prisoner to eat another's vomit (*The Potato Feast*); an attempted escape in which a prisoner has no choice but to abandon his 'master' to the wolves in order to get away himself (*Escape*).¹⁰

Moral dilemmas are at the heart of Yang Xianhui's writing: his clinical narratives use detailed descriptions of acts of inhumanity (bodily decay and pain, cannibalism, torture) while remaining emotionally detached, suggesting the impossibility of passing easy moral judgments on such acts as cannibalism in the context of Jiabianguo. Yang carefully crafts situations in which characters face ethical dilemmas that stump the reader's judgment: survival may necessitate betrayal of one's closest companions or even cannibalism. I have argued elsewhere that Yang's book is best read not as a documentary record, but rather as an intervention by Yang about what he sees as a deliberate state-led attempt to break down the elementary moral and human values that form the base of life in society, progressively depriving the victims themselves of their feelings of humanity, so that any act seems morally tolerable if it is justified by the urge to survive.¹¹ *The Ditch* retains many examples of the pervasive moral breakdown that fascinates Yang: as dying prisoners in the dispensary reminisce about eating roasted mutton skin, former county chief Lin threatens to denounce a fellow prisoner who criticizes the land reform – an unrepentant snitch to his deathbed. The prisoner gets back at Lin at the end of the film, kicking a bowl of gruel to the ground as Lin is being fed (an episode taken from Dispensary no. 1) – a display of the political pettiness and misguided ethical values from which few prisoners can claim immunity. *The Ditch* again resorts to an oddly symmetrical dedication that does not seem to differentiate between perpetrators and victims: *Cipian xiangei naxie baojing kunan, yijing daoxia he jixu qianxing de renmen* 此片獻給那些飽經苦難，已經倒下和繼續前行的人們/'This film is dedicated to those who have suffered their fill, those who have fallen and those who continue to walk forward', suggesting the contingency of survival or death against the shared background of suffering, and also the moral uncertainty surrounding the choices which allowed some prisoners to survive. Wang Bing departs from Yang Xianhui's original text in leaving out most of the stories that deal more largely with the administrative mechanisms of the Maoist state and the legal absurdities of the Anti-rightist

1. movement: by focusing his narrative on the camp of Mingshui, he also zooms
 2. in on the moment of the most violent physical and ethical breakdown among
 3. the prisoners.
4. The narrative structure of *The Ditch* is an indication of Wang Bing's tech-
 5. nique of dramatization. The film is framed by two parallel sequences: the pris-
 6. oners' arrival at Mingshui at the beginning, and their discharge from Mingshui
 7. at the end; in both cases the leading cadres comment on the necessity of using
 8. prisoners to cultivate the wild and their hope to carry on the project despite
 9. the 'excess' deaths. The opening sequence is followed by a graduated series
 10. of fragments dealing with the famine, which depict its increasingly gruesome
 11. effects: a prisoner collapses in the field, guards distribute watery soup, prison-
 12. ers cook deadly grasses to fill their stomachs, chase rats, eat vomit, ask their
 13. family for extra rations by letter, finally resort to cannibalism. This sequence
 14. leads up to the climax: Dong Jianyi's death and his wife's visit (taken from
 15. *Woman from Shanghai*), followed by one final episode adapted from the story
 16. *Escape* in which the protagonist is able to flee the camp, but only by sacrific-
 17. ing his exhausted companion whom he leaves to be eaten by wolves, another
 18. dark example of moral compromise.¹² The length (approximately 45 minutes
 19. at the centre of the 112-minute film) and importance of the central episode
 20. highlights the parallelism between *The Ditch* and *He Fengming* (to which
 21. there is a brief allusion when the name of He's husband Wang Jingchao is
 22. mentioned among the dead): the visit of Dong Jianyi's wife and her fight
 23. for her husband's body, against both the camp authorities, who threaten to
 24. deport her back to Shanghai, and the fellow prisoners, who do not want her
 25. to see evidence of cannibalism in his mutilated flesh, is narrated in a similarly
 26. dramatic way as He Fengming's story, again highlighting the strident, conten-
 27. tious voice of a wronged woman. In this sense, *The Ditch* displays a dramatic
 28. crescendo similar to the one in *He Fengming*: the significance of the central
 29. episode is encapsulated in the breakdown of humanity that takes place when
 30. both the authorities (for bureaucratic more than ideological reasons) and the
 31. other prisoners (for very selfish reasons – they do not want to be associated
 32. with cannibalism) join forces in preventing a lone woman from looking for
 33. her husband's body.
34. However, if the narrative structure is skewed towards dramatization, it is
 35. counteracted by the actors' performance, which serves to recreate distance.
 36. Similarly to *He Fengming*, Wang Bing creates a tension between the dramatic
 37. crescendo and self-reflexive performance techniques, alternating between
 38. Stanislavskian authenticity and techniques of distantiating. Wang Bing pains-
 39. takingly reconstructs a labour camp on location in Gansu (where he filmed in
 40. semi-secret for several months in the fall and winter of 2008), with a minute
 41. attention to detail: oil lamps, battered tin bowls and cups, a Longines watch
 42. as a memento of pre-revolutionary China, leather suitcases in underground
 43. caves all make a claim to documentary authenticity. He often positions his
 44. camera within the cave, at exactly the height of prisoners lying on their beds
 45. and too weak to move, achieving a strong empathetic effect. However, the
 46. acting (mostly by amateurs or semi-amateur cultural workers Wang Bing
 47. hired locally in Gansu) seems to 'quote' the propaganda films of the 1950s
 48. (inspired by Stanislavsky's 'method'): cadres and prisoners speak in the same
 49. ponderous tones, use the same highly theatrical gestures and voice effects.
 50. The slowness of their movements, and their shortness of breath upon making
 51. the slightest effort are theatrically exaggerated; the surreal silence inside the
 52. caves, broken only by the sound of the desert wind, and the slow, deliberate
12. Wang Bing leaves aside another slightly more uplifting story on a similar theme: in *The Train Conductor*, the human organ looter/eater Wei Changhai is denounced by Li Tianqing; however, seeing the potentially lethal punishment inflicted on Wei by the camp director, Li saves him from the pit, a good act Wei repays by taking Li with him on his escape – the cannibal thus ends up becoming a humane saviour.

13. This description of Wang Bing's fictional technique chimes interestingly with Bill Nichols' analysis of documentary reenactment: 'the camera records those we seen on screen with indexical fidelity, but these figures are also ghosts or simulacra of others who have already acted out their parts' (Nichols 1994: 4). For a related analysis of reenactment in Rithy Panh's documentary *S 21* (2003), see Boyle (2010).

enunciation (for example in the scene in the dispensary when the prisoners are dreaming about food) all contribute to the nightmarish quality of the depiction. Excessive authenticity thus creates a kind of Brechtian distance which incessantly reminds the viewer of the fictional nature of the image on the screen: we may once more draw a parallel with *Brutality Factory*, where the camera, slowly lumbering up the stairs of what appears to be an ordinary factory in post-reform China (it is dismantled at the end of the film), discovers a surreal re-enactment of the most violent episodes of the revolutionary past – a nightmarish scene with almost psychoanalytic overtones, hinting at the ubiquitous return of the repressed past in contemporary China.

Similarly, Elena Pollacchi, while highlighting the realist aspects of *The Ditch* and the director's choice to shoot very close to the original location, goes so far as to write: 'the camp of Jiabangou appears inhabited by a democracy of ghosts rather than a hierarchy of guards and prisoners. Nameless people unreasonably erased from history by the brutality of power, literally surface from underground like the living dead' (Pollacchi 2012).¹³ By filming on a location close by the original site of the camp, Wang Bing is able to create this effect of a nightmarish return of the repressed past in the form of ghostly rightists emerging from hidden burrows in the midst of what may at first appear as a documentary representation of the fascinating landscape of today's Gobi desert. However, where on-location re-enactment traditionally serves to heighten the dramatization of documentary, Wang Bing's performance techniques on the contrary distance his fictional representation. We may note that Claude Lanzmann, in a collection of interviews published after *Shoah*, outlines a similarly ambiguous preoccupation with place and performance: for him, the original scene of a concentration camp is no longer relevant, however it cannot be entirely left out of the film: 'The hated object remains somehow alive. [...] The film always plays to both sides: the places are disfigured. The famous Chelmno castle no longer exists: it is a kind of warehouse. These disfigured places are what I call *non-lieux de mémoire*' (Cuau 1990: 290). The place has lost the traces of the historical event and hence its meaning; Lanzmann conversely sets out to recreate this meaning through a collection of highly stylized interviews:

Shoah is a fiction of the real. [...] In a way, we had to transform these people into actors. They are telling their own story. But telling it is not enough. They had to act it out, un-realizing it. That is what defines the imaginary: un-realizing. That is the essence of the paradox of the actor'.

(Cuau 1990: 301)

While Lanzmann does not condone fictionalization, this interview shows that he is perfectly aware of the dialectics of indexicality and performance. And while Wang Bing goes one step further in embracing fictionalization, this does not mean that he does not at the same time share some of Lanzmann's distrust of dramatization.

As in *He Fengming*, light also plays an important role in *The Ditch*. The darkness inside the caves, in which the dead and the living can no longer be distinguished, contrasts starkly with the blinding light outside: in the episode of the escape, when Luo Hongyuan crawls to the mouth of young Li's cave, Wang Bing uses reverse shots to establish a contrast between the certain death that awaits the characters in the darkness of the cave, and the liberating, but

1. also terrifying road to escape promised by the blinding light outside. The
 2. aesthetic beauty of the natural environment is oftentimes disturbing, provid-
 3. ing an effective contrast to the senseless political persecution: when Dong
 4. Jianyi's wife finally finds his burial place and breaks down wailing, the direc-
 5. tor uses a beautifully composed shot of her against the immense landscape
 6. of desert dunes that has engulfed so many of her husband's fellow prison-
 7. ers. The scene ends with a shot of the cloudless deep blue sky at dusk, as
 8. Dong's remains are cremated. The indifference of this imposing nature to the
 9. human suffering that plays out against it (and which it contributes to caus-
 10. ing) may be seen as a trope for Wang Bing's depiction of how humanity is
 11. capable of 'getting used to death' (the title of one of Zhang Xianliang's labour
 12. camp novels): when Zhao Tingji dies, we see his body, wrapped up in a cover
 13. and ready for burial, in the furthest corner of the dispensary, at this point, a
 14. door near it suddenly flies open and floods the dispensary with blinding white
 15. light, in what I would argue is not a sign of moral redemption, but the direc-
 16. tor's way of startling the viewer out of the darkness of moral indifference that
 17. pervades the underground.

18. Finally, the director uses a strategy of de-individualization to prevent
 19. heroic identification with any of the characters, in contrast with Yang Xianhui's
 20. use of individual narratives for each of his characters. *The Ditch* makes strong
 21. use of the contrast between the vast blue sky over the yellow desert and the
 22. inmates shuffling through fields or crawling around their dark underground
 23. caves like ants, bundled into several layers of thick clothing that make them
 24. unrecognizable as individuals. This aesthetic choice, which may seem surpris-
 25. ing in a director who has stressed that he aims to return their dignity to the
 26. victims of the movement, in fact also echoes some of Lanzmann's misgivings
 27. about fictionalization, for example in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993):

28.
 29. *Shoah* forbids many things, *Shoah* deprives people of many things, *Shoah*
 30. is an arid and pure film. In *Shoah*, there are no personal stories. The
 31. Jewish survivors of *Shoah* are survivors of a particular kind; they are not
 32. just any survivors, but people who were at the end of the extermination
 33. chain and directly witnessed the death of their people. *Shoah* is a film
 34. about death, not at all about survival. Not one of the survivors in *Shoah*
 35. says 'I'. Not one tells his or her personal story.

36. (1994)

37.
 38. While these pronouncements may merit being taken with a grain of salt, they
 39. do highlight that fragmentation and individualization are not necessarily the
 40. only narrative strategies that are ethically permissible, whether for Lanzmann
 41. or Wang Bing.

42. The neat framing of *The Ditch* by two episodes in which the leading cadres
 43. discuss the opening and closing of the camp of Mingshui gives the film a
 44. completeness that Yang Xianhui's fragmented collection does not seek. In
 45. the final images, as the survivors stagger out of their caves and toward (rela-
 46. tive) freedom, camp director Liu is seen standing, in the full splendour of his
 47. cadre status, wearing a blue military coat over his impeccable khaki Mao-suit,
 48. and talking, in the heroic cadre-tone typical of 1950s films, to Chen Yuming,
 49. whom he asks to stay behind after the prisoners leave. 'Too many people have
 50. died', he concedes, 'but this farm must still be run'. New prisoners will come,
 51. new land will be cleared. As the Rightists, seen from the vantage point of this
 52. far-removed position of power, laboriously crawl like ants out of their caves,

14. Contrary to the Cultural Revolution, in the case of the Anti-rightist movement, there was no official recognition that the movement was a 'mistake', a simple *tongzhi* 通知/Circular' was issued (Central Document no. 11 of 1978), followed by implementation guidelines (Central Document no. 55 of 1978), establishing the official number of condemned rightists at 550,000 and stipulating that:

In accordance with the spirit of Central Document no. 11 of 1978 and the 1957 Party Central Circular regarding the Criteria for designating rightist elements', there will be no general reexamination and rehabilitation of Rightist elements; for those whose designation as rightists was truly erroneous, correction should be granted by seeking truth from facts.

(Central Document no. 11)

All cases were therefore to be treated individually by work units, who were responsible for finding work for reinstated rightists; there was also no automatic restitution of Party membership.

away from the camera and towards an uncertain future, the background, sharply divided exactly halfway between the dark earth and a milky sky, suggests the uncertainty of the outcome: the camp is closed, but the system still spins on, not unlike the unstoppable train wheels at the end of *Shoah* demonstrating that the Holocaust has 'no end'. In this way, Wang Bing subtly conveys the official position on the Anti-rightist movement: errors were made in judging 'individual' cases (albeit in 99.9 per cent of cases), but the principles that governed the purge remain *zhengque*'correct'.¹⁴ There is no time or leisure for moral reflection, as Chen Yuming, returning to the dispensary as ordered, remarks: the living are more important than the dead. In this sense, Wang Bing's fictionalization, perhaps more than Yang Xianhui's, is expressly concerned with placing the episode of Jiabangou within an ongoing history of violence.

WANG BING AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

The seemingly stark contrast between a rigorous documentary based only on narrative, perhaps to some extent inspired by Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and a full-fledged fictional re-enactment, shot near the original location, raises important ethical questions, very relevant to Wang Bing's *œuvre*, and which are well summed-up in a pronouncement by Lanzmann:

Fiction is a transgression, I deeply believe that there is an interdiction of representation. [...] When I watched *Schindler's List*, I had the same sensation as when I had watched the series *Holocaust*. Transgressing and trivializing is the same thing here: a television series or a Hollywood film transgress because they trivialize, thus doing away with the unique character of the Holocaust. There is not a second of archival material in *Shoah* because that is not my way of working, of thinking and also because none exists. Therefore the question is raised: to testify, does one invent a new form or does one reconstruct? I think I invented a new form. Spielberg chose to reconstruct, and reconstructing is, in a way, fabricating archives.

(1994; see also Wajcman 2001)

The justifications for the philosophical position developed here, which holds that images cannot avoid being partial or misleading, are well-known: fiction, especially commercial fiction, is always a form of trivialization, it calls for easy identification and emotional responses to complex situations. In the case of the Holocaust, Lanzmann argues, only individual verbal testimony, because it avoids these pitfalls, is an ethically acceptable investigation technique.

Wang Bing obviously does not subscribe to this view, as the *He Fengming* project was from the beginning a preparatory work for a – then still unfunded – feature film to come. In fact one might go further and underline the symmetrical deconstruction of the apparent opposition between the genres in Wang Bing's diptych. *He Fengming*, rather than a detached documentary investigation, turns out to be a highly dramatized narrative, using meticulously thought-out light effects, camera frames, and editing to enhance the build-up of suspense, but at the same time de-dramatizing the narrative by using a camera that obstinately refuses to get 'involved' in the old lady's 'act', revealing the 'ropes' behind her performance. Conversely, in *The Ditch*, the on-location reconstitution of historical events which might produce the

1. kind of dramatic effect that Lanzmann so strongly objects to, is counteracted
 2. by the absence of individualization and a 'distantiated' style of acting reminis-
 3. cent of the historical era in which the film takes place, so that the film becomes
 4. not so much a re-enactment of 'reality' as a self-reflexive re-actualization of
 5. the discursive and visual codes of the Mao era. In this sense, both fiction and
 6. documentary construct a similar dialectic between dramatic involvement and
 7. distanced exteriority, and one that Claude Lanzmann, as mentioned above,
 8. also sometimes recognizes. The questions raised by fictional representation or
 9. indexical interviews are similar and in fact resonate across the divide between
 10. the two.

11. Rather than seeing an ethically loaded opposition between a documen-
 12. tary based on testimony and a fictional reconstruction that relies on a form of
 13. trivialization, Wang Bing shows that both genres run the risk of a problem-
 14. atic dramatization: the director's work is to address this risk through specific
 15. cinematographic techniques. Jacques Rancière's rejoinder to Lanzmann seems
 16. relevant to this discussion: '*Shoah* only poses problems of comparative repre-
 17. sentability, of adaptation of the means and ends of representation. If one
 18. knows what one wants to represent – i.e. in the case of Claude Lanzmann, the
 19. reality of the incredible, the equivalence of the real and the incredible – there
 20. is no property of the event that proscribes representation, that proscribes art,
 21. in the precise sense of the artifice. Nothing is unrepresentable as a property of
 22. the event. There are simply choices. The choice of the present as against histor-
 23. icization; the decision to represent an accounting of the means, the material-
 24. ity of the process, as opposed to the representation of causes' (Rancière 2007:
 25. 129). Fictional representation does not, in the final analysis, raise ethical issues
 26. that are different from those raised by a non-representational documentary;
 27. however, in both cases, what is important are the inseparably aesthetic and
 28. ethical choices made by the director. Bill Nichols, defining 'style as technique
 29. and moral outlook' (1991: 80), points to the narrative structure and the view-
 30. er's implication in the film as fundamental parameters in reading the text of
 31. documentary films. The following paragraphs will attempt to provide some
 32. examples of these inseparably stylistic and ethical parameters.

33. Wang Bing's previously mentioned use of light and darkness in the two
 34. films merits some further discussion. In *He Fengming*, the long nocturnal
 35. narrative that unfolds under artificial lighting, and the contrast with the natu-
 36. ral sunlight of the next morning which marks the beginning of the epilogue,
 37. serves as an historical trope for the long night of Maoism and a possible return
 38. to lucidity in its aftermath. In *The Ditch* the contrast between blinding light
 39. and numbing dark, underground caves and desert skies, serves to remind
 40. the viewer that no simple ethical judgments can be made. However, in the
 41. context of a discussion on the ethics of representation, light and darkness are
 42. also reflexive tropes, as pointed out by the film scholar Gérard Leblanc:

43. Where does fear stem from in the cinema? From the twofold threat hang-
 44. ing over the viewer's head, either of too much brightness or of a too deep
 45. darkness. A light so blinding that it would be impossible to look straight at the
 46. screen to see the image. A darkness so dense, so impenetrable that it might
 47. lead to the deep coma of a dreamless sleep. On the one hand, the threat of
 48. losing conscience through excessive light, an overexposed picture, on the
 49. other, the terror of anaesthesia, of sleep without return. (2000: 152, original
 50. emphasis)

51. In this sense, the contrast between the darkness of the caves and the
 52. blinding light of the desert sky also suggests the director's self-imposed limits

15. For a different view, see Veg (2007). For a fuller discussion of *West of Tracks*, see Li (2008).

in representing the extremes of his historical subject. The impenetrable darkness inside the caves points to the extreme degree of dehumanization of their inhabitants that the director refuses to show in the clear bright light of moral judgment. Similarly, the blinding brightness of the desert alludes to the extremes of suffering endured by the inmates of the camp that are too painful to be looked at directly. This use of light serves as a counterpoint to Wang Bing's fictionalization, highlighting the limits of what 'should' be represented.

Replacing these two films within Wang Bing's *œuvre*, and in particular in the context of *West of Tracks*, one may note that they also connect with two structural tendencies in his earlier film. The three-tiered organization of *West of Tracks*, which moves in arithmetical gradation from the monumental first part 'Rust' dedicated to the factory (with workers appearing either in uniform or in the nude, in either case undistinguishable as individuals) to the shorter and highly individualized third part 'Rails', which deals with a scavenger and his son living off the railway tracks, sketches out a movement from the demise of the great collectives of the Mao era towards the search for value and meaning in individual existence. In this sense, it probably stands less a paean to the remains of the socialist ideal, as famously argued by Lü Xinyu, than as a quest for an aesthetic and historical way out of the collectivist past, which also encompasses the great political campaigns of Maoism (2005).¹⁵ The diptych formed by *The Ditch* and *He Fengming* also reveals a similar contrast between the fiction film in which (contrary to Yang Xianhui's original book) individualities are blurred, characters' faces are often unrecognizable, swathed in layers of scarves and covered by the long earflaps of military hats, and the documentary, focused on a highly individualized witness emerging from the collectivist past. In this case, however, the dichotomy is complexified by the difference between feature and documentary, each genre being vulnerable to its own pitfalls. The collective dimension of the fiction film derives from the director's guarding against any kind of heroization of the characters, whereas the seemingly individualized narrative of *He Fengming* is ultimately lacking in a critical distance that only the camera can introduce. The absence in both films of a truly individual conscience points to the absence of individual space in the history of the Mao era: the victims, as Wang Bing puts it in the dedication, belong to the same 'revolutionary era' as the perpetrators. A situation with consequences, in Wang Bing's view, which continue to afflict China today.

Indeed, the most striking trope used by the director is no doubt that of a recent but hastily forgotten past reappearing under the apparently mundane appearances of daily life. Wang Bing thus provides stylized images that can be read as tropes for China's post-Mao predicament: the sun shining through the bars in *He Fengming* and the repressed past hidden under the surface in *Brutality Factory*. In this vein, the depiction of Jiabiangou as both a nightmarish figment of violent ideology and a drab and all-too prosaic reality of corporal starvation lends the film a kind of schizophrenic quality, not unlike the contrast between the ordinary old lady in her apartment and her horrific narrative in *He Fengming*: these are Wang Bing's ways of guarding against the aestheticization of terror.

In conclusion, Wang Bing's engagement with the labour camp theme gives rise to two films that probe the question of the ethics of representation across the boundary between fiction and documentary. *He Fengming*, conceived in a classical Lanzmann vein, is somehow hijacked by the protagonist's contentious call for justice, at times both highlighted and effectively counteracted by

1. the director's aesthetic choices in camera work and editing. Conversely, *The*
2. *Ditch*, conceived as a meticulous fictional reconstruction, eschews dramatiza-
3. tion in its refusal of individualized characters, while at the same time using to
4. great effect a strongly melodramatic acting technique related to Mao-era prop-
5. aganda films. In this case again, techniques of dramatization and de-drama-
6. tization are both put to use in the film. In this sense, although Wang Bing
7. shares none of Claude Lanzmann's philosophical leanings towards iconoclasm
8. and a sacralized conception of the 'Word', he grapples with similar questions
9. related to the ethics of representing a labour camp, which effectively became
10. a death camp for many of its inmates. In particular, the tension between the
11. two films forcefully underscores the difficulty of representing individuality in
12. the collective era of the Anti-rightist movement. Finally, Wang Bing's use of
13. light as a reflexive trope for moral issues, and the ways in which he hints at
14. the lingering presence of a frightening or violent past among the mundane
15. objects of the everyday show that, for him, the most pressing issue is not so
16. much the choice between fiction and documentary, but crafting a visual form
17. to adequately express the ethical dilemmas critical to the historical experience
18. that he – and we, the audience – are engaging with.

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