Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 3

Art and the facts of daily life

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The state of the world concerns and disturbs many artists. So too does the state of art. And rightly so. The self-absorption, triviality and outright banality of so many films, for example, offends the more sensitive and intelligent directors and writers, those least devoted to celebrity and wealth, those attached by stronger threads to the general population and attuned to its interests and needs. In opposition to the false and unreal studio products, most of which seem hazardously distant from any recognizable existence, certain filmmakers set up the principle of "social facts" in the form of documentary filmmaking.

Film is a peculiar medium. As the Italian director Pasolini noted, "unlike the written or spoken language," film "expresses reality not through symbols but via reality itself. ... The cinema is a language which expresses reality with reality." Every film (with the exception of certain "experimental" works), fiction or otherwise, documents real people, whether actors or not, in real settings. There is an inescapably concrete element to cinema. This does not mean, however, that every act of filming establishes the truth about the given people or settings. For that to occur the artist must have truthful ideas in his or her head *before* the camera begins to record images. Deeply truthful images are not stumbled upon accidentally.

Of course turning on the camera on the street or at a work-place inevitably provides pictures of life. Given the present state of cinema, such an undertaking has an undeniable appeal, holding out at least the possibility of something superior to the vast majority of the bombastic commercial products and self-indulgent, empty-headed "art" films. However, to arrive at a serious grasp of any aspect of daily life requires an understanding of its social basis. Images without adequate social or historical context can turn reality on its head. This is the everyday method of the major media outlets. There is no reason whatsoever to imitate them.

In any event, no purely spontaneous act occurs in art. At what and at whom one chooses to train a camera and when one turns the apparatus on and off, these are decisions that already reflect a definite world outlook. That the artist is only dimly aware (as is generally the case at present) that he or she operates with such distinct conceptions only means that an entire series of unstated connections and assumptions, reflecting the influence of the socially-dominant, bourgeois outlook, enter *unconsciously* and *uncriticized* into the work.

This brings us to the case of *Tiexi District: West of the Tracks*, the 9-hour documentary (in three parts) from China directed and shot on video by Wang Bing. I have to confess that I did not see all nine hours, but I viewed a large enough portion (six and a half hours) to get some sense of the whole.

The work looks at life in the Tiexi district of Shenyang, in northeast China, according to the film's on-screen text, "the oldest and most extensive" industrial manufacturing center in the country. Originally built to produce armaments for the occupying Japanese army in 1934, the factories were shifted to civilian use after the Mao regime came to power in 1949. In the following decade the district was built up, with the USSR providing a good deal of the industrial equipment, much of it having been seized from a defeated Germany. In all, the Soviet Union financed 157 industrial projects in the region. After the Sino-Soviet split, many industrial projects were relocated to central China; some 100 remained. The work force reached an all-time high of over one million in the 1980s. In the early 1990s the industries began to falter. In 1999 they began to shut down, one by one.

The first part (245 minutes) of Wang's film, *Rust*, centers on the closure of three factories—a smelting plant, an electrical cable manufacturer and a sheet metal factory. *Remnants* (178 minutes), the second part, examines the fate of workers and young people living in the district's employee housing, now scheduled to be demolished by developers. *Rails* (133 minutes), the third section (which I did not see), deals with the fate of the rail system, focusing on a scavenger and his son.

Wang Bing, born in 1967, studied in the cinematography department of the Beijing Film Academy. He explains in his notes, "From 1992 to 1995, I went to the Tiexi Heavy Industry District many times to study the area's history. Based on my experiences there, I began to work on my documentary film *Tiexi District* in 1999." He shot 300 hours of video footage during the course of the next two years. Wang told an interviewer, "Before I went to university I worked there [in one of the factories] and similar places for 10 years. Also, I spent some time on the job, training there. So they [the workers] knew me. When I was filming, everyone gave me a tremendous amount of help. From the very beginning, we got along. There was a sense of mutual understanding, of mutual respect."

There is a deeply admirable and sincere quality to Wang's effort. He has chosen quite deliberately to devote his artistic skill to the portrayal of "the lives of the people in the factories from the time that there *was* a working state economic plan up to very recently. I wanted to capture on film the way people lived—the life of the workers in the factories, and the way the factories dealt with their employees. I care about what's happening in China, and that's why I made the film." At the Berlin film festival Wang explained that none of his nine-hour film could be shown in China; its only screenings have been at cafes and school clubs.

If the word "naturalistic" is to be employed anywhere, than it deserves to be applied to Wang's artistic method. He points his camera toward his subject matter and records everything that happens. There are long sequences shot from a train crossing the snow-bound, bleak industrial district. In the 4-hour *Rust* the director sits at one end of a factory locker-room or lunch-room and films silences, conversation, games of mahjong, fights, monologues. In *Remnants* his camera follows the mostly youthful subjects as they joke, flirt, chat and quarrel in hovels, streets and stores. Wang even records his own efforts to make his way by foot through the snow and rubble, complete with heavy breathing, stumbling, etc.

Some of the sequences are fascinating and revealing, while others are extremely tedious and unrewarding. The workers in *Rust* prove to be angry and discontented, but generally confused by the introduction of a "free market" economy and the closure of their factories. Their conditions

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are terrible; they often work without masks or other protective equipment in vast, decaying, pollution-ridden enterprises, which seem to belong to another era. Here are some of the voices in *Rust*:

-I hear we're getting paid next month.

-That's what they say. The bosses and [Communist Party] cadres have it easy, they don't have to work overtime.

Another worker:

-Thirty years! What a waste! ... They said we'd have a job for life, pension, health care, a safety net. What a joke. They don't care if you get sick, much less if you die. Next thing you know the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] will start calling itself the Republican Party.

And others:

-The bosses have gotten rich ... What kind of society are we living in? It's like what they say in biology—a life or death struggle. What I'm talking about here is survival of the fittest.

-I can barely afford to eat. We're all people, right? We're all the same, but we're falling behind. We're not educated, but we read the papers, we read the news. We know how our lives compare [to those of the better off].

One of the final scenes takes place in a facility where the lead smelter workers undergo chelation, to remove the toxic residue from their blood. The workers remain there for a month. They watch porno films, sing old "revolutionary" songs, go shrimping in a shallow pond. One man drowns—is it a suicide? The atmosphere is immensely depressed and depressing.

The workers filmed in *Rust* are hostile to the factory authorities and the Beijing regime, but politically limited in their responses. Some accept the official argument that the plants should be closed and their jobs destroyed because the facilities are not profitable. An air of resignation hangs over the factories and their workers. The absence in their lives and experience of a left-wing critique of Stalinism makes itself felt sharply and tragically.

The adolescents in *Remnants* are even less prepared. As the notes for the film explain: "While the adults in the neighborhood worry about factory closures, layoffs and financial pressures, the teens are preoccupied with their own lives and concerns: Seventeen-year-old Bobo is busy chasing after Nana, a girl from the neighborhood who won't give him the time of day; seventeen-year-old Chi Ying and her boy-friend Yi Xiu find their relationship imperiled by their constant bickering; eighteen-year-old Wang Zhen busily scribbles angst-filled love letters to a girl he likes, only to be mocked by his friends; eighteen-year-old Qu Jian, living with relatives after his parents' divorce, does his best to track down his absent mother while helping to support his family with piece-work packaging chopsticks; and seventeen-year-old Ren Huan is an orphan, who finds himself very much alone in the world."

These kids live in a district about to be torn down by private developers. The situation is desperate. Many of the residents, unhappy with the tiny apartments offered them as compensation, refuse to move. The developers begin to demolish the district, threatening and intimidating those who remain, cutting off the water and electricity. Again, however, the resistance is disorganized and largely futile. Parts of this three-hour film are interminable.

Tiexi District raises and touches upon enormous historical questions, including the nature of the Chinese revolution and Mao's Stalinist regime, the origins of the modern Chinese working class and the present economic crisis threatening the jobs and lives of tens of millions of Chinese workers.

The monumental character of the issues "raised" and "touched upon" finds a reflection in the length of the film, in its sheer quantity, but not in its quality, not in its analysis. Wang apparently shares the limited and more or less resigned attitude of many of the workers: "I wanted to capture that way of life [working in a state-owned industry] and show how it's disappearing. It's actually a very personal thing for me." He disavows any element of protest or political activism.

The director says of the workers, "The idea of having a voice is not really something they would think of. These people, the class they belong to, would not even understand the idea of someone giving a voice to their problems. All they do is worry about everyday life, on a daily basis, as it comes to them. They only worry about the things that affect them immediately. It wouldn't even occur to them that they could voice an opinion. They don't expect much from life."

This is a fairly sweeping statement. Mass workers' protests have already taken place in China and the objective reality of shattering economic change will intrude on even the most passive and "everyday," "immediate" consciousness. In any event, even if a given group of workers were unable to see beyond their noses, why should the artist be obliged to share their outlook?

Of course the filmmaker, like the workers, has grown up under Stalinism and faces great ideological and intellectual obstacles. One cannot blame him for the consequences of the suppression of left-wing ideas by the Beijing regime. He belongs to a generation of intellectuals that is very much at sea politically: disgusted and repulsed by the "Communist" Party and its policies of repression and so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics"; suspicious of American and Western capitalism and the consequences of globalization; and, at the same time, largely cut off from a Marxist analysis of these complex processes. This leads to all sorts of artistic-intellectual vulnerabilities, hybrids and miscalculations.

Taking the difficulties into account, however, one must still say *what is*: Wang's notion that he can convey the essence of his protagonists' lives through extensive filming, through the sheer bulk of the details of their daily existence, is mistaken. Not in nine hours, not in 300, not in 3000 hours, could the life of the district during the course of even one hour be captured *in its entirety*. And if one could reproduce on film every detail of each life in the district that would still not provide the key to unlocking the secret of its existence.

For that one has to penetrate to the inner reality of the social-class structure, which inevitably involves a removal, at least temporarily, from the mass of immediate facts through the process of abstraction. Whether in fiction or documentary filmmaking, some means of artistically clarifying and concentrating the decisive features of social reality, which *remain invisible* to the naked eye, has to be found. Otherwise the result may be, as in the present case, a great sprawling mass of everyday detail, which tends to play into the notion that the social process is either inexplicable or unalterable, or both.

Current attitudes in intellectual circles in North America and Europe do not necessarily contribute to clearing up the confusion. In his short description of *Tiexi District*, Vancouver's Asian films programmer Tony Rayns comments, "There's no 'expert opinion,' no economic analysis and no pretense that this is a microcosm of China." In a comment on *Morning Sun*, a film treating the Maoist Cultural Revolution, Rayns returns to this theme, writing that the directors of the film "don't pretend to 'explain' the Cultural Revolution." One senses that the filmmakers would probably agree with these comments.

It's not a matter of picking on Rayns or Wang or anyone else, these notions are thoroughly commonplace in film and artistic circles. Nonetheless, they deserve to be challenged.

Naturally, no work of art, fictional or documentary, could possibly be expected to present an all-sided explanation of any complex social or historical phenomenon. Art cognizes reality by its own means, which are more indirect and roundabout, more linked to the unconscious, the intuitive and the non-rational than those of science or historiography. Nonetheless, if a film, in its overall structure (dramatic plot or organization of documentary material), does not attempt to reflect reality, to bring out the essential pattern of human relationships, then what is its purpose?

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To pick up a camera or a paint-brush is an inherently presumptuous act. It implies that the artist believes he or she has something new to contribute to people's understanding of themselves and their relations to one another. Wang Bing speaks very modestly, perhaps too modestly of his aims, but when he acknowledges his desire to "portray" or "capture on film" the lives of the workers, whether he likes it or not, the process of separating what he considers the essential from the inessential (nine hours out of 300 hours of video footage) involves an attempt at some level to explain the deeper tendencies in Chinese society. The problem is not that Wang makes no attempt to explain events or offer an expert opinion—every meaningful work of art inevitably does that—but that his explanations and expertise are not informed by a penetrating social and historical understanding.

A great deal of water has to have flowed under the bridge to reach the point where it is accepted by filmmaker and critic alike that the verb to "explain" ought to be placed in quotation marks in a discussion of artistic work. Pat, simplistic or self-serving explanations are obviously no use in any sphere of intellectual life, but art cannot possibly flourish if it pledges ahead of time not to try and make sense of the world to its audience.

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