4 *West of the Tracks*: History and Class-Consciousness

*Lu Xinyu, translated by J. X. Zhang**

> We wanted to create a world, but in the end this world collapsed.
>
> — Wang Bing, director of *West of the Tracks*[1]

After watching *West of the Tracks* (2003), the long take at the beginning remains unforgettable. The camera stares from the cabin of a small goods train moving slowly through snow-muffled, abandoned factories. A few ghostly figures flit under a gloomy sky. The only sound in a silent landscape is the creak of its wheels. These three minutes are like a rite of passage into history. We are entering another world, one that has already been destroyed: a ruin of industrial civilization.

Tiexi — "West of the Tracks" — is a district of Shenyang, the city once known as Mukden. For fifty years it was China's oldest and largest industrial base, a fortress of the socialist planned economy. The origins of the zone go back to the 1930s, when Japan seized Manchuria and constructed a military-industrial complex for its further advance into China. Factories were built in the south of Mukden, producing weaponry for the Kwantung Army and machinery for large-scale military enterprises, and workers' housing grew around them. After liberation in 1949, the USSR supplied China with additional industrial equipment dismantled from Germany at the end of the war, in what was known as the 156 Investment Projects of Soviet aid, most of which were located in the northeast. Favorably situated close to Russia, and building on the industrial foundations left by Japan, Tiexi became a pioneer example of Soviet-style planning in a region that served as an engine of socialist modernization for the country as a whole. As late as 1980, around a million workers were employed in the plants of Tiexi, and even today the state owns three-quarters of the assets in the province of Liaoning, of which Shenyang is the capital.[2]

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In the reform era, as China's path of development shifted from a planned to a market economy, Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy concentrated investment first in the south's Pearl River Delta and then around the Lower Yangtze, with a special focus on Shanghai-Pudong. But while south and central China were shifting to market mechanisms, the northeast still depended on command planning, with a high proportion of its output of steel and machinery transferred out of the area at low prices to the state, and its enterprises subject to heavy taxes. Fifty years of the PRC's planned economy were made to bear the cost of the twenty years of its market economy. By the early 1990s, some of the plants in Tiexi were already starting to decline, and by the end of the decade most of its factories had closed. In 2002, the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party announced that market reforms would rejuvenate the northeast industrial region, transforming it into an area of high-tech, capital-intensive enterprises. But the central government is neither willing nor able to shoulder the investments necessary for such a change, hoping instead that foreign capital will step into the breach. The reality is that Chinese industrial development is heavily dependent on the import of capital goods, which now account for two-thirds of total investment in fixed assets. No ready solution to the plight of the northeast is in sight. The region's oil and coal reserves are seriously depleted. In Liaoning Province alone the jobless number some 2.5 million; labor protests and street demonstrations have multiplied as mass unemployment becomes an acute social problem.[3]

It was into this scene that Wang Bing arrived in late 1999. He had studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Shenyang from 1991 to 1995, and then undertaken postgraduate studies at the Beijing Film Academy. But he had never made a film before. Wandering around Tiexi in somewhat low spirits, he rented a small DV camera. A year and a half later, he had shot three hundred hours of footage about the district.[4] Out of this material he created a monumental trilogy. *West of the Tracks* is a documentary that runs for a total of nine hours, divided into three parts of descending length — 4:3:2 — whose English-language titles are "Rust," "Remnants: Pretty Girl Street," and "Rails." It is without question the greatest work to have come out of the Chinese documentary movement, and must be ranked among the most extraordinary achievements of world cinema in the new century. Out of the dense maze of plants in Tiexi, with a purpose-built industrial railroad winding through them, Wang Bing picked three to film. The first was the Shenyang Foundry, built by the Japanese under the puppet Manchukuo state in 1934, which remains the most famous factory in Tiexi. The foundry has three huge chimneys, the first dating from the 1930s, the other two from the 1960s, that were long a virtual icon of the industrial northeast. When Wang Bing started shooting, it was still

in normal operation. The second plant he chose was the Electric Cable Factory, which produced vital equipment for China's power-supply system, also first built by the Japanese and then reconstructed by the Russians. By 1999, 90 percent of its workers were already off-post — the official euphemism for "temporary" unemployment on reduced pay — with only middle-level cadres and above still at work. The third factory was the Shenyang Steel Rolling Mill, which, like a number of others in Tiexi awaiting formal approval for bankruptcy, was virtually abandoned, with only a few people remaining on site as guards.[5]

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

> We wanted to create a world, but in the end this world collapsed. I filmed the life of the mainstream population, their relation to society, and traces their lives had left behind. If you see my film together with things from the last few decades, you can see what people have been doing over the decades in this country, what they have been dreaming of, and if their dreams have come true. This is a very important issue, because it tells us how we might live in the future.[6]

Here "the mainstream population" refers to China's working class. The working class and its history in the Third World socialist countries are different from that in the developed capitalist countries. This difference is what we need to clarify. What exactly does Third World socialist revolution and modernization mean? This question is unavoidable and urgent. It will help to shape the self-consciousness of China and the Chinese people, which itself is being formed through the struggle between other various different forces. This is the most important thing that *West of the Tracks* shows us.

"Rust"

> Inasmuch as industry sets itself "objectives" — it is in the decisive, i.e. historical, dialectical meaning of the word, only the object, not the subject of the natural laws governing society.
>
> — Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*[7]

> The factory is my protagonist. — Wang Bing[8]

The first part of *West of the Tracks* is called "Factory" in Chinese, but interestingly it is translated as "Rust" in English. In this way, Chinese industry is renamed in the historical context of Western industry. This reminds us that Chinese industrialization cannot be separated from Western industrial history, but was an episode in a worldwide process. The furnaces of Shenyang implied the pre-existence, and legitimacy, of the evolutionary atlas of Western industrial civilization — which would also, it might be said, predetermine their fall. For does not today's Tiexi merely repeat the decline of the rustbelt in the American Midwest or of the Ruhr in Germany? The same historical rationality appears to unfold remorselessly across space and time, and no one can escape its compulsion. As Lukács puts it in the quotation at the beginning of this section, in a dialectical and historical sense industry is the object of a social-natural law. It is in the spirit of this objectivity that Wang Bing constructs a narrative of the factories of Tiexi. How have they developed and lasted? What have they been through? These are the key questions. In Wang Bing's film, the factories are transformed from objects into subjects. There are no characters or intrigues threading through "Rust" as in traditional movies. The Refinery, the Steel Mill, and the Electric Cable Factory — these three factories established in 1934 become the protagonists of the film. The process of production itself becomes the main plot of the film. The film offers an extremely detailed analysis of the factories through observing, entering, selecting, progressing, balancing, and realizing. "Rust" has the most complex structure among the three parts comprising *West of the Tracks*. It was filmed according to factory routines, and edited according to the work process.

First comes copper. We see the rough smelting of electrolytic coppers, their loading, electrolysis, and then return to rough smelting, revolving, and refining. Next, lead: from welding in a workshop, to the lead tower and another workshop for processing, then on to the workers' break room, and exit from the factory at the end of the day. After that comes the now idle Electric Cable Plant — and back to the previously omitted process of lead electrolysis and lead casting, before returning to the lead-tower again. This completes a narrative that makes

in front of erotic scenes of coupling in a pornographic film. Reified, the human body has become alien.

Wang Bing has remarked that a director's first work is often particularly sensitive to the world, as an unfamiliar landscape in which much still remains to be recognized or understood.[10] At times the imagery of "Rust" recalls the aesthetic of the machine in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), where the nameless fear in the heart of the heroine is like the unbanishable ghost in an industrial civilization. In the visual metaphors of *West of the Tracks*, we may sense a similar feeling of loss and despair. When we enter an enormous, empty factory and a crane suddenly roars into life and rises threateningly into the air, it is as though we were walking through an ominous valley and were startled by the cry of some strange bird ascending from its floor. But what if, confronted with the vast objectivity of world history, such a shock was the beginning of our salvation? What are the consequences of the appearance of industry for the history of humanity?

The secret of the Industrial Revolution is that human wealth henceforth no longer relies on the union of land and labor as it did in traditional agriculture and handicraft — in which it was based on renewable natural resources such as organic fertilizer, labor, solar energy, and wind, water, and animal energy. Human modernization since the Industrial Revolution has relied on non-renewable mineral resources as the resource for wealth. The magic of capitalism is based on the depletion and alienation of nature. In this process capital depletes humanity in the same way it does a mine. When Karl Marx says that "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things," he profoundly underlines capital's enslavement of humanity by means of social alienation.[11] However, when capital places labor as the only source of value, it gives labor a position higher than nature. This separation between humanity and nature is the premise of Enlightenment thought. This conceals the deep structure of human enslavement and the depletion of both men and things, namely that capital acts in this way on humanity in the same way that it acts on other natural forces. Labor is nothing but a form of natural force. The enslaving of labor entails separating the farmer from the land, which is similar to extracting minerals from stone — these are both conquests over natural forces. Marx observed from his time that capital relied on the enslavement of labor to complete its primitive accumulation, and therefore he gave labor higher status than natural forces.[12] Also, Hegelian historical dialectics had pre-designated the historical subjectivity of the working class as satisfying the demand for a subject to drive history. However, the union of the working class and the most advanced productive forces has not been guaranteed or realized. On the contrary, the contemporary working class is being rejected by the most advanced productive forces. Capital- and technology-intensive forces have replaced labor; science and technology have become the productive forces; and employed labor has been rejected, because science and technology have proven that it is machines not men that can produce quicker capital appreciation. Science and technology transform natural forces into means of production and capital by accelerating the consumption of global energy and natural resources.

Productive force is the capacity to transform natural resources into capital, but the price is the serious global ecological crisis. This explains why the earliest labor movements started with the smashing of machines. Hatred toward machinery results from capital's rejection of men. Machines are anti-human. When machines replace men, men are transformed, and the world is inevitably reified. The workers' revolt against machines is the revolt against the reification of men by capital. Because machinery does not need labor time to sustain labor reproduction, when machinery becomes the first driver of the Industrial Revolution and ever more quickly transforms natural resources into capital as commodities, humanity loses its importance as an instrument. Because capital does not need to bear the costs of the reproduction of natural forces for the huge consumption of coal, petroleum, and all the other mineral resources of the earth, machinery becomes the perpetual engine of the industrial civilization. For the realization of surplus value, commodities need to be consumed as quickly as possible. Therefore, the process of capital appreciation means the transformation of natural resources belonging to all human beings on the earth into private property. This process of transformation is the biggest secret of contemporary capitalism.

In the shift from classical political economy to modern economics, the most significant change is the disappearance of "things." Marginal utility theory, arriving as an analysis model of modern economics, emphasizes the influence of subjective factors upon economic activities. Its starting point is human desire and its satisfaction.[13] Consumption, distribution, price, market, and so on are the core of the theory. Capital seems to have lost its physical attribute. Modern economics has completed its concealment of capital's materiality and become psychology, discussing the edge effect. The study of economics shifts from social existence as physical existence to social psychology. Concentration becomes an economic problem, while natural and social ecology is not an economic problem. The capitalist knowledge system cannot reveal but only conceal the relation of capital to the reification of nature. Therefore, in the end, postmodernist theories interpret the consumer-society as a society of signifiers.[14] The source of the commodity is concealed in the consumer-society. Signifiers have been cut off from their connection to objects, the signified disappears, and the signifiers remain alone. Marxist political economy has been turned into a political economy of empty

signifiers, where theories have been disconnected from objects and history. In such a political economy of empty signifiers, the "thing" becomes signifier and information, culture becomes a carnival of signifiers, capital becomes wealth, and currency becomes a capital market in empty signifiers. This is how the bubble of the capital market is formed. The "thing" itself has perished forever in the knowledge system of capitalist societies. In this sense, Lukács is right when he points out that capitalist ideology is unable to overcome its own antinomies.[15] To achieve its abstract eternal dominance, the formation of capital must extract the real materiality and conceal its origin. However, no commodity can eliminate its physical body, just as no human can eliminate their flesh — it is this physical body that demands the right to exist. Plastic bags, a white pollution all over the world, appear as signifiers of commodities, yet do not disappear along with the consumption of the commodities. Similarly, human beings as unprofitable "things" are rejected by capital, yet these "things" demand the right to exist. When the subject is sealed up in the symbol system, it becomes a subject without a material or physical body. This means the cancellation and extermination of the subject — the extermination of humanity. For the working class, this means unemployment, the logical result of the fact that human beings as "things" cannot be transformed into commodities. Capital abandons workers in the same way as it abandons a hollowed mine; capital has defined the meaning of the existence of things. Anything that cannot be transformed into a commodity has lost its existential value and is consigned to the darkness of history. Places abandoned by capital become rubbish yards of industrial civilization. Social alienation is unimaginable without the premise of natural alienation.

When the commodity is understood as emerging magically under the charm of capital, and when the laborer is no longer the productive force but science and technology are, a simple truth is concealed: wealth awakened from underground by capitalism is nothing but a thing transformed from natural resources, wealth is still material, and currency itself cannot create wealth. But the price of the consumer society is the future, namely the limit of nature, and the limit of unrenewable energy. Is it true that it is only after becoming the victim of transformation that humanity can become aware of its status as a "thing"? The environmental pollution of land, water, and air, the ecological crisis, as well as all kinds of labor movements and social movements, all insistently demonstrate the subjectivity of the world and society.

Objective facts will in the end deny the historical narrative of neo-liberalism, in other words the claim that the history of humanity is nothing more than the history of production and reproduction of capital or the history of market expansion. When Marx measured value with abstract labor time, he opened a back door for the ideological subjectivity of capital, enabling capital to hide its plundering of the laborer as a human being and natural resources as material.[16] As Theodor Adorno points out, any transformation is a kind of forgetfulness.[17] It is the time to resume in dialectics the status of the subjectivity of things as the subjectivity of history. In this sense, I still place myself in the perspective of the historical dialectics of Marxist materialism. The deviation in the labor theory of value is the re-encounter with Marx's theory of alienation. The world is material and capital is the transformation of material, the transformation of nature, and the deprivation and alienation of nature. During this process, the working class and even all humanity are the victims of transformation.

In this sense, we need to re-think the working class and its destiny. Awareness of transformation is the self-consciousness of the working class, but this consciousness will lead to unprecedented connections — with farmers losing their land, the bankrupt Korean farmer killing himself in Cancun in a protest against the WTO,[18] the black Civil Rights Movement, and all forms of environmental protection movements. Only on the basis of the most widespread real connections can the overall historical dialectics show its power and the working class have its self-consciousness identified and reconstructed. In this sense, *West of the Tracks* manifests not only the Chinese workers' history and their class-consciousness, but also the history and class-consciousness of Third World socialist countries. This process itself is an intrinsic part of the history of humanity.

In contemporary China, the ideology proclaiming the working class's role as protagonists of a socialist country has become hypocritical. The theory of true value as determined by labor input, which dominates China's official socialist ideology, has become an insurmountable dilemma in market socialist theories. The working class has lost the significance it once had under socialism. In the context of the market economy, unemployed workers can no longer be called upon by national ideology. The working class is losing its subjectivity and failing to become a part of the material world. Therefore, it is the working class itself — its factual existence — that demands subjectivity and legitimacy, but this can only be realized with the reconstruction of its class awareness. How can the contemporary Chinese working class restore its self-consciousness? Does negative dialectics imply that only when the working class resumes objectivity can we return to subjectivity?

The declining class-consciousness of the contemporary Chinese working class and the loss of class-consciousness of the Chinese farmer class are different manifestations of our transformed world. Capital's dispossession of farmers, though morally condemned by Marxist theory, has been justified by historical dialectics. Therefore, neither capital's dispossession of farmers nor farmers' revolts against capital can be included in the modern Marxist historical narrative.

Classical Marxism's denial of the class-consciousness of peasants can be regarded as the premise for the loss of class-consciousness of the contemporary working class. The absence of the class-consciousness of farmers in modern theories results from the fact that capital needs to base its development upon the rejection of traditional agricultural means of production. This is the constraining subconscious of modern theories. It is also a major issue that needs to be reconsidered in the critique of today's modern theory. The self-consciousness gained by the working class in its union with capital loses its material base when capital extracts wealth directly from natural resources and natural forces. Capital's rejection of employed workers is based on the same logic as its rejection of traditional farmers. Therefore, the fate of the working class and that of the farmer class ought to be treated in a common historical context. This is an urgent issue in contemporary China. The Chinese working class is once again a proletariat, the bankrupt farmers are exposed daily to the world market, and millions of migrant laborers are compelled to leave their land. The destinies of these populations are historically connected together in an unprecedented manner. Being transformed and rejected by capital is the common destiny of Chinese workers and farmers. Therefore, the liberation of the working class cannot be obtained alone. The reconstruction of the working class's self-consciousness cannot be realized without the farmer class resuming its consciousness first. This is exactly what we have learned from the defeat of the socialist modernization experiment undertaken with China's planned economy since 1949.

"Remnants: Pretty Girl Street"

> In the ruin, history has physically merged with the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory therefore declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.
>
> — Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*[19]

The second part of *West of the Tracks* is entitled "Remnants: Pretty Girl Street." The name of the street comes from a legend that the maidservant of a rich family was buried here, so it was called Housemaid's Grave. Later the name changed to Pretty Girl Street, implying it was a haunt of prostitutes. In keeping with this allusion to women of low social position, the local residents were typically marginal people. From the 1930s to the 1950s, most were workers who had migrated from the south to find employment in Japanese factories. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some sent-down youths returning from the countryside also settled there. At the end of the 1990s, the majority of its inhabitants were workers from plants in the Tiexi district. As Wang Bing's camera tracks along the street, we see nothing but low, dilapidated shacks, inside which crouch sick mothers, exhausted or disoriented fathers, aged grandparents, and restless youngsters. This shabby, formless landscape, without depth or elevation, lacks any of the dramatic shapes or colors, let alone scale, of the factories in Part One. We are as if in their underside.

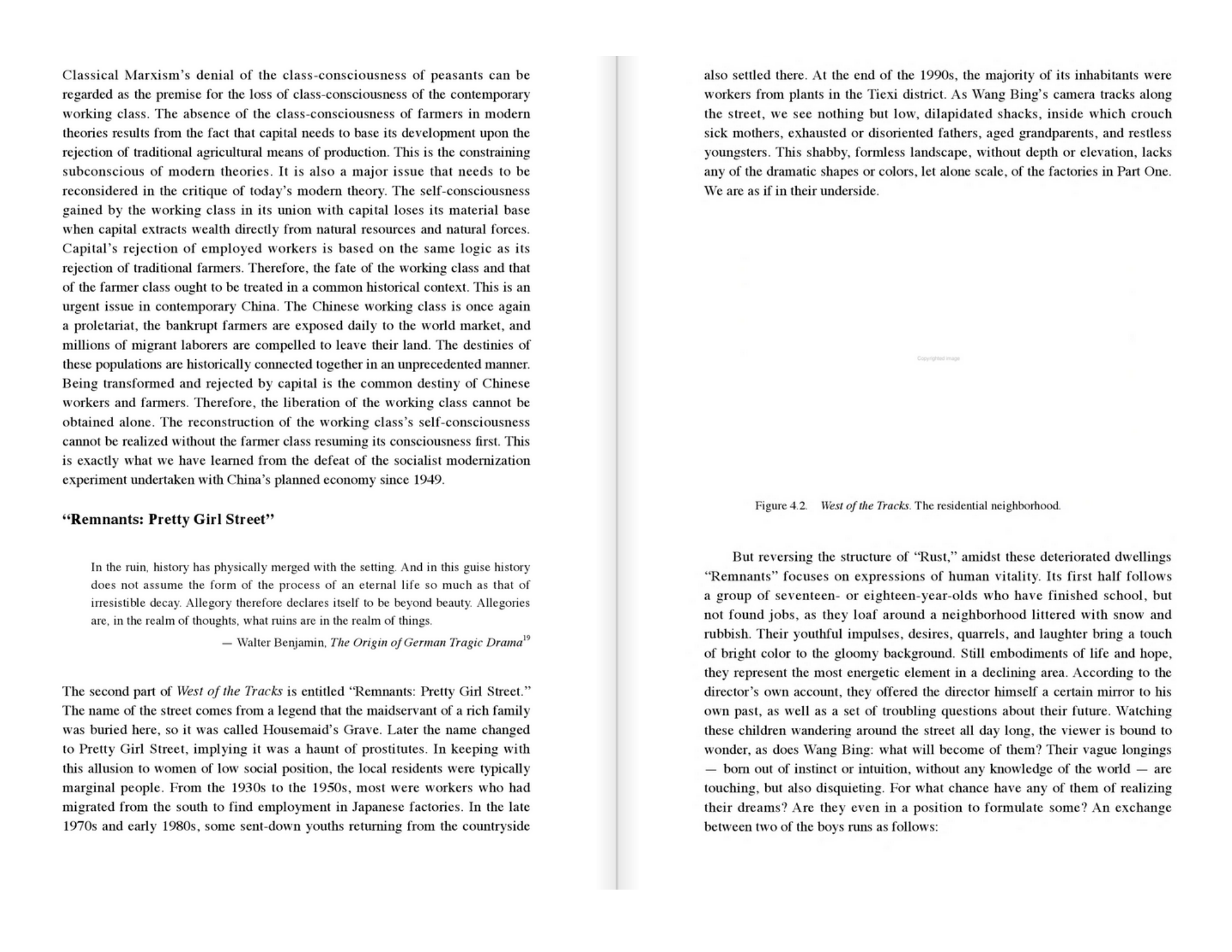

Figure 4.2. *West of the Tracks*. The residential neighborhood.

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

- I don't know either. You ask me what to do. I don't know what to do.
- No dreams at all, just like me.
- So why are you having a go at me?
- Just like me, no dreams at all.
- What dreams?
- Fuck you!
- What dream?
- What dreams, what dreams?
- I'm trying to chat with you.
- Can we get food from chatting?
- What dreams?

The boy who says he has no dream does so, in Wang Bing's words, with an "extremely charming smile: like a flower briefly blooming in the frost." The most popular girl in the group is abandoned by all the boys after she breaks up with her boyfriend: a prolonged shot shows her standing alone, after everyone else has left, as if youth itself were deserting her. In the last scene of "Remnants," which is also the last shot of the entire film, the street is banked up with thick snow, and most of the houses have already been demolished. Under the dim street light, a boy comes out from a house and looks aimlessly into this wasteland, once familiar but now utterly silent.

"Pretty Girl Street" is translated into "Remnants" in English. The second part of the film observes the death of the street, as the closure of factories in Tiexi is followed by demolition of the neighborhood where its workers live, to make way for commercial development. Such clearances are uprooting communities of the laboring poor all over China today, where urban speculators or local authorities — there is often no clear line between them — are flattening traditional neighborhoods and pockets of popular life to build malls and high-rises. The old ones have been demolished, but where are the new ones? For the workers of Tiexi, the demolition means the total disintegration of public and daily life. Workers are sent off by uncontrollable forces to far frontiers and lose contact with each other. When the working class has lost its self-consciousness, it has also lost its voice.

In fact, what Tiexi witnessed at the beginning was not China's socialism but the expansion and invasion of Japanese militarism in the guise of capitalism. Because of Tiexi's unique geopolitical location in Asia, it became post-revolutionary China's socialist industrial base, aided by the Soviet Union, with machinery confiscated from defeated Nazi Germany. World history made Tiexi a witness of both hot and cold wars in the twentieth century, as well as a battlefield of industrialization where socialism confronted capitalism. The northeast was the most treasured place of the Qing dynasty, the battlefield where the allied armies fought against Japan, the birthplace of the first generation of steel workers and petroleum workers in the People's Republic of China, and the place where volunteer troops valiantly crossed Yalu River to aid Korea and resist the United States. Because of the demolition, people have discovered in Tiexi a large number of rusty shells left behind by the Japanese as well as underground constructions suspected to be army hospitals.

The appeal for modernization that prioritizes industry over agriculture in order to resist the global hegemony of plundering capitalism has created in Third World socialist countries a working class whose history and class-consciousness are different from those in Western countries. In the 1960s, China's working class was symbolized by Wang Jinxi, son of a poor peasant and one of the first generation of oil well drillers in New China. His spirit was "sharing the country's sufferings and making every effort to win honour for the nation."[20] Because the first step in China's industrial modernization was to solve the problem of energy and steel — the most essential things for modern industry — it is no surprise that petroleum workers and steel workers become the role models of the Chinese working class. The sense of themselves as masters refining oil and smelting steel for their own country shaped the consciousness of the working class. As in other Third World socialist nation-states, the consciousness of the working class was realized in relation to the establishment of the nation's industry. Therefore, when today's Chinese working classes cherish the memory of Mao Zedong's time, they are not praising dictatorship, but calling for Third World nationalism to resist the hegemony of Western capitalism. This consciousness enabled the Chinese working class to found and develop its own country with great initiative. When the oppressed have experienced being masters, they could and should never forget it. This is the undeniable heritage of today's socialism.

The destiny of the Chinese working class has been closely tied to the process of China's modernization. Because China's appeals for modernization had learnt a lesson when confronted by the armies of imperialism, it is no wonder that early modernization movements such as Westernization start with the war industry. This demonstrates a historical logic: in order to become a nation-state, China was doomed from the beginning of its modern history to develop industry, and especially heavy industry. This logic pre-existed and became the historical motive for the prioritization of heavy industry in the People's Republic of China. China's appeals for industrialization and a nation-state are both products of modern history. China's modernization is not an invention of Chinese Marxists alone, because after the Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century, China was already caught up in the globalization of capitalism. As a semi-colonial country, it was impossible for China to rely on a "free" market to modernize its national

economy. In the 1930s, when China's agriculture and national industry fell deeply into crisis, Chinese intellectuals debated about modernization, industry, and agriculture. Most people then believed that national salvation was dependent upon catching up in industry, especially heavy industry. However, as the liberal Hu Shi clearly realized, the most important thing for China's modernization was national sovereignty, for neither industrial nor agricultural modernization could be realized without it.[21] In 1949, when Mao Zedong proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic from Tiananmen Gate, he said, "The Chinese people have stood up." The significance of this statement is that the concept of the people can only exist within the framework of modern nation-states.

Just as Tiexi's history is deeply marked by the Soviet brand, China's revolution and socialist construction were closely tied to the Soviet Union. The similarity between post-revolutionary China and the Soviet Union has not received enough attention. Both began with farmer movements, and both were built on the dispossession of the farmer. The Chinese working class are the children of farmers. In contrast, socialist revolutions have never matured in developed capitalist countries where the working class is powerful. The appearance of socialism in the Soviet Union and China resulted from failed national capitalism. History certainly gave China and Russia the opportunity to develop market capitalism, but this development led to social schism. When capitalism excludes and plunders the farmers, they rebel against it and social crisis ensues, leading to socialism as an alternative modernity. In countries with successful national capitalism, socialism has failed. The United States has witnessed worker movements yet no socialism, because it has no farmer revolution or an agricultural civilization with thousands of years of history to resist capitalism. This may explain why the French Revolution is the most brutal of Western bourgeois revolutions. The old France was actually overthrown by Britain, which had experienced both industrial and political revolution. This created a domino effect in world revolutions. In France, the most wealthy absolutist country with the most powerful traditional agriculture on the European continent, farmers amounted to more than 80 percent of its population. Therefore, the French Revolution's relation to modernity is still a complex and significant question today and its historical significance is far from being exhausted. As Immanuel Wallerstein points out in *After Liberalism*, in the French Revolution, liberalism and socialism were closely related, for socialism is nothing but radical liberalism.[22] We appreciate now that the French Revolution and the Russian October Revolution ought to be compared. They do not meet Marx's expectation that the working class from the most developed capitalist countries would stand up and overthrow capitalism with anti-capitalist revolutions in capitalist countries. Rather they are the old world's rebellion against emergent capitalism. These revolutions succeeded under the flag of socialism and socialist countries have resulted from farmer movements instead of worker movements. However, in these socialist countries, it is the subjectivity of the working class that was assigned as the motor of history by Marxist historical dialectics. This ideological prioritization of the working class has the dispossession of the farmers as its premise and price. Although farmers pushed forward the revolution to victory, they became the exploited. What a historical paradox! The historical mission of a nation-state is to develop capitalism and modernization with the power of the nation. Therefore, the primitive accumulation of capital required by modernization and industrialization is always based on plundering farmers and agriculture. Whether it is capitalist Britain or socialist China and the Soviet Union, the same applies.

Post-revolutionary China was short of capital. To develop capital-intensive heavy industry, it could not rely on the market but had to squeeze farmers and agriculture. This has opened up ever deeper schisms between city and village, industry and agriculture, and they have resulted in China's most serious social crises today. However, these are not simply crises of socialism, but the logical result of China being compelled to accept the concept of the modernized nation-state in the framework of globalization today. Consequently, the "Three Great Differences" — the gaps and inequalities between industry and agriculture, town and country, and mental and manual labor — were not overcome in Mao's time, but have increased in today's market economy. The town and country split has always been a serious problem in China's modernity. Mao Zedong, though born in a peasant family and with great sympathy for the lower classes, had to depend on state power to establish a system dividing town and country in order to guarantee the industrialization of the nation-state. He tried to overcome the "Three Great Differences" through ideological mobilization. His tragedy, as well as that of China's socialist experiment, are rooted in the history of globalization and modernization, and therefore cannot be understood within Chinese socialism alone. Mao's socialist road was actually the Chinese version of socialist primitive accumulation and "Industrial Revolution." The gain and loss of the self-consciousness of the Chinese working class are both related to this history. In fact, the turn to the market economy in the 1980s is nothing but another national plan to continue modernization. The legitimacy of political power in the People's Republic of China depends upon modernization. This is an irresistible destiny once the nation-state is established. The "Great Leap Forward" in Mao's time has a historical logic similar to today's acceleration to modernize. In China today, the introduction of foreign capital and industrialization targets have become criteria for judging official achievement. As a result, the history of statistical fraud repeats itself, with the "Great Leap Forward" appearing again in a different historical time.

Furthermore, also appearing again is the paradox of China's modernization, namely social crisis in the form of "migrant laborers" and worker protests. The tragedy of today's Chinese working class in the market economy is a modern socialist tragedy. The historical paradox lies in the fact that the self-consciousness of the working class has collapsed after the socialist nation-state finished its "industrialization" with the help of the planned economy. The working class is no longer the creator of value, but the exile of capital. The time of the capitalist market economy has arrived. But, as many researchers point out, without thirty years of highly intensive accumulation through Mao's planned economy, it would have been impossible for Deng Xiaoping to implement his policy to realize the market economy. Behind this highly intensive accumulation are the broad masses of Chinese workers and farmers who have paid an enormous price for the country's modernization. Under the market economy, this price has not been compensated, but written off. "Modernization" has become an alien power to them.

Today, the decline of industry in northeast China means the end of the historical mission of the socialist planned economy. Tiexi, a place that suffered the development of heavy industry in a Third World socialist nation-state, a place with the working class constrained by the narrative of today's market economy, has been burnt into our memory by the documentary *West of the Tracks*. Why did we build such big factories? Why did this become the dream of an entire age? Why did the entire country sacrifice everything else to realize it? Why did we want to create a world, and why did this world collapse in the end?

"Rails"

> The iron road … whose embankments and cuttings, bridges and stations formed a body of public building beside which the pyramids and the Roman aqueducts and even the Great Wall of China paled into provincialism, was the very symbol of man's triumph through technology.
>
> — Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*[23]

Since their invention for the coal mining industry, railroads have been closely related to the Enlightenment belief in the progress of human history. Trains have become a symbol of history and human destiny. As a result, the traditional interpretation of the world and time has changed dramatically. The belief in the cycle of life and the experience of time developed from observation of the growth of grain have disappeared and agricultural civilization has declined. The age of industrial civilization arrives with the whistle of trains and the white fog of steam engines, giving an unprecedented shock to humanity. History has become the reinforced concrete sleepers under the steel bodies of trains, cold and glittering, extending to the infinite distance. Objective existence appears in the form of steel and iron. Those who submit prosper; those who resist perish.

As Benjamin indicates in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in this age when the resources of mysterious nature have been taken at any cost, the ancient Greek god of time and the ancient Roman spirit of the crops have become death, the grim reaper. The sickle in his hand no longer slices crops but humans.[24] The flow of time is no longer the annual cycle of sowing, harvest, and winter fallow, but life's irretrievable stride toward death. Originally, history is just like seeds scattered on the earth, but now we scatter the seeds sadly on the fallow earth. This is what Benjamin means by allegories. Allegories are the combination of nature and history. When the world of gods disappears, allegories preserve the world. Allegories are indeed ruins, occurring when history declines. Observed from the structure of allegories, objects appear fragmentary, incomplete, and imperfect, like ruins. The details and fragments the allegories refer to are the objects settled into the intentionally constructed ruins. Benjamin has re-narrated the history of modernity by means of allegories.

West of the Tracks faithfully renders Benjamin's allegories with its giant images of ruins. This astonishing conjunction gives us new trust in and comprehension of the existence and meaning of art in this world. I named the introduction of my book discussing the rise of documentaries in China since the late 1980s "On the Ruins of Utopia — China's New Documentary Movement."[25] In a society undergoing huge transformation, the documentary movement attempts to expose oppression and exploitation. Under history's iron logic, art strives to find a place for humanity's survival and feelings. This is how art establishes its relation to time and society and becomes a force questioning the logic of history, a force that can redeem humanity.

In *West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing composes many different types of places and people after he has considered their narratives and metaphorical significance. He constructs the film through factories, streets, and rails that complement each other and make the entire film stable and objective. *West of the Tracks* reveals the decline of materiality in this world, the decline of humanity, the disappearance of spirit, and the decay of this age. The film creates a strange but startling effect, without any cheap or unproved optimism and, resisting the temptation to please the audience, it has rejected any light or easy approach. Every single shot of the nine-hour-long film has been strictly handled with reason and sobriety, pointing directly at reality and the innermost truth. The length of the film has its own reason as a work of art has its own vital rhythm. Wang Bing said, "I truly wish

that I could confirm the value of life, but in the face of reality, I feel so powerless and have become more and more sceptical towards life."[26] He has turned this suspicion into powerful images. During the one-and-a-half-year shooting process, Wang always tried to keep his mind calm and clear in order to observe and understand reality. When an avalanche of events occurred during the shoot, Wang Bing was deeply touched and realized that he had not reflected upon these things enough before. For the filmmaker as well as the audience, *West of the Tracks* is a difficult experience.[27] Wang Bing believes that the importance of a work does not depend upon who makes it but upon its ability to be meaningful for the viewer. If the viewers relate to the film's concerns, then they will pay attention.

The film ends as it began, with the train still moving slowly through Tiexi. Historically, the locomotive was a ubiquitous symbol of dynamism in the optimistic documentaries made by avant-garde directors between the wars, extolling modern industry and the progress it represented — works like John Grierson's *Industrial Britain*, Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City*, or Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm: Donbass Symphony*. Ruttmann also started his film with a train, traveling through open fields in the early morning. With wires skipping on both sides and rails opening and closing underneath, we speed into the awakening city and its industrial districts. The sequence is a heady celebration of a new age. In the metropolis, every kind of machinery gradually starts into motion. Human beings spring into action with increasing rapidity, as if driven by some magic power. Watching *West of the Tracks*, I was repeatedly reminded of this great work from another time. But here, the train has become the opposite of its image in the classic documentary. The small industrial wagons rumble drearily through a wasteland of decayed factories, over and over again, until the railroad itself becomes no more than a memento of a rust-ridden past. The plants have been closed down, but the train still wanders through the empty, absurd space of their debris. The factories and people are gone, but the railroad persists like the dead soul of the ruins around it. In this snow-covered land, surrounded by buildings in decay, its journeys no longer symbolize the progress of history or humanity. They have become a ceremony of mourning for their decline.

In the dark night of history, how do we affirm our own lives? What is a real life? "Rails" raises these questions through the depiction of a group of people making their living on trains. They spend every day on the train traveling through the meaningless and absurd factories. Each person, puzzled with his own problems and limited by reality, vainly seeks pleasure in life, longing for a change, or something that can make time meaningful. They do not know how to escape the situation in which they are trapped but upon which they depend. Willingly or unwillingly, each person in this country is bearing and experiencing such a destiny. The fate of individuals is struggling within the larger fate of the nation. The nation, buried under the allegories of vast rusty steel and material, has its prosperity and decline decided by powers beyond its control. The struggle of individuals contains the strength of life itself. Wang Bing believes that, if by such destiny one gets to understand oneself and reality, then one might be awakened even in the middle of this destiny — and awakening is the premise for redemption.

Compared with the first two parts of *West of the Tracks*, "Rails" has a striking difference: people as individuals are illuminated against the dim background. Du Xiyun and Du Yang are a father and son whose lives depend on the trains. They are not employees of the railroad, and have no official relationship to it. Like many others in contemporary China, they are marginals drifting below the surface of the social order, of no fixed abode and on no household register, seeking a precarious, sub-legal foothold in the crevices of the system. One-eyed Du and his son survive by doing menial jobs for the railwaymen who have come to tolerate them, and by selling coal picked up or stolen from the train. The father owns nothing in the world, but hardships have strengthened him and given him a certain cunning. He has his own view of society and those around him, and makes a great effort to create a minimal space for himself and his child in the unstable eddies of life. But his seventeen-year-old son, whose mother went off when he was very young, is withdrawn and silent, visibly the product of an abnormal environment that has left him highly vulnerable to the outside world.

In the course of Wang Bing's filming, the father was arrested for stealing coal and sent to a detention center. What follows is an astonishing sequence of *cinéma vérité*. Left alone at night in the little hovel where they live, the son finds a package wrapped in plastic bags. When he opens it, we see a pile of photos: one of the whole family, another of his mother when she was young, leaning against a haystack and smiling warmly at the world. Suddenly a clock on the wall strikes eleven times, and the camera swings slowly away from the photos toward it. When it swings back, tears are glittering on the son's face. The next day, we follow his desperate journey to the detention center to release his father. In a heart-rending scene, the old man is finally allowed to go, and the two return together to their tiny, bleak room, alone in the world again. At the end of the film, the train is still traveling through the blurred shadows of the factory district. As if in the white night of the century, desolate buildings emerge and recede as in a dream, farther and farther away. We look out at the railroad gradually extending behind us. At this moment, snowflakes start to fall silently on the camera lens, in a shade of grey somewhere between light and darkness. The sky and earth become obscured. It is the twilight before history is clarified. As it journeys on through this ambiguity, to what kind of future is the train taking us?