BRINGING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT: *WEST OF THE TRACKS* AS A DELEUZIAN TIME-IMAGE

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INTERPRETING *WEST OF THE TRACKS*

West of the Tracks (*Tie Xi Qu*, 2002) is about life in and around the decaying factories of Tie Xi, a district of Shenyang, which is a city in China's northeastern Liaoning province, Manchuria. Filmed between late 1999 and early 2001, the film is divided into three parts, "Rust" (four hours), "Remnants" (three hours) and "Rails" (two hours). "Rust" depicts the workings of three factories all in the process of closing down – with an emphasis on not only people at work, but also workers relaxing (as well as fighting) in the factories' various break rooms; "Remnants" follows the lives of several people, predominantly teenagers, in the so-called Rainbow Road area of Tie Xi, which is due to be demolished; and "Rails" is about those workers who man the trains that move up and down Tie Xi's twenty kilometres of railway tracks, in particular an old man, Old Du, and his son, Du Yang, who struggle to eke out an existence by hawking materials, predominantly coal, from the increasingly derelict factories.

West of the Tracks has been hailed as a landmark of both Chinese cinema and documentary cinema — as well, of course, as a landmark of Chinese documentary cinema. It features, for example, in Patricia Aufderheide's *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, as well as in works on recent Chinese film culture.[1] While perhaps more namedropped than studied (owing to its unwieldy length?), the film has nonetheless also garnered some close, if often brief, readings. Bérénice Reynaud, for example, reads the film as being about the loss of a (particularly male) way of life; Lü Xinyu considers *West of the Tracks* through the lens of class and history; Jie Li looks at how the film forsakes narrative for the benefit of showing ruin; Ban Wang reads the film alongside Friedrich Engels' *Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*; Ling Zhang considers the way in which director Wang's handheld digital video (DV) style helps to give to the ruins of Shenyang both a temporal and a material dimension; and Luke Robinson argues that contingency — the capturing on film of chance but meaningful events — makes the film powerful as a documentary.[2]

Over the course of these essays on *West of the Tracks*, it is the work of Walter Benjamin that crops up most regularly as a (Western) theoretical lens through which to view the film.[3] Given the way in which *West of the Tracks* centres upon ruins, decay and history, it is perhaps natural that Benjamin should be invoked in relation to Wang's film, since Benjamin was also preoccupied with such concerns. Nonetheless, it also seems strange, given its emphasis on time, its rejection of a clear narrative structure, and its treatment of ruined spaces and the "seers" who inhabit them, that the work of Gilles Deleuze is not also mentioned alongside Benjamin when considering the film. It is only in a footnote that Jie Li says that the "layered" nature of Wang Bing's film brings to mind "Deleuze's concept of 'stratigraphy' or "the deserted layers of our time which bury our own phantoms'," but she does not elaborate further on this.[4] In this essay, then, I hope to offer up a Deleuzian reading of *West of the Tracks*, and Chinese cinema more generally, in order to bring to the fore the way in which the film is a powerful meditation on time within the context of global capitalism. To this end, I shall not necessarily be disagreeing with those other considerations of the film mentioned above, but I shall be using Deleuze to draw out different aspects of *West of the Tracks* that have hitherto been overlooked. Furthermore, this approach is not a one-way manoeuvre, whereby Deleuze can draw out meanings that are otherwise "hidden" in a Chinese film. For, as a Chinese film and as a documentary *West of the Tracks* can also help us to refine our understanding of and/or to elaborate upon Deleuze's work, specifically the film-philosophy that he articulates in his *Cinema* books.[5] Before doing this, however, we should look at how Deleuze relates to Chinese cinema more generally.

GLOBAL DELEUZE, GLOBAL CHINESE CINEMA

As David Martin-Jones and William Brown have discussed, there is a history of debate surrounding the legitimacy of using Western theoretical paradigms as tools for analysing non-Western, and specifically Chinese, cinemas.[6] Wary as I am of the ongoing nature of this debate, though, I might simply follow the lead of Jean Ma, who applies Deleuze's concept of the time-image to films by, *inter alia*, Wong Kar-wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang in her book, *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema*. Indeed, her "description of Chinese cinema as a cinema of time is intended to invoke […] Deleuze," whose own examples of

films offering us direct images of time might well be mainly post-war and European, but whose film-philosophy nonetheless is "pressing[ly needed] in an age when the industrialising, urbanising, and mediatising forces of global capitalism have spread well beyond the parameters of the West and Japan."[7]

Now, as we shall see, *West of the Tracks* is a film that focuses intently on not just the industrialising forces of global capitalism, but also the de-industrialising forces that see a city like Shenyang ruined for the sake of profit sought via better margins elsewhere. Even if it is thus a post-industrial city, *West of the Tracks* nonetheless emphasises the way in which Shenyang enjoyed a population boom in the 1930s and onwards when, with Manchuria under Japanese control, many workers came to the city to help build munitions for the Japanese. A second population boom followed in the 1970s and 1980s, when many Chinese citizens who had been "sent down" to rural China during the Cultural Revolution returned to Shenyang. In other words, Shenyang is a city whose identity is predicated upon a largely migrant population, which itself is integrated into a wider east Asian geography (including Japan), whose very war efforts in the 1930s and 1940s came to be integrated into not just a regional conflict, but a world war that covered nearly every continent on the planet. If, as we shall see, *West of the Tracks* depicts the sorry effects of globalised capitalism on a formerly industrial community, that globalisation is in fact long-standing; indeed, it is what allowed Shenyang to gain the industrial identity that it enjoyed from the 1930s until the turn of the current millennium. That is, the processes of globalisation arguably allowed Shenyang to exist as such in the first place.

What is true of the film's content is also true of its production. *West of the Tracks* is a film that was made in part thanks to the Hubert Bals Fund at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. That is, it is a film made thanks to the global circulation of both capital and cinema. What is more, if, as Reynaud reports, the film was not screened theatrically or on television in China and that its domestic reputation has been won though the circulation of illegal DVD copies of the film, then we might contend that *West of the Tracks* also enjoys a predominantly non-Chinese/Western audience, circulating globally via film festivals and specialist DVD labels.[8] In other words, *West of the Tracks* is not a film that exists in a Chinese bubble, but which was funded by and which circulates in a globalised film and media ecology — and in such a global ecology, so, too, are the theoretical frameworks that we use better to under-

stand it themselves globalised. That is, if cinema is, like capitalism, globalised, then why not put "Western" theoretical paradigms into contact with a Chinese documentary?

It is not that globalisation is without problems; if the film tells us anything, it is surely that globalised capital wreaks havoc on the proletariat, as time and again in *West of the Tracks* we see disturbing images of the impoverished inhabitants of Shenyang, their despair manifesting itself in arguments, even fisticuffs, discussions of prostitution, theft, gambling, and a general sense of enclosure that is fascinatingly reflected in the film's own slow pace. At one point in "Rust," the body of a worker, Yang Mou, is found in a fish pond — a seeming suicide. As his body is carted around, some of the locals begin to laugh, so devalued has human life become in the face of the inhuman(e) forces of capital. In other words, if globalisation is supposed to be a "good thing," then the issue of "whose globalisation?" is an important matter that must continually and attentively be examined and critiqued, since, as Wang Bing's film tells us, one person's globalisation is another person's destitution and/or death. But this issue of "whose globalisation?" is not necessarily one to be understood according to the national paradigm that some critics, such as Nick Browne, might insist upon (globalisation as Americanisation or Sinification).[9] Perhaps more suitable for the globalised era is the critique of global capital across borders by those who, in carrying out such a critique, express more kinship with each other, as critics, than do compatriots who might otherwise stand on different sides of the proverbial tracks (exploiters and the exploited). By illustrating in theory the "connections between politics, aesthetics, and the medium of cinema," Deleuze thus might conceivably demonstrate as much kinship with Wang, who illustrates in practice these same connections (between politics, aesthetics and cinema), as might another Chinese filmmaker or theorist who understands globalisation in a completely different fashion.[10] These connections, and the kinship that I wish to express between Deleuze and Wang Bing, focus upon the issue of time — as I shall discuss presently.

CHINESE CINEMA AND TIME

What does Jean Ma mean when she defines time as the principal characteristic and/or concern of (contemporary) Chinese cinema? What she means is not simply that cinema is an excellent tool for capturing change or movement — although cinema surely is this even if it is

typically made up of static frames taken and played back at a rate of 24 per second. For, Ma also means, after Deleuze, that cinema can capture time itself. How this is so is made most clear in moments of "historical rupture," or what Deleuze terms "mutation."[11] At moments of historical rupture — the end of the Second World War, the onset within China of globalised capitalism — cinema demonstrates the way in which different people and different groups of people move at different speeds; that is, while chronometric time might be regular and ongoing (days follow hours follow seconds), the *experience* of time is not; in fact different people move at different speeds and might even try to go backwards or skip forwards in time by immersing themselves in memories of the past and/or dreams of the future. Historical rupture not only exposes these different rhythms, or temporalities, of existence, but these different temporalities arguably bring about historical rupture: one person or a group of people cannot (or decides that they do not want to) live life at the same rhythm as everyone else, and so a rupture happens — they separate from the rest, and that person forges forward at a faster rate through time, or falls behind, moving at a slower rate. With regard to *West of the Tracks*, the film explores how globalised capitalism in post-socialist China figures such a rupture, as the film depicts those who figuratively as well as literally have been left behind, their way of life, their rhythm, their temporality being out of sync with that, or better those others, of the contemporary world. A comparison between the beginning and ending of "Remnants" can serve as a good example of this: at the start of this section, we see a town full of electronic goods, cars, vans and people buying lottery tickets in December 1999: the mod cons of the contemporary world are only a lottery win away. Soon after, however, with the celebratory bunting taken down and Shenyang strewn with discarded lottery tickets, we see what is left behind — men hawking scrap metal, poverty and joblessness. This reaches its climax towards the end of the section, when we see several inhabitants, awaiting relocation, scramble through the rubble of Rainbow Row's ruins in order to find kindling for fire. As such, the title "Remnants" alone brings powerfully to mind the temporal dimension of this being left behind: not only are the Rainbow Row inhabitants "remnants" of another era, but their pace of life also belongs to a temporality that is different from the one promised at the section's outset with the mod cons and cars. "Rails" also seems to suggest this when Old Du turns to the camera and tells the story of his brother, who was given away at birth. As he sits in darkness speaking defiantly (young Du is drunk in a bed next to him), Old Du says that "Heaven never lets a good man down," seemingly in reference to his own life. It is at this

moment that an electronic clock strikes the sombre tones of a late hour. Whether added or recorded by coincidence, this scene constitutes a poetic moment in which we are reminded of Old Du's temporality, his time. Old Du and his son are not ghosts of a past that has disappeared (except inasmuch as voices of people like Old Du are rarely seen or heard on our screens — a disappearance that Wang in part sets straight); these are people from contemporary China, equally a part of its present and not just condemned to live in its past. At a time when China is supposedly "marching toward the world," Wang exposes the flipside of Chinese globalisation, in which people are marching lost through derelict building sites.[12]

To return to Ma's work, this notion of multiple, simultaneous temporalities allows us to understand how she analyses the asynchronies of both contemporary China and contemporary Chinese cinema. This is brought to the fore through the fact that in focusing on Wong Kar-wai, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang, Ma in fact studies as "Chinese" filmmakers from Taiwan and Hong Kong (filmmakers who may not even consider themselves to be Chinese!). It is not that the legitimacy of her study is suddenly undermined by this conflation of Taiwan, Hong Kong and (mainland) China; on the contrary, Ma's discussion of Wong, Hou and Tsai under the umbrella of "Chinese cinema" points precisely to the fact that China is not a homogenous entity, but that it is rather made up of multiple, competing temporalities, some of which may not even be "Chinese" — if a set, unchanging definition of what constitutes "Chinese" is to be desired in the first place. Indeed, discussing the work of contemporary theorist Andreas Huyssen, Ma argues that the present is defined by non-synchronicities and multiple, co-existing temporalities, such that

> [t]he globalised world of late modernity brings forth discontinuities of time as well as space; rhythms of crisis, rupture, and repetition; the double threat of amnesia and hypermnesia. If the interpellation of individuals as social subjects once depended upon a synchronisation of the time zones of public and private life, the construction of a shared past as a ground of commonality, we are now confronted with the fracturing of universal narratives of history into a heterogeneous field of temporalities, as these narratives lose their power to suture memory to the empty, homogenous time of the nation.[13]

In other words, the concept of China, and of the nation more generally, is challenged during the globalised era on the level of time and temporality, because where previously we might

have thought of the nation as one people marching to a single rhythm, now we have a "heterogeneous field of temporalities" — as China (and any nation) is revealed to be composed of multiple, often competing, temporalities — but with China's modernity in particular being defined by the various temporalities that emerge around Hong Kong, the presence of Japan in Manchuria in the 1930s, the Civil War and the move to Taiwan by the Kuomintang, and other historical factors that make China not a single, unified nation, but a diverse nation made up of asynchronous peoples who are defined not simply by nationality or race, but also by political allegiance and socio-economic status.

CHINESE CINEMA AS NATIONAL CINEMA?

If the work of Wong, Hou and Tsai seems far removed from that of Wang (although stylistically all four filmmakers regularly, though not always, employ long shots and long takes), the point to be understood here is that while Hong Kong and Taiwan make clear that there are different "Chinese" temporalities, it is also the case that there are multiple temporalities *within* mainland/the "official" China. However, it is not simply that cinema can or should reflect the way in which there are multiple, competing temporalities in contemporary China (although we can see that this is the case in *West of the Tracks*). Cinema can also play and has historically played a role in *creating* either a unified temporality and/or idea of the nation. Perhaps this is most clearly seen in socialist realism, or what is in effect propagandistic cinema that seeks to convey the nation as a homogenous entity. In the case of China, this might broadly be understood as state-backed cinema produced under Mao's reign, with, as Reynaud points out, Maoism presenting an explicitly Han-centred China, thereby disregarding those other races and ethnicities that go to make up its diverse population.[14] But such films are not limited to Mao's regime; even today a film like *Hero* (*Ying xiong*, 2002) tells the story of a nameless assassin (Jet Li) who decides *not* to kill the Emperor (Daoming Chen) because he comes to understand that the Emperor's role in unifying China is far more important than the ongoing possibility of warring states within China. In a film that expressly deals with different perspectives on the same events, with those differences expressed through the use of colour in the *mise-en-scène* (the same story is in effect told three times, with the different versions being expressed via different colour schemes, with red, blue,

white and green dominating the film's visual field at different points), the film is about competing temporalities — but all of which become subjugated to that of the Emperor by the film's climax. In other words, even today unification of the people under the banner of the Chinese nation is an issue not only addressed in contemporary cinema, but also potentially enabled by that cinema.

Whether by design or not, Zhang's *Hero* is probably more ambiguous than the above synopsis suggests, in that the film does not overtly endorse the suppression of difference that otherwise informs the entire structure of the film (after all, we do see different versions of the same story — even if the film is about creating a unified China in the face of competing claims to what the nation is or should be). What is important, though, is that *Hero* deals with the issue of different temporalities within the ancient China of its setting and the contemporary China of its making. What is more, it is partially a state-backed film that on the whole tells an action-packed story in the *wu xia* genre/tradition (there are plenty of fight sequences in the film) and which involves by and large a fast pace, or temporality, of editing. In short, although it has formal complexities (seeing the same events multiple times but from different perspectives), *Hero* is predominantly a narrative film — and the point that I wish to make here is not simply that it is a film *about* different temporalities (or rather about the suppression of different temporalities for the benefit of a single temporality that is unified under the rubric of the nation), but that formally the film has its own temporality, that of mainstream narrative cinema. Here the very ambiguities that surround the film become important: as a mainland-Hong Kong co-production, the film suggests the need for an integrated Chinese identity in the context of the post-1997 handover era. But as a fast-paced action film that also (eventually — it was released in the USA in 2004) was a global box office success, the film also demonstrates that Chinese cinema can, in effect, rival Hollywood's cinema, by being a narrative film that moves at the fast pace/rhythm as per the latter's more mainstream fare. In other words, while the film seemingly promotes a nationalistic discourse as the nameless assassin calls off his quest for the benefit of the nation, *Hero* is also a film consciously created to circulate within, precisely, the *global* arena of contemporary cinema ("China marching toward the world").

This discussion of *Hero* may seem removed from *West of the Tracks*, but it is useful for clarifying how film form relates to politics. Ma herself acknowledges this in relation to the films of Wong Kar-wai: "[h]is work," she says, "brings into view the implications of narrative mutation at a moment when the assurance of temporal continuity erodes under the pressure of historical

rupture, globalisation, and a discrediting of narrative's ability to impose a stable order upon the experience of time."[15] In other words, Ma understands globalisation as a moment of historical rupture in the sense defined above, and narrative cinema, formally and as a global phenomenon, functions as a means to "impose a stable order" via determining the (typically accelerated) rhythm, or temporality, of not just films themselves, but also of those who watch them. In other words, the issue of "whose globalisation?" is written into a film's form, but not necessarily in terms of the nation; instead it is (mainstream) narrative cinema that serves as a force for homogenisation, with its capitalistic impulse to make money revealing that what is being homogenised is globalised, neoliberal capitalism — at the expense of different, typically slower rhythms. In other words, the answer to "whose globalisation?" is, *Hero* would suggest, not really a Chinese globalisation, but the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism as expressed formally through many of the tropes of mainstream narrative cinema (what David Bordwell would term "intensified continuity" — fast cutting, lots of close ups, the camera always moving).[16] In being a nine-hour documentary, Wang's film serves to disrupt the "stable order" that we see *Hero* try to enact. In other words, *West of the Tracks* does not stand alone as a film, but it stands in relation to other Chinese films (including, as Ma might suggest, films from Taiwan and Hong Kong), which themselves stand in relation to globalised capital.

In the same way, therefore, that Ma reads it as a political manoeuvre on the part not just of Hou, Tsai and Wong to make "slow" films that challenge the mainstream narrative style/tempo, and which demonstrate not a synchronous and fast-rhythmed world, but a world of "desynchronised time," so, too, might it be that contemporary mainland filmmakers aim to do something similar, Wang Bing in particular.[17] Within the context of mainland Chinese filmmaking, it perhaps is logical, then, that various filmmakers, a number of whom are associated with the so-called Sixth Generation, such as Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Zhang Yuan and Wang, would also make "slow" films, the narrative content of which is minimal – since they similarly want to explore the different times/temporalities of those not just within an expanded "China" that includes Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also within (mainland) China as defined geopolitically in the contemporary world. For this reason, many Sixth Generation films are about the dispossessed, the disillusioned, ethnic minorities, homosexuals, intellectuals, and stories that challenge the official version of recent history. They want to show the diversity of China, not its simplified and homogenised face that is used as a tool both for social control within China and as a means to export China to the rest of the globalised world (the myth of *Hero*). Since these

filmmakers do not march to the official beat of the national drum, it also follows logically that many of these filmmakers have at least historically worked outside of China's official film industry and have had many of their films banned within China.

We should note that this is not a case of calling Sixth Generation films "anti-national" or "anti-globalisation" as a simple result of the fact that they reflect neither the "official" China nor its contemporary adoption of capitalism as it emerges as a, if not the, global power within the context of globalised capital. Indeed, the fact that Sixth Generation filmmaking, as I have defined it above, "logically" challenges the drive to unify China under a single narrative that, cinematically speaking, also moves in time with the fast-paced narrative of contemporary Hollywood, suggests that it (the Sixth Generation) is as much a part of the processes of globalisation as mainstream films like *Hero*. As Paul G. Pickowicz suggests, many independent filmmakers require and seek foreign funding for their projects, something that applies to *West of the Tracks*, as mentioned above (it was funded by the Hubert Bals Fund).[18] In other words, the Sixth Generation relies upon facets of globalisation in the same way that *Hero* does. It is not necessarily that these films are resigned to the process of globalisation; it is perhaps more that we (always) already live(d) in a globalised world — but now the political issue becomes for whom is this globalised world, and why do the forces of globalised capital, including mainstream cinema, seek to homogenise temporality worldwide, thereby suppressing difference? Why is it that that which is different is cast – or deliberately seeks to enter — into economic, cultural and other forms of poverty? And why is it demonised in the very same process (existing underground, sometimes being banned, being about the dispossessed, who themselves are demonised), even though the world has always consisted of multiple temporalities and perhaps could not exist as such without them? This is an issue that extends far beyond national boundaries, meaning that a film-philosopher like Deleuze might well be useful for helping us to think through something so foreign to him as a contemporary Chinese documentary like *West of the Tracks*.

DELEUZE AND DOCUMENTARY

Writing about *Peacock* (*Kong que*, 2005), Xiaoping Lin says that "in this new era of Chinese capitalism there is no longer any job security for the working class, not to mention their chil-

dren who have no education or professional skills as they grow up during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution."[19] Even though, unlike *Peacock*, *West of the Tracks* is not set immediately after the Cultural Revolution, Lin's analysis applies at least in part to Wang's film, since it similarly speaks of how Chinese capitalism destroys job security for the working class, as thousands of workers are laid off and struggle to survive in Shenyang without education or the learning of new professional skills. However, throughout his book on contemporary Chinese film and video, Lin has a tendency to read all films as allegories: movies tell the tale of China in their smaller, specific stories. I do not wish to rehearse here the debate surrounding Fredric Jameson's observation that Western (and other) scholars tend to read texts from the so-called Third World (and elsewhere) as "national allegories."[20] Rather, I wish to say that while Lin's discussion of no job security and no education does apply to *West of the Tracks*, his analysis of texts as allegories is harder to uphold when we consider that *West of the Tracks* is a documentary film. This is because documentary film is supposedly grounded in a specific time and place: it is hard to generalise from the case of Shenyang as depicted in *West of the Tracks* what life is like throughout China, because the very specificity of Shenyang as a place and 1999-2001 as a period in time arguably prevents us from doing so. However, I should like to say that, when applying a Deleuzian framework to *West of the Tracks*, we can not so much read the film as an allegory per se, but we can see in the film more than simply the specificity of its content. In part this is possible as a result of Deleuze refusing to recognise a hard and fast distinction between fiction and documentary, as I shall explain presently.

Now, ever since John Grierson declared documentary to be the "creative treatment of actuality," it has been clear that documentary is not (necessarily) a reliable recording of reality, but that it in fact involves input from a filmmaker (it is a "creative treatment").[21] That is, the distinction between fiction and documentary has been blurred since the term documentary was coined. Indeed, Michael Renov says that documentary and fiction "inhabit each other," while Bill Nichols, in one of the classic texts on documentary, says that there is "no absolute separation between fiction and documentary," despite the fact that

> documentaries address *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker, [and despite the fact that] they [documentaries] differ from the various genres of fiction (science fiction, horror, adventure, melodrama, and so on) in significant ways. They are made with different assumptions about purpose, they involve a different

> quality of relationship between filmmaker and subject, and they prompt different sorts of expectations from audiences.[22]

When documentary filmmakers have themselves made claims regarding the reliability of their work (proponents of Direct cinema, typically), others have stepped forward to disagree entirely, suggesting that documentary cinema is not detached observation, but that it is infused with its own prejudices. That is, once again, the distinction between fiction and documentary is not entirely clear, since both types of filmmaking involve creative decisions and the input of a filmmaker.[23] This does not mean that scholars like Dirk Eitzen and Carl Plantinga have not tried to give a definition of the term documentary; for the former, documentary is a mode of viewing films, while for the latter documentary is an "asserted veridical representation" that the filmmakers want audiences to take as real.[24] Both can be used to distinguish documentary from fiction in various respects. However, while there is a history of claims regarding what (or, in Eitzen's case, when) a documentary is, and while more particularly there is a history of scholarship that demonstrates the at-best porous boundary between fiction and documentary, the reason why Deleuze does not recognise a distinction between the two is because Deleuze's approach to cinema is different. Deleuze considers cinema from one or both of two angles: how a film treats movement, and how a film treats time. From this perspective, the division between fiction and documentary melts away.

To be clear, Deleuze does not much discuss documentary in his *Cinema* books. Jean Rouch and *cinéma vérité*, together with Shirley Clarke and direct cinema, all merit mention, as does Canadian documentary maker Pierre Perrault. Concerning in particular Rouch, Deleuze asserts that *cinéma vérité*/direct cinema should have as its goal "not to achieve a real as it would exist independently of the image, but to achieve a before and an after as they coexist with the image, as they are inseparable from the image."[25] Deleuze seems therefore to propose documentary should show time itself. The image, even the documentary film image, cannot capture or show reality objectively ("a real as it would exist independently of the image"); instead images, including cinematic images, falsify reality. But this is not necessarily a negative process in that we can be said never to reach the truth through film. For, what film perhaps does best in showing us images of time is also to show us that there is no truth that can be separated from the false. If the temporality of the unified nation obscures and excludes as much as it unites, and if this temporality of the unified nation is put forward as the

"true" nation (Han China is the "real" or "true" China), then clearly we can see that truth-making is a process, and that truth is therefore not eternal, but constructed and then imposed on people such that they become included or excluded in national or other groupings. When a film shows not a truth but how truths are constructed, we have not the putting forward of a particular temporality as the "true" one, but a depiction of how there are multiple temporalities. In short, then, such a film offers a direct image of time, a time-image — regardless of whether it is a fiction or a documentary film.

Deleuze's argument goes against much documentary scholarship not by asserting that there is no direct access to the truth; as outlined above, many documentary scholars have argued this. But Deleuze's implicit rejection of the fiction-documentary binarism springs from his rather more daring argument that the true-false binarism is itself misleading. Since it is concerned with time and different temporalities, Wang's film is perhaps best understood as a time-image film, regardless of whether it is documentary or fiction.

WEST OF THE TRACKS AS A TIME-IMAGE FILM

There are several ways in which we can understand *West of the Tracks* as a time-image film, the nature of which also reflects upon the issue of time within the contemporary Chinese context. The first way in which we can explore the film's status as a time-image is through its relationship to history. This is not simply a question of whether *West of the Tracks* shows a particular moment in history (1999-2001), nor simply a question of whether the film illustrates how history (the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, the Cultural Revolution, contemporary globalised capital) features in the film. Rather, the film also relates to the way in which history is not simply about what happened, but about its own telling. That is, history is a tool for making official the time or temporality of a particular group of people or a nation. In cinematic terms, this means films filled with heroic agents who go out and who conquer enemies and/or the wilderness in order to construct a community or civilisation. In other words, this is narrative as history, as the official version of events, an official version that like all "truths" hides as much as it actually tells. History, therefore, can be compared to memory: people do not actually remember things in the way that the history books or films write them.

This concept of history is important, for it informs *West of the Tracks* on various levels. Firstly, the film is not an official history of Shenyang, as is made clear by the predominantly unofficial circulation of the film in China. Secondly, it is not a film about heroic individuals who go out into the wilderness and who conquer nature and/or enemies in order to institute a new nation or civilisation. On the contrary, we have something more akin to what we see in Italian neorealism, which is perhaps the first major cinematic movement that Deleuze defines via the time-image. That is, rather than agential heroes, we have people in Wang's film who are victims of industrial decay and an increasingly capitalised China following the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s onwards – just as the characters in *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945) and *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania Anno Zero*, 1948) are similarly incapable of overcoming the war and post-war situations in which they find themselves. In order to demonstrate how their environment plays a large role in defining their lives – rather than showing his subjects as heroes who control their environment — it also makes sense that *West of the Tracks* often shows its subjects in long shot. This means that the environment's own temporality comes to the fore, rather than simply having the film defined by human temporalities; the factories and other spaces of Tie Xi become "characters" in the film as much as the humans do. In "Rust," for example, the red-hot metals, the smoke and steam, the grimy relaxation rooms all help to make the Shenyang smelting factories characters as much as any of the humans. The trains that are present throughout the whole film also take on the role of characters, as does Shenyang itself. "On the railroad, I'm somebody," says Old Du in "Rails," as if in giving to Old Du an identity, the rails themselves also take on an identity.

Furthermore, the weather plays an enormous role in the film, in particular the snow that we see during the winter sections of all three of the film's parts. Not only does the snow visibly and audibly slow Wang and others down as they try to traverse Shenyang's wintry landscape (in one sequence in "Remnants," we can hear Wang breathing heavily as he tries to keep with the father of Zhu Bin, one of the youths upon whom that section focuses), but we also literally see the white snow and the white fog cover over and replace the otherwise urban environment, occupying large areas of the film's frame — with the camera lens itself occasionally being covered in snow or rain (as happens in the same sequence when Wang's camera mists up after entering Zhu Bin's father's store). In other words the weather imposes upon Wang and Shenyang's inhabitants its own temporality (it slows them down), while also

invading the cinema screen, lending to the images a foggy, almost unfinished feel that is reminiscent of the late paintings of J.M.W. Turner (e.g. *The Approach to Venice*, 1840). James Williams writes about how Deleuze sees in Turner's work a prescient "catastrophism" — a sense in which catastrophe haunts humanity — and this also seems to apply to *West of the Tracks*: in showing us both the temporality of the environment and those of the human characters as co-existing simultaneously, we not only see a direct image of time, but the film seems both metaphorically and literally to convey the catastrophe of neoliberal, global capitalism that has ruined Shenyang, suggesting that nothing is "safe or static; it is constantly undone and remade," because all is characterised by mutation or rupture.[26]

Now, it is worth making clear at this point that perhaps cinema only ever shows us different temporalities, in that any film will show us a background and a foreground, with a human agent typically occupying the foreground. This is true — but the point perhaps to make is that most (mainstream) films do not encourage viewers to consider the background as important – but instead as a backdrop for heroic escapades (this is in part what Deleuze is arguing when he defines the movement-image). *West of the Tracks*, meanwhile, encourages us to understand the different and differing temporalities of the world precisely because of the prominence that the environment plays in the film; rather than backdrop, the environment becomes a prominent character. This character, or temporality, of the environment is made especially clear during the sequences in "Rust" in which we see the factories iced over following their abandonment during the winter months as a result of the state being unable to pay the workers' wages. As those who write official history aim through narrative to delineate clearly the true from the false, so does the civilisation of nature by (typically) heroic agential men involve the separation of man from nature, in particular via the construction of walls and buildings, and the separation of figure from ground. When we see nature, here in the form of thick ice, invading and disregarding the boundaries imposed by man, such that ground affects figure more than vice versa (with Wang depicting workers trying at length to get rid of the ice), we are again reminded of the fact that nature has its own temporality, that it does not bend solely to the will of man, but that man perhaps also has to struggle and/or try to live in harmony with nature.

The desire for viewers to acknowledge non-human temporalities in *West of the Tracks* extends beyond nature. In placing his camera on the front of the trains that pass along Tie Xi's railway tracks, it is as if Wang wants us to see from the perspective of the train — meaning

that we not only consider the train a "character," as suggested above, but that we also thereby adopt the train's temporality — a temporality that is, significantly, slow and ponderous (these are not exciting, high-speed train shots as per mainstream train-based thriller films that viewers might see elsewhere; technology is not here figured as the purveyor of excitement, but itself is somehow disenfranchised). This is contrasted with other moments in the film when visibly we can see that Wang is holding the camera himself, not because he figures in mirrors (although his shadow does come into some shots, and, as mentioned, we also hear his breathing as he struggles across snow-filled and slippery landscapes; what is more, various characters acknowledge the camera's presence, with one man telling Wang to cut in a factory changing room as he films a fight between two workers), but because of the handheld camera work. In other words, we are shown (slow) train time and what we might term "Wang time" at different points in the film — again suggesting the co-existence of multiple temporalities, moving *West of the Tracks* into the realm of the time-image, the time image now being as much a way of seeing the film (different temporalities are in all films) as it is a quality of the film itself (Wang nonetheless takes the time to encourage us to see the different temporalities).

Although *West of the Tracks* progresses across its three parts from a film with multiple protagonists in the factories in "Rust," to what seems to be a large group of teenagers in "Remnants," to predominantly Old Du and his son in "Rails," this is also a film in which we do not have so much a central character (let alone one who is a controlling agent) as a film in which there are many characters, or people. If history is the writing of official narratives, *West of the Tracks* rather allows memory, unofficial and counter-histories to enter into its form. This is signalled not only by numerous characters recounting their lives and how they ended up in Shenyang (in "Rust," for example, one retired factory worker explains how he arrived in Shenyang from Hebei province at age 16 because of the war, and then proceeded to work for the Japanese, right up until his current age of 73), but also by the passing comments that many people make about those in power and who seem to have left out to dry those who struggle to get by in Tie Xi. For example, in "Rust" a foreman, Dexing Zhou, describes how the fumes are dangerous in the smelting factory, and that workers don't earn enough money to go into business for themselves, before a second worker says how 30 years of his life are down the drain, as he remains unpaid, has no security and might get sick. A third worker then complains that the factory is far from "first rank," since workers regularly have to

spend two months a year in hospital as a result of lead poisoning. That is, we are presented not with an official history of Tie Xi, but with the memories of those who continue to inhabit the space. Their memories are not just testimony to the existence of the past in the present, even of a suppressed past that is not officially discussed. Rather, those who remember, and even those who simply feature in the film, function as what Deleuze might term "intercessors." Within the context of "fiction" filmmaking, intercessors are "real and not fictional characters" who tell stories in such a way that fiction and documentary become impossible to tell apart.[27] What we have in *West of the Tracks* are intercessors who tell their stories, who speak their minds, and/or who simply feature in the film, not because those stories are necessarily true or false, but because they show us how memory, or their private existence, is also a political existence. As per Deleuze's modern political cinema, which features as part of the time-image, intercessors trouble the distinction between the private and the political, using personal/private memories to disrupt the official/political narrative or history.[28]

Within *West of the Tracks*, it is not that these characters need to tell stories in the same way as Deleuze's intercessors do in the films of, for example, Pierre Perrault. Rather, it is simply by being in the film, by seeing their temporalities, that the story of the film is created/told. That is, the film itself is a *fabulation*.[29] This act of fabulation via intercessors functions on several levels. Firstly, the people-as-intercessors trouble Wang's role as author of the text. Although we recognise Wang as the filmmaker, the presence of so many others, who modify and change the film as it is being made rather than following an official script, means that this documentary by definition acknowledges and shows us many temporalities, which intercede into Wang's own temporality as the film goes on. Furthermore, because many of Wang's subjects are conscious of the camera, with the 17-year old Bobo and his gang of friends from "Remnants" being most so (although numerous others make reference to Wang and tell him specifically to film objects and moments as the film progresses), we are never wholly certain whether the characters are "being themselves" or "performing" for the camera. This seems particularly clear as Bobo chases his girlfriend, Shen Shen, near the start of "Remnants." As she walks away from him, in part because she doesn't want to be filmed, Bobo turns back to the camera and then asks after her if he can buy her flowers. The turn in particular suggests that he wants to appear romantic for Wang; he is performing as much as he is "being himself."

Determining whether this moment is an "act" or "genuine" is not our concern here; on the contrary, what is of concern is not knowing whether these moments are "real" or at least in part "false." They therefore demonstrate the status of the people in the film as intercessors, in that while they may not specifically tell stories, the very possibility that they are modifying their behaviour and are potentially performing for the camera means that they are "fabulating," or behaving in such a way that we cannot tell if what they are showing us is "true" or a performance. The direct image of time results not from our being able to tell what is true from what is false, but from the disruption of the distinction between the two, and from our understanding, again, that many truths/temporalities co-exist simultaneously. In showing us so many temporalities, or memories, Wang disrupts the temporality of official history as well.

EPISODIC STRUCTURE AND FILM HISTORY

Wang also disrupts official history and thus shows us a direct image of time through the film's structure. For, if narrative is for cinema and history alike a tool for creating an official truth, the rejection of (cause and effect-driven) narrative is part and parcel of showing us not a single temporality, but multiple temporalities, or time itself. Although we are often given dates for what happens when, at other times Wang skips about in time in such a way that we have no idea when events are taking place. By favouring an episodic structure over a clear, cause-and-effect driven narrative, Wang troubles classical narrative techniques. Bereft of a clear temporal marker, often the viewers of *West of the Tracks* regularly wonder if days, hours, even months have passed between scenes — especially those in the factories in "Rust," since there is rarely natural light to guide us. Combined with the slow pacing of the film and its enormous running time, Wang invites viewers not to measure time chronometrically but to experience time differently, to experience the passing of time itself.

Wang's insistent use of the long takes and the film's sheer duration also emerge here as important. As Elizabeth Cowie, in one of the few Deleuzian considerations of documentary, puts it: "Documentary's ability to show place and space as immanent — as a 'time-image' as Deleuze defines this — involves a freeing of depicted time from the temporal causality of cinematic representation."[30] Instead of being able to relate one episode to the next in a cause

and effect-driven fashion, time unfolds at its own pace — with multiple temporalities also in frame for us to see. As a result, "[h]istorical time and the referential are subordinated to the bodily time of viewing, that is, to an experiential process of memory, cognition, and affect."[31] Not only does watching *West of the Tracks* become an experience for the viewer of time itself, but for Cowie this would elevate the film (she does not mention *West of the Tracks* in her book) from a "mere" documentary to being a work of art. As precisely an *experience*, the time-image becomes not a quantity but a quality, or an intensity, which again is core to personal memory (intense experiences are remembered, whether or not recorded/given "extension" in official history), and also core to disrupting the official time of history (we cannot experience the film "scientifically," with time within the film and time watching the film evading measurement according to the calendar and the clock). In this way, the time-image can be re-read not simply as a type of image (or film), but as a lens through which to consider cinema more widely — deliberately paying attention to those alternative temporalities that mainstream cinema often (tries to or simply does) ignore — as well as the world itself.

In favouring an episodic structure over a cause and effect-driven narrative, Wang eschews the temporality of mainstream and/or official cinema. However, formally he also demonstrates how *cinema itself* has many co-existing temporalities. This is signalled by the prominence of the factory and the train in *West of the Tracks*: these two elements are the primary features of the first two Lumière films — *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (*L'arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat*, 1895) and *Workers Leaving the Factory* (*La sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon*, 1895). These, combined with the Hales Tours/phantom ride-style shots from the front of the trains, recall the earliest cinema, a cinema before cause and effect-driven narrative took over and became the dominant and presumed-best form. In other words, even though Wang is using contemporary, lightweight and highly mobile handheld DV cameras, cinema's own past cannot help but co-exist with its present, just as the past of Shenyang and Tie Xi cannot help but haunt its present, too. What is more, since the Lumière and the phantom ride films pre-exist cinema's narrative phase, they remind us, too, of cinema's unofficial history, its memory of itself as not necessarily a narrative form, even if it is as a narrative medium that cinema is most widely understood. Finally, the influence of the earliest actualities from France and elsewhere on Wang and his digital film from China suggest that cinema has always been globalised, even if Hollywood and other mainstream, fast-paced action cinemas

(the Chinese example given in this essay is *Hero*) wishes to promote a certain type of (capitalist) globalisation.

In this way, Wang once again disrupts the official narrative both of China and of globalisation, creating a monumental work that formally challenges official narratives and histories concerning China and the processes of globalisation more generally. Although I have by no means exhausted all that can be said about *West of the Tracks*, I hope to have shown that Deleuze can help to unlock some of the potential that the film possesses, while simultaneously showing that a Chinese documentary can help us to gain insight into Deleuze's work, both with regard to Chinese cinema and with regard to documentary. Indeed, *West of the Tracks* suggests that the time-image might well be a tool not just for seeing certain films, but perhaps cinema — and the world in which it circulates — as a whole.

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