

Antoine Thirion on *Beauty Lives in Freedom*

If we had to introduce Wang Bing's *Beauty Lives in Freedom*, it could be on the basis of its immediate predecessor, the monumental *Dead Souls* (2018): how Bing's latest film stems from it, how it differs from it to the point of justifying a new work of its own. *Beauty Lives in Freedom* is a monument of its own kind, a successor like Bing's 2007 *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* to Jean Eustache's 1971 *Numéro Zéro*.

The testimony Wang Bing provides in *Beauty Lives in Freedom* is one more piece of evidence in the file opened in the mid-2000s, when the director began to prepare *The Ditch* (2010), an adaptation of Yang Xianhui's book *Goodbye, Jiabiangou*, named after the camp where several thousand 'rightist' men were sentenced to forced labour, starvation and often, death. To create *The Ditch*, Wang Bing travelled across the dry lands of the Gobi Desert (where the camp was located) and faced its strong winds to listen to the unbearable stories of the camp's survivors and shed light on their previously unheard narratives.

Much like He Fengming, Gao Ertai – a Californian-looking stateless man, with pristine white false teeth and long grey pulled-back hair – was pursued and imprisoned by Chinese authorities for his dissenting opinions expressed in an essay written in his younger years entitled 'On Beauty'. Fifty years after the essay, Gao released his memoir, *In Search of my Homeland*, which details the many persecutions he and his relatives suffered until his exile in 1993.

The four-and-a-half-hour running time of *Beauty Lives in Freedom* may not have been sufficient to contain the vivid words and precise memories of this survivor, historian, painter and writer. A particularly moving element of the film is witnessing Gao handling old pieces of paper on which he had written micrographic poems and texts before hiding the scraps in the lining of his clothes during his time as a political detainee. Now kept by Gao in plastic binders, these scrolls or pieces of parchment are the tools that shape his memories; they are their origin and the source of their meaning ('real names are hard evidence'). In *Beauty Lives in Freedom*, the question of survival never arises without the question of art, since in such abject circumstances, it is not only about staying alive but about finding a reason for staying alive.

Restoring the chronology of the shoot for the final edit, Wang recreates the mechanics of memory and its blind spots; the cracks or fissures caused by emotion or oversight. To consider a central focus of Wang's cinema, these gaps show what man is striving for when he no longer works. Gao's inability to rest contradicts his appearance: that of a retired man. Four and a half hours, it seems, is the time necessary for a man possessed with an incredible sense of determination to think through and recount how he was broken but remained standing; how, faced with incurable grief, he now seems incapable of ever sitting still again.

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