

Contemplation and Drifting: Exploring Painterliness in Wang Bing's Works with *Three Sisters* (2012) as the Focus

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Abstract

Wang Bing's 王兵 documentary works are often known for their coarse visual style; however, a close reading of his visual texts reveals a distinctive painterly aesthetic and formal sensibility. *Three Sisters* 三姊妹 (2012) exemplifies this: the film's use of static shots, enclosed compositions, and contrasts of light and shadow transforms the screen into a visual space with a painterly frame, producing intertextual resonances with Western naturalist painting. At the same time, through techniques such as wide shots and wide-angle lenses, the film evokes a sense of spatial flow and the aesthetic of 'distance', embodying the traditional Chinese aesthetic notion of *you* 游 (wandering). Using *Three Sisters* as a point of entry, this article examines Wang Bing's works across different periods and finds that these aesthetic characteristics recur throughout his oeuvre, forming a vital part of his authorial style. The painterly elements in his moving images attenuate realism and dissolve narrative, guiding viewers to detach from existing cognitive frameworks and, beyond narrative, to apprehend the lived states of the filmed subjects.

Keywords: documentary aesthetics; painterliness; Wang Bing; *Three Sisters*; *you* (wandering); suspension

Introduction: Exploring the Visual Aesthetics in Wang Bing's Works

In October 1999, Wang Bing brought a borrowed DV camera to Shenyang, where he spent a year and a half filming *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* 铁西区 (2003). This documentary, which depicts the decline of an industrial region in Northeast China, brought Wang international recognition at film festivals in the early 21st century. Its nine-hour runtime sparked considerable debate around issues of documentary production, aesthetics, and reception. Since then, Wang Bing has continued to create without pause, regularly releasing new works.

Although Wang has explicitly denied in interviews that his works bear political intentions or exposé motives (Wang & Wu, 2007; Futai, 2017), the documentary form's inescapable indexical relationship to reality has led scholars to interpret his films as reflections on Chinese history and contemporary society. Elena Pollacchi, for example, categorizes Wang's films based on subject matter into two groups: 'historical themes—the Anti-Rightist Campaign', and 'contemporary themes—current politics, economics, and everyday life' (Pollacchi, 2017). Similarly, Tetsushi Marukawa attempts to understand works such as *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* and *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* 和凤鸣 (2007) by tracing the genealogy of 'modernity', arguing that their content is both part of China's modern history and a means of entering and reconstructing that history (Marukawa, 2008). Beyond content-based approaches, some scholars have turned their attention to the visual characteristics and documentary form of Wang's works. Yet in terms of visual texture and aesthetic significance, his films are often viewed as lacking refinement or beauty. Ayako Saito uses terms such as 'dirt, chaos, the anti-aesthetic, the ugly, the impure, or gross' (Saito, 2013, p.12) to describe Wang's films, suggesting an authorial tendency toward anti-aesthetic or de-aestheticized expression. Pollacchi likewise notes the rough and unpolished appearance of his works, attributing this to harsh shooting conditions, limited

resources, and constrained preparation time (Pollacchi, 2019).

Evaluations of Wang's 'coarseness' in form seem to indirectly support the legitimacy of interpreting his works through the lens of social reflection. However, a look at contemporaneous documentary practices reveals two distinct filmmaking strategies. Filmmakers such as Chen Weijun 陈为军 and Zhou Hao 周浩, who come from a journalism background, tend to produce works that carry a news reportage texture, emphasizing urgency and dramatic impact. In contrast, documentary directors like Wang Bing and Zhao Liang 赵亮, with backgrounds in photography, show a clear concern for artistic expression in their creative approaches. This article aims to move beyond the gravitational pull of 'grand narrative' implied in the documentary's indexical function, and instead focuses on the formal dimension of Wang Bing's work, seeking to uncover its aesthetic expressions beneath the seemingly 'rough' surface.

Pollacchi outlines Wang's creative trajectory in spatial terms, dividing it roughly into four periods—'North-east–Northwest–Southwest–East China'—which together form a counterclockwise loop on the map of China (Pollacchi, 2017). Following *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, Wang turned to the northwest region, producing a series of films themed around political memory in China;¹ he then moved south to Yunnan, focusing on groups such as peasants, left-behind children, psychiatric patients, laborers, and refugees; more recently, he has turned his attention to the Yangtze River Delta, portraying the living conditions of contemporary Chinese migrant workers. From an auteurist perspective, early works like *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* represent 'a process of youth, an irrepressible impulse of life' (Wang & Zhang, 2007, p.66), and cannot yet be said to display full artistic self-awareness. During the Northwest period, Wang devoted considerable effort to his only fiction feature to date, *The Ditch* 夹边沟 (2010). After this, he largely concluded his exploration of the 'Anti-Rightist Campaign' series that had shaped his image as a dissident filmmaker,² and returned to documentary practice.³ In Yunnan, he made a deliberate decision to adjust his filming approach, organizing narrative and characters in ways that differed markedly from earlier works such as *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*.⁴ This transformation relates to the reality that, in the digital age, filmmakers must confront and manage an overwhelming abundance of raw material, necessarily involving strategic choices in editing. From this period into his East China phase, Wang has remained committed to resisting the 'design' of story in documentary filmmaking, instead seeking the unknown within cinema (Wang, Dong, & Zhang, 2018, pp.299–300). In his recent work *Youth (Spring)* 青春：春 (2023), he adopts a narrative structure composed of several juxtaposed 20-minute segments (Wang & Yang, 2023).

Although Wang places great importance on discovering new narrative possibilities through the medium of film—and has described his considerations of visual language as 'often intuitive, or rather, random' (Wang & Chen, 2020)—image remains the core element of any moving-image work, and it signals the emergence, establishment, and evolution of formal and aesthetic strategies across his career. In this regard, *Three Sisters* (2012), Wang's first documentary filmed after leaving the long-familiar Northeast and Northwest regions for Yunnan, marks a significant turning point. Set in the high-altitude mountainous region of northeast Yunnan, the film centers on Ga Ying 茆英, Zhenzhen 真真, and Fenfen 粉粉—three sisters aged 10, 6, and 4 at the time—and documents their daily survival in a harsh environment with little parental care. In *Three Sisters*, stylistic features that had appeared sporadically in earlier works coalesce into a self-conscious formal signature, which continues into subsequent films. Through visual analysis, this article focuses on the painterly qualities embedded in Wang's imagery, examining how *Three Sisters* fuses dramatic and naturalist modes

of visual expression. Building on this, it traces the recurrence of such painterly elements in Wang's works across different creative periods and discusses how this aesthetic quality shapes viewers' understanding and recognition of the filmed subjects.

Painterly Expression in Documentary Images

The Screen as Frame: On the Possibility of a Painterly Perspective

Exploring the painterly qualities in Wang Bing's works may offer an effective avenue for understanding the aesthetics of his documentaries. In discussing the painterliness of cinematic images, Wang Hengli 王亨里 remarked: 'Nearly all cinematographers must possess some degree of painterly cultivation in order to operate behind the camera... Thus, all realist filmmakers first drew attention through the painterly quality of their images (Wang, 1989, p. 26).' This painterliness differs from the photographic quality that captures specific moments: unlike the past tense implied by the instantaneity of photographic exposure, painterliness endows the image with a sense of presence or contemporaneity.⁵ On another level, Wang Bing's deliberate blurring of the boundaries between film and installation art in his practice also encourages us to examine moving images beyond the constraints of medium and materiality. When the viewing space and formal presentation shift, the potential for the image to evoke a visceral 'shudder' in the viewer is diminished—especially when viewers are moving through space—recasting the image as an 'exhibit' rather than a 'projection'. This transformation signals a latent affinity between the cinematic screen and the picture frame.

Erik Barnouw observed that the influence of painting on documentary dates back to the 1920s, when many painters turned to filmmaking and introduced new perspectives and techniques into the medium (Barnouw, 1992). However, the painterly qualities in Wang Bing's work differ from the rhythmic and abstract elements in the early non-fiction films Barnouw described. In Wang's case, painterliness is most evident at the level of the shot itself. As Pascal Bonitzer noted, 'Comparing a filmmaker to a painter begins with the concept of the shot... The production of the shot brings the filmmaker closer to the painter, and film closer to painting' (Bonitzer, 1999, pp. 36–37). In Wang Bing's films, elements such as color and chiaroscuro rendered through long takes transform the screen into a painterly canvas. Thom Andersen has argued that the colors in *Three Sisters* resemble Giotto's frescoes (Andersen, 2012), while David D'Arcy noted in his review of *Ta'ang* 德昂 (2016) that Wang, through improvisational filming and minimal resources, evokes the intimacy found in the paintings of Georges de La Tour (D'Arcy, 2016).

These remarks point to the viability of discussing Wang Bing's images in painterly terms, though they largely remain at the level of intuitive perception. If we are to probe more deeply into the mechanisms generating these associations and viewing experiences, a straightforward hypothesis might be: the image must tend toward stillness—that is, cinematographically, camera movement should be minimized. Wang frequently employs static shots and near-motionless handheld cameras in many of his films, which both reduces interference in the filmed space and grants the image a stillness akin to that of a painting. Yet, given the inherent properties of the moving-image medium, it would be simplistic to treat the fixed shot as the sole criterion for establishing affinities between film and painting.

André Bazin famously argued that 'the picture frame is centripetal, while the screen is centrifugal' (Bazin, 1987, p. 199). Roland Barthes echoed this: 'The screen [as Bazin observed] is not a frame; it is a masking

device. Characters exiting the frame continue to act beyond it: the ‘blind field’ is the continuous repetition of partial images’ (Barthes, 2002, p. 89). In tension with this assertion, however, is the centripetal visual effect found in certain images within Wang Bing’s films.



Figure 1. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 2. *The Potato Eaters*, Vincent van Gogh (1885)



Figure 3. *Ta'ang*, Wang Bing (2016)

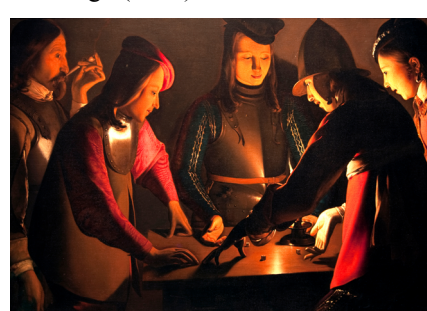


Figure 4. *The Dice Players*, Georges de La Tour (1650- 1651)

For instance, in the ensemble scenes of *Three Sisters* and *Ta'ang*, both filmed during Wang’s Yunnan period, one can find similarly structured images: characters gather around a dining table, a bonfire, or another focal object. A single, limited light source creates dramatic contrasts between light and shadow, further diminishing the realism of off-screen space and generating a sense of visual enclosure. If these scenes were juxtaposed with Vincent van Gogh’s *The Potato Eaters* (1885) and Georges de La Tour’s *The Card Players* (1650–1651), the similarity would not lie solely in their comparable chromatic palettes. In the dining scene of *Three Sisters* and in *The Potato Eaters*, dim lighting concentrates on the characters’ faces and the table, and the surrounding arrangement enhances the visual cohesion of the composition (see Figures 1–2). In *Ta'ang* and *The Dice Players*, figures are arranged in a regular pattern, and the simplicity of the composition enhances its stability and order (see Figures 3–4). Known as the ‘painter of candlelight’, La Tour was a leading exponent of tenebrism, whose paintings used single light sources to produce dramatic chiaroscuro. In *Ta'ang*, the spartan interiors of ethnic minority refugees displaced by war are similarly rendered in deep shadows by lone light sources, obscuring environmental details. As viewers’ attention is drawn toward the illuminated center or the figures gathered within, the distinction between on-screen and off-screen space becomes sharply defined.

As an observational filmmaker, Wang Bing rarely directs the behavior or postures of those in front of the camera. His painterly style emerges instead from photographic adjustments in distance and angle. Maeda Yoshitaka, a cinematographer who worked with Wang, described Wang’s instructions as follows: ‘Start with a static shot and keep filming... Even when the camera does not move, things outside the viewfinder will eventually enter the frame’ (Maeda, 2018, p. 15). This suggests that while Wang does not entirely negate the profilmic or the off-screen world, under his method of filming, the screen is not a ‘window’ in the realist

sense—it becomes more like a trap, awaiting its subjects to enter and then isolating them within. This concept of the screen provides grounds for exploring the painterly qualities in Wang’s work: namely, that the elements within the frame tend to constitute a closed system in two-dimensional space. According to Deleuze, the ‘off-screen’ possesses both a ‘relative’ and an ‘absolute’ dimension. While the former constantly gestures toward and connects with the space beyond the frame, the latter, he writes, describes ‘a closed system that opens onto the cosmos through its very closure; it is no longer a set, nor does it belong to the order of the visible’ (Deleuze, 2016, pp. 28–29). Under this framework, once the image is spatially enclosed within a two-dimensional plane, the off-screen can potentially extend into the fourth and fifth dimensions—namely, time and spirit. From this standpoint, an investigation into the painterliness of Wang Bing’s work begins with the spatial relation between what is within and beyond the frame. The screen’s borders function like the edges of a canvas, severing the image from external space. On this basis, the following section will examine how painterliness is expressed and functions in *Three Sisters* and other works by Wang Bing.

The Other Within the ‘Frame’

In 2010, while passing through Xiyangtang Village 洗羊塘 in Zhaotong 昭通市, Yunnan Province, Wang Bing encountered three sisters, all under the age of ten at the time. He later decided, under commission from the Franco-German public television network Arte, to make a documentary focused on the three girls. Using two cameras, he filmed for ten days but was forced to leave due to altitude sickness. The first two hours and ten minutes of the film’s footage was shot by Wang Bing. Subsequently, cinematographers Huang Wenhai 黄文海 and Li Peifeng 李沛峰 continued filming for six more days under Wang’s remote guidance, and their material forms the final 20 minutes of the film.

In terms of lighting and tonal quality, some scenes in *Three Sisters* exhibit the dark tonalities reminiscent of Western naturalist painting. The interior of the sisters’ home is nearly devoid of light; bright daylight entering through the doorway creates sharp contrasts between light and shadow. Fujiki Kōsuke notes that Wang Bing’s other works—such as *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, *Ta’ang*, and *Bitter Money* 苦钱 (2016)—also employ light-shadow contrasts, but these effects are most pronounced and dramatic in *Three Sisters* (Fujiki, 2018). In this film, the subjects inside the house are frequently enveloped in darkness, with only certain portions illuminated by strong light. The film opens with this stylized presentation of the three girls (Figure 5), establishing the audience’s initial impression of them. This technique—using light contrast to articulate the relationship between figures and space—is repeatedly deployed in subsequent interior scenes (Figures 6–7). The strong side lighting, simplified composition, and de-idealized realism evoke associations with the works of Caravaggio (Figure 8). While the sisters are not depicted in scenes as dramatic as Saint Ursula’s martyrdom at the hands of the Huns, the visual impact of their figures, silhouetted against the dark background, achieves a dramatic intensity through visual means alone, independent of narrative.



Figure 5. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 6. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 7. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 8. *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, Caravaggio (1610)

Bill Nichols has argued that the primary function of documentary is to convey information in order to satisfy the viewer's desire for knowledge (Nichols, 1991, p.31). Yet the images in *Three Sisters* clearly depart from this function. The darkness obscures detail, making it difficult for the viewer to gather information. Jacques Rancière once described the 'painterly power' of Rineke Dijkstra's photographic series *Beach Portraits* (1992–1994)—a judgment equally applicable to the girls enshrouded in darkness in *Three Sisters*. Because the dark backgrounds dissolve contextual detail, the girls—like the Polish adolescent in Dijkstra's image, sitting on the sand and eating potatoes—become anonymous figures to the viewer. The distance and mystery that emerge from this presentation 'are very similar to the mysterious quality found in the portrait paintings that fill art museums' (Rancière, 2018a, p.140).

Seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque painter Murillo created a series of paintings on the theme of street children and beggars. On the level of surface resemblance, the ragged children in *Three Sisters*—playing, delousing—recall the subjects of Murillo's works (Figures 9–12). When Hegel discussed the 'noble soul' embodied even in genre paintings of mundane subjects, he cited Murillo's series as exemplary. In his view, 'in these half-naked, impoverished youths, there shines—both inwardly and outwardly—a kind of transcendental innocence that even mendicant monks could not attain.' These children, he argues, 'remain unbound by outward circumstances; no matter their appearance, they preserve their inner freedom, and this is precisely the realm pursued by the beauty of the ideal... They lack special interests or goals, not because they lack vitality, but on the contrary, because they are immersed in a sense of contentment and bliss no different from the gods of Olympus. Sitting on the ground, they neither act nor speak, express neither displeasure nor complaint—they simply exist as human beings' (Hegel, 1995, p.183). To draw a connection between the three sisters and Hegel's notion of ideal beauty is not only to note the visual and thematic parallels between *Three Sisters* and Murillo's paintings, but also to highlight how the painterly shots and dark, obscuring backgrounds blur the visual markers used to identify social status (Rancière, 2018a, p.152). In doing so, the girls in the frame begin to approximate the 'free individuals' portrayed in Murillo's works (Hegel, 1995, p.183). During the prolonged moments—lasting seconds or even minutes—in which such images appear on screen, the suspension of narrative and identification interrupts the viewer's existing cognition and imagination, generating a sense of estrangement. Preconceived notions shaped by power and social systems lose their efficacy, and the filmed subjects are momentarily freed from the net of meaning. At such a moment, the viewer is no longer confronting a pitiful, impoverished girl from some nameless village in China,⁶ nor—as Susan Sontag puts it—are they merely witnessing suffering that is 'too vast, too inescapable, too massive' to inspire anything but an empty, impotent sympathy (Sontag, 2006, p.73). Instead, what emerges is a concrete individual stripped of measurable scales and classifying labels. If, from the perspective of cinematic cognition, the figure of the

‘other’ is always immanent to the act of viewing,⁷ then Wang Bing’s cool, restrained depiction proposes an ‘other’ that escapes existing regimes of knowledge and power. As the three girls emerge from the shadows, their identities, circumstances, and value cannot be defined by social, cultural, or historical frameworks the viewer already possesses. Unlike the ‘other’ constructed through the viewing subject in ethnographic film, these girls are presented as more concrete, real, and free individuals; but precisely because they elude conventional frames of reference, they also remain unfamiliar—another kind of ‘other’ that cannot be explained through existing epistemologies.



Figure 9. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 10. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing (2012)



Figure 11. *Boys Playing Dice*,
Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1675)



Figure 12. *The Young Beggar*,
Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1645-1650)

This examination of *Three Sisters* reveals how stylized imagery generates qualities that resonate with painting and influences the viewer’s understanding of the filmed subject. Looking across Wang Bing’s filmography, one finds that the characteristic dark backgrounds in *Three Sisters*, which separate the visual field from the off-screen ‘blind field’, had already appeared in earlier works such as *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* and *Brutality Factory* 暴虐工厂 (2007) (Figures 13–15). In these images, darkness around the frame fully encloses the central subject, rendering them as silhouettes stripped of features and detail. The dramatic use of shadow not only estranges the subject from the realism of high-key lighting environments but also blocks the entry of off-screen elements, dampening the viewer’s imagination of what lies beyond the frame. The fixed camera reinforces this effect, sealing what is captured within a frame-isolated world. Nevertheless, such images constitute only a limited portion of those films’ total runtime. Though they form memorable moments, they do not yet define the films’ dominant visual characteristics. It is not until the recent film *Man in Black* 黑衣人 (2023) that Wang Bing extends this aesthetic across the entire work by making full use of theatrical space and shooting exclusively in low light (Figure 16). While *Man in Black* may seem stylistically distinct from Wang’s previous films—featuring uncharacteristically extensive use of music and cinematography by Caroline Champetier in which the camera actively rotates and moves around the subject—it in fact adopts a

visual strategy strikingly similar to scenes in *Three Sisters*: the use of a single light source to produce a dark background and stark contrast evokes the visual impact of chiaroscuro painting (Figure 17), granting the image dramatic force and presenting the filmed subject as an individual independent of discourse and definition. Thus, the technique of treating the edges of the screen as a pictorial frame to instill painterly qualities in the image first emerged tentatively in Wang Bing's early work, was consciously employed in *Three Sisters*, and becomes foregrounded as a fully developed stylistic device in *Man in Black*.



Figure 13. *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing(2003)



Figure 14. *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, Wang Bing(2003)



Figure 15. *Brutality Factory*, Wang Bing (2007)

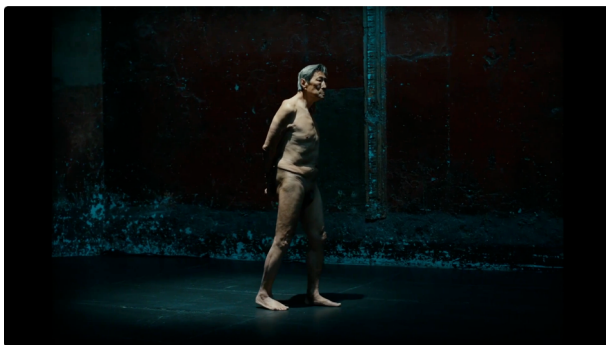


Figure 16. *Man in Black*, Wang Bing (2023)

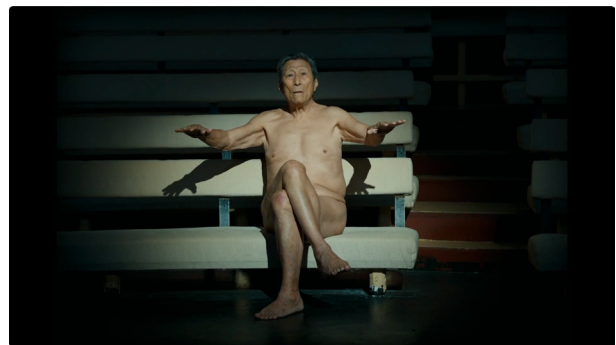


Figure 17. *Man in Black*, Wang Bing (2023)

The Aesthetics of *You* (Wandering)

The images in Wang Bing's work not only exhibit affinities with the visuality of Western painting but also harbor a foundation in Chinese traditional aesthetics. This article does not seek to impose a narrow nationalist reading; however, as Jean-Michel Frodon notes, when contemporary Western directors employ the long take, their methods are often closely linked to the European spiritual heritage—particularly Christianity and Western philosophical traditions—whereas the way Wang Bing constructs elements of reality and imagination bears deep connections to Chinese traditional culture and philosophy (Frodon, 2007). A similar view was expressed by Huang Wenhai, cinematographer and documentary director who has worked with Wang: 'Wang Bing's films are close to Chinese traditional aesthetics; in terms of camera movement, they emphasize *qi*yun

shengdong 气韵生动 (spiritual rhythm and vitality), and his compositions exhibit a sense of detachment... The structure and overall layout of his films are akin to traditional Chinese painting, leaving blank spaces for the audience to contemplate.’ (Huang, 2016, p. 347)

To articulate how Chinese traditional artistic forms are manifested in Wang Bing’s documentaries, this article draws on Lin Niantong’s 林年同 aesthetic concept of *you* (wandering). In the aesthetics of Chinese landscape painting, *you* is a concept deeply embedded in traditional Chinese philosophy. Jiang Jin’s 姜今 1963 essay *On the Beauty of Form* 论形式美 emphasized the importance of *you* in discussing multi-perspective composition and spatial treatment (Jiang, 1963). Influenced by Zong Baihua’s 宗白华 aesthetic thought, Lin Niantong synthesized theories grounded in Chinese classical aesthetics—Zheng Junli’s 郑君里 handscroll-style layout, Han Shangyi’s 韩尚义 ‘changing views with each step’, Jiang Jin’s ‘scattered-point perspective’, and Nie Jing’s 聂晶 ‘resonance of the frame’—to systematically develop a Chinese film aesthetic marked by the notion of *you*.

In referencing Lin’s concept of *you*, this article does not ignore its historical limitations.⁸ Lin’s aesthetics of *you* were formulated primarily in response to Chinese cinema traditions of the 1950s and 60s. Lin passed away in May 1990 and thus did not live to see the rise of Chinese independent documentary. Nonetheless, as one scholar writes, ‘Though Lin’s theory of “wandering through the frame” has flaws, it is not a rigid doctrine, but a dynamic system that continues to be enriched through historical development’ (Huang, 2021, p. 11). The aim of this article is to adopt *you* as a systematic aesthetic point of reference and to extend and elaborate it within the realm of documentary aesthetics.

Lin Niantong argued that *you* constitutes the highest aesthetic ideal in Chinese art and forms the core of Chinese aesthetic thought. Chinese traditional painting influenced by this aesthetic exhibits shifting perspectives and a non-linear visual path. This influence extends to the visual language and spatial construction of Chinese cinema. From this standpoint, Chinese film aesthetics may be understood as an aesthetics of *you*. Much attention to the aesthetics of *you* has focused on what Lin described as ‘dynamic, continuous shot composition’, emphasizing the spatial awareness produced by camera movement and the connection between horizontal tracking shots in film and the horizontal unfolding of handscroll paintings, thereby linking painterliness to motion (Wu, 2017). Building on these insights, this article analyzes how the aesthetic of ‘distance’ emerges through the use of wide shots in Wang Bing’s films, revealing the flowing spatial consciousness embedded in the theory of *you*.

In discussing ‘long shots’ and ‘panoramic views’, Lin argued that the spatial treatment in Chinese traditional art forms—including painting—is foundational for film spatial theory. Drawing on Zong Baihua’s observation that Chinese painting space ‘tends toward the distant’, Lin wrote: ‘The way Chinese filmmakers construct spatial positions has its roots in the classical tradition; it seeks to take form from the “distant”.’ (Lin, 1991, p. 78) The sense of distance presented in Wang Bing’s films is closely tied to this spatial principle of *yuan* (distance). Fujii Jinshi points out that the distinctive sense of distance between camera and subject in Wang’s films ‘is almost always a point of contention in discussions of his work’ (Fujii, 2020, p. 195)—so much so that the phrase ‘Wang Bing’s distance’ has emerged. Wang himself has stated that he prefers to use lenses with wide angles, believing that a 28mm wide-angle lens captures an image most similar to what the human eye sees.⁹ According to Wang, many of his films are shot with ultra-wide 18mm lenses.¹⁰ These wide

lenses allow the camera to capture expansive scenes even when shooting close to subjects, avoiding spatial constriction, and thereby provide a technical basis for what has come to be called ‘Wang Bing’s distance’.

At the same time, the perspective effects produced by wide-angle lenses demand particular camera height. Wang has noted that raising the camera while using a wide lens often leads to unsatisfactory results. As a result, he rarely shoulder-mounts the camera, preferring to shoot handheld at lower angles.¹¹ This low positioning causes subjects to be framed from below, often making the sky dominate the upper portion of the image, resulting in blank space and a sense of expansiveness. Such a treatment of space—reserving room for ‘heaven and earth’—is also common in traditional Chinese painting. Drawing from the *three distances* theory proposed by Northern Song landscape painters Guo Xi 郭熙 and Han Zhuo 韩拙, Lin observed that spatial creation in Chinese cinema aims for ‘effortless ease in gazing upward or downward; the spirit wanders in the profound’ (Lin, 1991, p. 99). Given the plateau environment of Yunnan, the location of *Three Sisters*, the film serves as an exemplary case of *three-distance* composition.

In *Three Sisters*, outdoor scenes are primarily structured around expansive space, with open areas left within the composition. As the girls exit the dark-toned interiors shaped by rudimentary lighting, they enter broad landscapes framed by the camera. With normal exposure, the image abandons the selective lighting constraints of tenebrist painting and presents every element in the frame, with the human figure occupying only a small portion. Cinematographer Huang Wenhai describes these depictions of exterior space as ‘constructing a stage with heaven and earth, where the person exists alone or prostrates on the land between them’ (Huang, 2016, p. 354). When Ga Ying, who is being filmed, is placed among the mountains of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau, the camera captures the girl in the foreground, a valley at mid-distance, and distant mountains and sky—all in one frame (Figure 18). The visual expanse reveals the coexistence of multiple vantage points, encompassing all three traditional Chinese distances. Just as in traditional landscape painting, what the audience sees in that moment is ‘a broad, vast, and expansive space’ (Lin, 1991, p. 99), in which ‘the three distances can converge or disperse at will’ (Lin, 1991, p. 80). Such spatial treatments are omnipresent in the film’s portrayal of Yunnan’s majestic terrain. In one scene, when the girls’ father returns to the countryside after failing to support the family through migrant labor in the city, Wang again uses an extreme wide shot to show the snowy, expansive plateau. The figure seems to appear out of the earth, wrapped in a cloak that blends into the land, and as if ready to vanish into the environment at any moment (Figure 19). In small-aperture shots, the visual path extends from the nearby ground to distant peaks. The diagonal upward movement of the figure suggests the slope’s steepness while intersecting with the horizontally extending terrain. As the character passes before the camera, it does not follow, but instead remains at a low angle, watching him ascend the hill, leaving the sky again as blank space (Figure 20). In this minute-long take filled only with wind, the image’s treatment of spatial vastness and visual blankness conveys the immensity of the natural world.



Figure 18. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing(2012)



Figure 19. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing(2012)



Figure 20. *Three Sisters*, Wang Bing(2012)

While the distant and fluid aesthetics in *Three Sisters* owe much to the uniqueness of the shooting environment, similar aesthetics of *you* can already be observed in Wang Bing's earlier Northwest-period films. For example, *Man with No Name* 无名者 (2009) opens with a 15-second static long take that suggests the expansive and unfolding space typical of landscape painting (Figures 21–22). The film's only character is a nameless man Wang encountered while traveling between Beijing and northwestern China to make *The Ditch* (2010). Wang later returned repeatedly to visit and film him. The man lives in a cave and remains silent throughout the film. As in *Three Sisters*, the camera refrains from revealing or detailing his life, maintaining distance and often filming him in long shots as he labors in the fields, placing the subject within wide-open spaces. Huang Wenhai comments: '*Man with No Name* shows how one survives in the vastness of heaven and earth. It presents no concrete historical or social space, but instead evokes the poetic state in Du Fu's "Thoughts on a Night Journey 旅夜书怀": "Adrift—what do I resemble? A lone seagull between sky and earth"' (Huang, 2016, p. 352).

In the recent *Youth (Homecoming)* 青春：归 (2024), Wang Bing returns to Yunnan with migrant garment workers traveling back to their hometowns. After filming a local wedding, he includes a 15-second static shot to depict the spatial environment. The winding valley and layered mountains create a deep, expansive spatial atmosphere, once again evoking the spirit of the three distances (Figure 23). Compared to the long, claustrophobic indoor scenes in the 'Youth Trilogy', this panoramic image opens a kind of breathing space, signaling that although these young people are trapped in enclosed workshops and mechanical labor, they come from a world that reveals 'the eternal vitality of the will to live' (Huang, 2016, p. 348). Deleuze argues that the long shot is a perception-image, meaning that the movement-image becomes perception in the panoramic view. From this standpoint, we may understand Wang Bing's spatial imagery expressing *yuan* (distance) and the aesthetics of *you* not as forms of subjective perception, but as a return to an objective, holistic perception integrated with the material world. Deleuze notes that cinema's 'central motility, its variability of framing, always constructs vast, decentered, and unbalanced zones', and the aesthetics of *you* enables the image 'to return to the primordial system of the movement-image, that is, universal variation, a total, objective, and indeterminate perception' (Deleuze, 2016, p. 103).



Figure 21. *Man with No Name*, Wang Bing(2009)



Figure 22. *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* 富春山居, Huang Gongwang 黄公望 (1350)

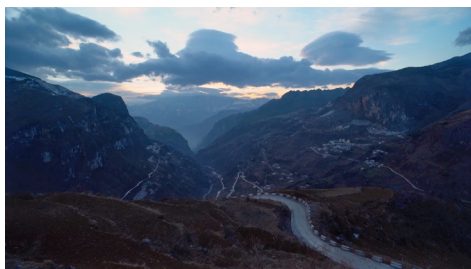


Figure 23. *Youth (Homecoming)*, Wang Bing(2024)



Figure 24. *Traveling Amid Streams and Mountains* 溪山行旅, Liu Yu 柳埭 (1680)

The Suspended Spectator

To discuss painterliness in film is not to simply equate cinema with painting. As Siegfried Kracauer cautioned, cinema should not be ‘subordinated once again to the dominion of traditional art, as experimental filmmakers tend to do’ (Kracauer, 1997, p. 192). There has been extensive discussion on the distinctions between painting and film. Walter Benjamin, from the perspective of the spectator, observed that unlike film, painting cannot be consumed synchronously by a collective audience (Benjamin, 2002). John Berger believed that oil painting possesses a kind of ‘directness’ that shortens the temporal distance between the act of creation and the viewer’s gaze—viewers can intuitively grasp the scene through the materials used by the painter (Berger, 2008, p. 31). This ‘directness’ is something that moving images clearly lack. To borrow Christian Metz’s words: ‘Characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, it is the imaginary that it is from the start’ (Metz, 2006, p. 41). Conversely, Mitry argued that the psychological compensation mechanisms in film might render even static images dynamic and spatially dimensional (Mitry, 1997)—a mechanism that may not apply to painting.

Nevertheless, the painterly shots in Wang Bing’s work serve a particular function. These shots are often filmed with a static camera, or depict content in which little to no motion or change occurs, tending toward stillness.¹² Static images interrupt narrative flow, making it difficult for viewers to enter the film’s story world, and hindering their ability to apply Robert Scholes’s concept of ‘narrativity’¹³ to fill in narrative gaps. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to revisit the relationship between continuous visual flow and viewer cognition.

Berger noted that the continuity of images in cinema constitutes an irreversible assertion (Berger, 2008, p. 26). This, too, is one of the differences Benjamin identified between cinema and painting. Unlike painting, which allows for associative contemplation, film disperses the viewer’s attention—just as the viewer begins to think, ‘the image on the screen has already changed’ (Benjamin, 2002, p. 124).¹⁴ In response, Roland

Barthes sought to locate the ‘third meaning’ in film—that is, what he called the obtuse meaning, ‘a signifier without a signified’. For Barthes, cinematic meaning is revealed precisely at this third level, and he advocated reading still frames, including film stills (Barthes, 2012).

While the painterly images in Wang Bing’s work are not strictly immobile, they do, to a degree, offer the possibility of uncovering what Barthes termed the ‘third meaning’. Within an extremely slow rhythm, his shots—like still frames—accentuate the ‘elements within the shot—the internal fragments’ (Barthes, 2012, p. 108).¹⁵ More significantly, just as the obtuse meaning resists narrativity,¹⁶ the shots in Wang’s films, while evoking a kinship with painting, do not submit to narrative control. They are ‘like moments of stasis within the motion of celluloid, neither integrated into the whole nor synchronized with the rhythm of narration.’ (Bonitzer, 1999, p. 40)

At this point, one might mistakenly equate ‘stillness’ with ‘anti-narrative’. And if still imagery is not unique to Wang’s films, then perhaps the distinctiveness of his auteur style is called into question. But in fact, not all static images are non-narrative. Zhao Liang’s *Petition* 上访 (2009) and *Behemoth* 悲兮魔兽 (2015) also employ static, contemplative shots, though their function differs from those in Wang Bing’s works. In *Petition*, one scene depicts a bedridden man in the ‘petitioners’ village’, who recounts how he was paralyzed by police brutality and how his brother was also injured. A ten-second close-up of the brother is followed by another ten-second shot showing the entire family in their makeshift shelter. As the four people remain largely still, the image takes on the texture of a tableau vivant. In *Behemoth*, the tendency toward prolonged stillness is even more pronounced. A sequence depicting steelworkers presents detailed close-ups of skin textures, with one laborer’s face held in frame for a full 20 seconds. These fixed, static shots resemble detailed portraiture. In another scene, a woman holds the portrait of her husband, who died of pneumoconiosis. The shot lasts for 30 seconds. As in *Three Sisters*, the background recedes into darkness, and the viewer’s gaze is drawn to the figure and the photo. However, unlike Wang Bing, Zhao Liang’s use of stillness conveys a testimonial function—these images are integrated into narrative, intended to evoke pathos. This emotional effect illustrates another possible relationship between painting and film. As Okada Atsushi observes, what cinema inherits and expands from painting are responses such as ‘pathos’ and ‘ecstasy’; this consistency in inner experience even shaped the development of montage theory (Okada, 2015).

In contrast to the evidentiary and emotional aims Zhao Liang pursues, Wang Bing’s tranquil imagery momentarily extracts the viewer from narrative, offering a space for reflection. This feature has been present since his earliest works. Patrick Smith, in analyzing *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, remarked that Wang Bing’s films rely on pure ‘pictorial contemplation’, which may even displace narrative backgrounds (Smith, 2015, p. 186). This sense of stasis becomes increasingly pronounced in Wang’s work after *Tie Xi Qu*. Like many of his films, *Three Sisters* is composed of fragmented scenes from everyday life, alternating between interior and exterior spaces without a clear logic, which blurs the film’s temporal progression. Generally, ‘in cinema, it seems that any single image is defined by all that preceded it’ (Benjamin, 2002, p. 24). But in Wang’s films, when such continuity is broken and the screen ceases to provide narrative cues, the viewer’s process of comprehension is suspended. Fixed shots and static imagery contribute to this effect, so that time in *Three Sisters* no longer flows in a linear, discernible way, but is instead perceived in blocks, lingering in segments, resistant to being charted along a measurable axis.

The reflective response that these nearly motionless shots invite is distinct from Benjamin's notion of 'concentration'. The viewer neither enters the image, as Benjamin suggested of Chinese painters, nor 'absorbs the work of art' (Benjamin, 2002, p. 124). Rather, the viewer is suspended between these two poles—unable to sink into a predetermined narrative, and unable to advance 'narrativity' based on established habits and expectations.¹⁷ The sense of stasis in Wang's work more closely aligns with Jacques Rancière's idea of interruption produced by 'pensiveness'. Rancière argues that the nature of contemplation can overturn the traditional relationship between narrative and expression. In other words, visual logic is no longer in service of the plot but acts to interrupt it, overlapping with it instead. Painterly scenes break from the logic of classical narrative chains and construct another kind—'without beginning or end, without causality, diffused at random' (Rancière, 2018a, p. 159)—such that 'all conclusions are suspended' (Rancière, 2018a, p. 157). What was once a 'collective body' positioned within the framework of grand narrative may, through the still image, return to the nameless individual. At the same time, the spatial consciousness of *yuan* (distance) amplifies this effect of interruption. This spatial 'distance' exists not only within the frame but also between viewer and subject. Such distance recalls Byung-Chul Han's idea of 'distanced nearness', which frees things from the domination of the acting subject: 'Beauty only reveals itself to the long, contemplative gaze. Where the subject of action withdraws, where its blind compulsion to the object is broken, things are given back their otherness, their mysteriousness, their foreignness, their secret' (Han, 2019, p. 92). In this process, the image leads the viewer toward the *absolutely other*, and the three sisters appear as Hegel's 'gods on Olympus'.

The painterliness of the image, in moments when the subjects are freed from established associations, enables what Rancière calls a 'redistribution of the sensible'. The visual presentation of the image offers an aesthetic distance, within which 'all definable relations between the artist's intention, the sensuous forms presented within the artistic field, the gaze of the individual viewer, and the state of the collective are suspended' (Rancière, 2018b, p. 71). Conventionally, documentaries portraying poverty and suffering are viewed as revelations of concrete social problems; once the persecuted or oppressed appear on screen, they are assumed to embody some form of resistance. This assumption may trace back to John Grierson's famous dictum: the screen is a pulpit, and film is a hammer for social reform. Such teleological thinking presupposes an audience. In this model, every filmed subject, while becoming a symbol of accusation, is also further confined within systems of social order and power. In contrast, *Three Sisters* neither avoids nor foregrounds historical issues or social conditions. As a result, each character appears at ease. While they survive and labor in harsh environments, they are also manifestations of 'free play' and 'free appearance' (Schiller, 2012), unmarked by special treatment, intention, or narrative design. 'Man is indestructible because capable of being infinitely destroyed.'¹⁸ This is a conception of the human in a universal sense, not bound to any narrow geographic or ideological frame. In this sense, the girls on screen resist viewers with strong opinions and fixed expectations—for the meaning or value they seek may remain entirely elusive. When reflection on human universality and existential condition replaces narrowly defined agendas, any 'interventionist gaze' begins to dissolve. The three sisters no longer face any particular group of spectators, but instead the anonymous, incidental viewer—and their *detached gaze*.

Conclusion

This article has explored the painterly qualities and aesthetic expression in Wang Bing's work from the perspective of image-text and the ontology of cinema. The closed compositions and dim backgrounds in his films reject the 'blind field' beyond the screen, while simultaneously concealing the kinds of detailed infor-

mation that documentaries often strive to convey. At the same time, in shots where camera movement tends toward stillness, space unfolds as both expansive and fluid. Multiple vantage points coexist within a single frame, reducing the perception of depth and rendering the concept of *you* (wandering) in concrete visual terms. In these painterly images, the filmed subjects are no longer bound by the meanings imposed by power-knowledge structures, but instead appear before the viewer as unfamiliar and singular beings.

There remains considerable room for further inquiry into the aesthetics of *you*. For instance, this concept is also reflected in the dynamic interaction between Wang Bing's camera and the space it observes. His works often blur the paradigms of 'seeing/being seen' and 'inside/outside', achieving a state in which 'subject and object vanish, self and world are unified' (Wang, 2011, p. 97). As the camera moves fluidly through the filmed space, the cool detachment characteristic of direct cinema is softened. Furthermore, in the series of works Wang shot in Zhejiang Province following his Yunnan period, one finds a pronounced tendency toward anti-empathic ensemble portrayals and loosely structured narratives. These recall Lin Niantong's narrative aesthetics of 'separation and convergence generating continuity'. His rejection of rhythm and narrative tightness, and his presentation of characters outside of temporal sequence and causal logic, not only create intertextual resonance with the narrative structures of classical Chinese literature but also evoke the shifting viewpoints found in traditional East Asian painting. Due to constraints of length, this article has focused solely on the painterly qualities of the moving image; other questions and topics are left for future exploration.

Notes

1 Although Wang Bing also shot *Crude Oil* 原油 (2008) and *Coal Money* 煤钱 (2009) in the northwest—films less directly tied to historical-political themes—he has stated in interviews that these were by-products created during spare time while making *The Ditch* 夹边沟 (2010) (Wang, 2013).

2 Completed in 2018, *Dead Souls* 死灵魂 (2018) may reinforce the impression of Wang Bing's long-term preoccupation with the Anti-Rightist Movement; in fact, most of the footage was shot between 2005 and 2008 during interview research initially conducted for *The Ditch*. Dissatisfied with the narrative form of *The Ditch*, Wang began to consider constructing a more reality-oriented account through documentary footage. He finalized the structure of *Dead Souls* in 2014 and began re-shooting and editing in 2016 (see: 1. Video: 'Interview with Director Wang Bing on *Dead Souls*', 2024; 2. Wang & Zhang, 2019; 3. Wang & Bourdeaux, 2020). *Dead Souls* can thus be regarded as a project that emerged from *The Ditch*, spanning several years before completion in 2018. By then, Wang had shifted his creative focus from the northwest and Yunnan to East China. That same year, he traveled to Las Vegas to film the intellectual Gao Ertai 高尔泰, a survivor of the Anti-Rightist Movement, resulting in *Beauty Lives in Freedom* 美在自由 (2018), which shares a similar oral-history approach and mid-to-close-up compositions with *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir*. The natural lighting changes often discussed in *Fengming* also appear in *Beauty Lives in Freedom*. In a post-screening talk in the UK in 2019, Wang stated this may be his final film on the Anti-Rightist Movement (see: Video: Frames of Representation 2019: In Conversation with Wang Bing). The formal similarity between *Beauty Lives in Freedom* and *Fengming* may be seen as a deliberate echo.

3 Wang Bing was initially drawn to Yunnan by the novel *Divine History* 神史 (2004) by local writer Sun Shixiang 孙世祥, hoping to explore the possibility of adapting it into a narrative film. In interviews, Wang has stated that his documentary work began passively due to environmental and financial constraints—but he soon realized that documentary filmmaking allowed him to more fully immerse himself in the unknown (see: Tsuchiya & Suzuki, 2020).

4 See Wang Bing's masterclass at the 2014 Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Video: *Masterclass – Wang Bing*, 2017).

5 Ayako Saito, drawing on Roland Barthes' idea that photography's essence is its assertion that 'this has been', argues that Wang Bing attempts to transcend the temporal attribute of the 'past' in photography, avoiding the status of the sub-

ject as a ghost of what once was (Saito, 2013).

6 Wang Bing has stated: ‘*Three Sisters* is set in poverty, but the film is not about poverty itself; it is about the girls’ real experience of life.’ (Wang, 2013, p. 132)

7 As Metz put it: ‘At the cinema, it is always the other who is on the screen; as for me, I am there to look at him.’ (Metz, 2006, pp. 44–45)

8 Debates surrounding Lin Niantong’s theory of Chinese film aesthetics center on two issues: whether the theory itself is coherent, and whether Chinese cinema, as its object, exhibits a singular, typical style (see: Hong, 2016).

9 See interview with cinematographer Maeda Yoshitaka, who participated in the shooting of *Bitter Money* and other Wang Bing films (Maeda, 2018, p. 15).

10 Based on Wang Bing’s remarks at the 2014 Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival (Video: *Masterclass – Wang Bing*, 2017).

11 Based on Wang Bing’s remarks at the 2014 Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival (Video: *Masterclass – Wang Bing*, 2017).

12 This recalls Kracauer’s discussion of *Earth* (1930), in which he argued that Dovzhenko revealed the intrinsic beauty of objects not through dramatic movement but through states of utter stillness (Kracauer, 1997, p. 185).

13 According to Scholes, ‘narrativity’ refers to the cognitive and imaginative process by which audiences actively reconstruct narrative from the elements a text provides. That is, narrative form guides viewers to use narrativity to transform the story into a meaningful whole—a process the text typically anticipates and encourages (Scholes, 1976).

14 Roland Barthes offered a similar view: ‘Can I add anything to the image on screen?—I think not, there’s no time. Faced with the screen, I cannot close my eyes at will; if I shut them and reopen them, I cannot retrieve the same image. I must remain fully attentive. There are many other kinds of effects, but not ones conducive to reflection’ (Barthes, 2002, p. 88).

15 When writing *The Third Meaning* in the 1970s, Barthes remarked: ‘Film stills free cinema from the bondage of time—a bondage that remains a barrier to what we might call the coming-of-age of cinema’ (Barthes, 2012, p. 108). Today, digital technology enables long takes and static shots more frequently. As cinema is liberated from earlier technological constraints, Barthes’s notion of ‘filmic’ also becomes freed.

16 Barthes, citing *Ivan the Terrible* (1944), suggests that the obtuse meaning in film ‘surpasses narrative and becomes a polishing or deviation of meaning’ (Barthes, 2012, p. 105).

17 Ueno Kōji, describing his experience of watching *Tie Xi Qu*, referred to it as a state of ‘alternating between clarity and intoxication’, which may help to explain the sense of suspension discussed here (Ueno, 2011, p. 2).

18 Upon receiving the EYE Art & Film Prize in 2017, a short film introducing Wang Bing’s work was produced by the EYE Film Museum. This quote is drawn from that video’s commentary on the individuals depicted in his work (Video: *Wang Bing, Winner of the Third Eye Art & Film Prize*, 2018).

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