

Tobias Madison

Another Three-Body Problem

What does it mean to have a body—phrased without question mark—seems to be of central concern in *Man with No Name*. We never find out, however, who this person without name actually is: the viewer, the filmmaker Wang Bing, or the hermit we follow for ninety-nine minutes? When we watch films, we do not watch others, but watch others watching others.

At first, there is nothing mysterious about this figure of the hermit. He seems to be mainly committed to self-preservation, engaged in the cultivation of a plot of land for the purpose of nutrition, the preparation of the latter, the construction and preservation of several dwellings. The film, which begins in winter, unfolds as a case study of these activities over four seasons so that at the end, everything can start all over again.

So what does it mean to have a body?

Let's consider this hermit's sequence of activities as something universal, as a common denominator, shared by all bodies. The figure of the hermit is bound to the filmmaker as a cinematographic tool by way of its manifest self-preservation; the figure's existence, its "staying alive," is to be understood to parallel the film's "staying alive", to keep running, that in turn presupposes the presence of the filmmaker. Thus, one could ask, does the filmmaker perhaps crawl into the intimate interior of a den not because he wants to create a particularly intimate portrait of the hermit dwelling in his burrow, but because he himself is chilled to the bone? Not quite, except maybe that every movie is necessarily also a documentation of its own production: After about 32 minutes there is a sequence in which the body with the camera thwarts the other body's path and creates a microsecond of irritation that immediately dissolves into an elegant evasive maneuver on both sides. Sometimes having a body just means blocking someone's passage, in other words, occupying space. The space that in cinema verité should not exist: the space of the cameraman that equals that of a fly on the wall. A few minutes later, in summer, the filmmaker again blocks a path, this time of the sun's rays; we follow his shadow at the bottom of the frame, or rather, we follow the hermit as he reaps the crop sown 15 minutes earlier.

Wang Bing's cinema is one of constellations—comparable to a planetary system in which stars with varying gravitational fields are positioned toward each other—the presence of the camera is understood as given and part of an equation including viewer and subject of the film. Always inherent to the documentary form is the slip-up arising from the film itself, meaning there is a tendency toward instability; for example, when suddenly a domesticated horse struts outside the frame of the recluse's life (which is no longer the life of a recluse if someone with a camera is present) and the horn of a car is heard. However, it is precisely this instability that is so relevant to Wang Bing's cinema, because it makes it possible to formulate an ethics, because having a body also means being aware of the forces it exerts on surrounding bodies. A sequence from *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013), a film not on view at Kunsthalle Zürich: A straight shot in the cell of a psychiatric institution. An inmate frantically wields a shoe in order to kill a fly on the walls of his cell while two other inmates rhythmically comment on the scene from their beds. The episode calls up both existentialist theater and a documentary fly-on-the-wall technique, where real-world situations are shot without actual interference of the camera. The camera's distance and the low resolution of the HD format make it impossible for the viewer to actually see the fly, and so the scene's narrative tension relies on us not knowing whether the fly actually exists or whether it only lives in the inmate's head. After about 10 minutes, however, the fly lands on the camera's lens, moving up and down inside the frame as a blurry, black something or other. The body with the camera then moves toward the patient to show him the fly on the lens in order to release him from his emotional turmoil. Such stutters, tipping filmic space out of balance, could just as well be units of measurement with which we can gauge the distance between all participating and hypothetically involved bodies—at least if we want to use cinema also as a navigational device: As a map of mediatic space and the relationships occurring inside of it at a moment when these relationships threaten to cease to exist.

For Mrs. Fang, having a body also implies its finitude, a trajectory toward dying. For cinema, this creates a dilemma: Mrs. Fang's body is already terminally ill at the beginning of the film, meaning that the precept of the mobility of bodies, which makes cinema possible in the first place, is no longer in effect. And so, instead, this body is captured through those around it; it functions as the gravitational center of an expanded family and the dealings of those involved with an imminent death and the still-existing relationship—or the body operates simply as a map of those relationships. At the same time, proceeding from this center, the film can reflect upon itself—on its tendency towards finitude—in a circular, outward motion that is nevertheless directed inward:

The electric shocks issuing from the poles used by the fishermen whom we follow again and again in the course of *Mrs. Fang* end the life of the river fish; the fishermen use the fish's conjunction with water as a medium for their killing. In a village whose economy is based on fishing, the bodies of course need the fish to stay alive. And Wang Bing needs the image of

killing fish not only to record the bodies' entanglement with the river by way of the fish, but because the image—or its electrical agitation—is like a substitute for the absence of vital motion in Mrs. Fang's body. Accordingly, the electric shocks allow us to look into Mrs. Fang's empty eyes for a little longer without getting bored; the blank stare can slide past the camera a little longer.

This staring past the viewer while he or she looks into these eyes is significant. Not only because it is exemplary of Wang Bing's larger project. A project that reflects on what it means to be visible or to disappear.