



*The Concrete Revolution* by Xiaolu Guo (image courtesy of the artist)

In October 1954, 12 years before he made *La Chinoise*, Jean-Luc Godard took a job on the construction site of the Swiss Valois dam and began making his first film, *La Campagne de Béton* (*The Concrete Campaign*). It was later re-named *Opération Béton* (*Operation Concrete*); both titles carry intimations of military engagement, mass peaceful manoeuvres towards the Future.

Godard's documentary is an ode to the dignity of labour, the power of engineering and the collective achievements of men, gravel and machines. Concrete, he tells us, is the means by which the forces of nature are tamed, and film is the means of recording that leap forward.

At the turn of 2001, Xiaolu Guo was a Beijing film student obliged to watch Godard's *La Chinoise*, and about to leave for 'the West' on a British Government Scholarship to the National Film and Television School. Why, she wondered as she studied Godard's film, did silly Westerners 'pretend they were taking part in the Chinese "mass-revolt of the proletariat"' in 1967, a year after the Cultural Revolution began?

By the time Guo returned to Beijing three years later, she found that post-Mao city accelerating towards the Victory, the collision of 2008's Olympic Games. 'New Beijing, Great Olympics', as the slogan ran. The Chinese authorities had already committed \$40 billion to construction projects; equivalent to the previous 30 summer games combined.

*The Concrete Revolution* (2004) is her response to that visit: a poem-film-essay about exile, or about that city as both means and form of exile. The Beijing of 2004 is a city being re-constructed through dislocation, in the process of eliminating its characters and its character.

As Guo's Beijing rips up (streets, roads, Hutong), it also rises; it's a city that stretches vast across limitless land (what is a mountain but a site-to-be?), yet still pushes upwards. A Hong Kong for the plains. There are figures beyond grasping:

*58569 streets; 18 Districts; 6 ring roads circle the city; 2.5 million cars on the streets; An extra half million expected this year; If someone goes missing in this city; How can you possibly find them?*

And there are people who go missing in the Concrete Revolution: people for whom no-one looks. An old woman who refuses move out and is gone by the next day: melted into air. And the woman (a younger Guo herself) who filmed the Beijing flat she once coveted: 'I remember the pictures the estate agent showed me: drawings of green trees, flowers and the big swimming pool, nestling in the middle of this bright new world. I immediately decided that this would be my future home'. But, as her narrator observes, 'home is a time and a space'. Who defines them? By 2004, 300,000 Beijing residents had been recorded as displaced. Suicides by jumping off high buildings grew so common that a new Mandarin term evolved: 'tiao lou xiu', 'jumping off buildings to show'. Workers jumping from the blocks they were building: to show what? The desperation of work without pay: Opération Béton. Or the clash of ideology ('I want to make something Big', one migrant says) and destitution.

At one point in Guo's film, two migrant workers devour rolls in an early morning sun. And as the camera frames them, hard hats bright against blue sky and squinting, it steadies long enough to capture their clothes caked in plaster, boots crumbling to dust and their limbs, legs, feet wrapped inside them in torn paper and shreds of cloth.

There's a gesture in this encounter that's both familiar and particular. This is the open-faced complicity of the Super-8 home movie, and the empathic exchange of Agnes Varda. 'Is that sand in your eye, or are you crying?' Guo asks one of the workers. This direct question, which carries the dignity of choice, is what Guo offers with her presence in this film. A female filmmaker and a male labourer exchange shared statelessness.

'I wondered', she writes later, 'if a person doesn't have an identity, would they have a face? A person without a face is a person without voice or memory.'

Beijing, in Guo's poem-essay, is erasing voices and memories, and her film holds the faces that vanish. In 1968, Mexico City took to the streets with slogans reading 'We don't want Olympics, we want revolution'. The response was security forces opening fire on civilian protestors. As I write this, protests continue in Hong Kong, a territory bound to mainland China by the world's largest concrete bridge. And Guo's 2009 riposte to Godard – *She, A Chinese* – is available on BFI Player. I urge you to seek it out.

*Notes by Kyran Joughin, University of the Arts London.*

Tonight's screening of *The Concrete Revolution* is accompanied by *Construction Lines* (dir. Max Colson, 2017) and *The Visitor* (dir. Sharone Lifschitz, 2019).

City, Essay, Film is a series of discussions and screenings hosted by UCL Urban Laboratory to examine the concept and practice of the 'urban essay film'. Curated by David Anderson and Jordan Rowe.