

Cheng Ran **The Last Generation**

Text by Christopher Moore

I'm the screen

Receiving department, 3 A.M.
Staff cuts have socked up the overage
Directives are posted, no callbacks, complaints
Everywhere is calm
Hong Kong is present, Taipei awakes
All talk of circadian rhythm

“Daysleeper” R.E.M Peter Buck, Mike Mills, Stipe 1998 for Album “Up”

City dwellers can never tell when exactly the daytime gives way to night – they actually do not care.

——Cheng Ran, *Circadian Rhythm* (2013)

Re-wind

Following graduation from the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou in 2004, Cheng Ran worked for five years for Yang Fudong. Between 2009-12 he explored themes familiar to Yang's oeuvre, notably the concentration of time, the structural relationship between film and painting (traditional Chinese and Western), the experience of viewing images, and the curious concerns of youth in China's urbanized and global culture. Yet whereas Yang in recent years has explored the extension and universalization of tension, Cheng has sought to deconstruct it, first by using devices such as shock or repetition, latterly through increasingly subtle examinations of international film history of recent decades.

Cheng emerged onto the Chinese art scene with *Rock Dove* (2009), inverting Hitchcock's *Birds* (1963) with a cote of doves cooing until being terrified by fluorescent strip lighting

suddenly being switched on. In *Chewing Gum Paper* (2011), Martin Luther King's inspirational *I Have a Dream* (1963) speech through repetition becomes relentless and sinister, the silver chewing gum papers screwed up and bouncing on the vibrating drum surface. More recently he has made more explicit homages. *The Sixth Angel for the Millennium* (2012) refers to Bill Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), where angels ascend to the heavens out of water (except that the film is presented "upside-down" – the figures are of course diving into the water). In Cheng Ran's version the angels are rescued, interfering with their agency, but also rescuing them from – what? – drowning or God? In *Lostalghia* (2012), Cheng reimagines Andrei Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia* (1983), which had to be finished in Italy after the U.S.S.R's Mosfilm agency withdrew support (Soviet interference even prevented Tarkovsky winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1983). In Cheng's version, the church is burning, caught endlessly pre-denouement, the hero denied the release of death. And in *1971-2000* (2012), Cheng spliced the violent sociopath teenager, Alex, from Stanley Kubrick's version of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), based the Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel, with the delicate Tom-Tom, in the final scene of Wim Wender's *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2000), involving a joyful rooftop leap into...nothing. As in Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise*, suicide may be inferred but should not be assumed. After all, Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* (1960) is infinite. (Also noteworthy is the story credit for U2's Bono, particularly as one of Cheng's interests is 1990's electronic music, including its use of appropriation).

In these films Cheng was redirecting the classics, sending them in different directions. Seeing what would happen. Accompanying this development have been meditations on photography, such as *Anonymity, or Imitation and Imagining of Man Ray's Tears* (2010) and the 3-channel expanded-cinema of *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood* (2011), as well as

pop-cultural plays (Hamlet played as a Zombie in *What Why How*, 2011), and delicate filmic poems, such as *The Summanus Butterfly* (2010) and *The Eclipse* (2011), both also from the same period of time. Cheng Ran has been constructing his foundations, refining his tools, and testing his methods.

The Last Generation

Steffan Postaer's pop novel *The Last Generation* (2003) imagines a world where babies cease to be born. This is the starting point for Cheng Ran's exhibition at Galerie Urs Meile Beijing. There is an implicit nod here to P.D. James's 1992 dystopia novel, *The Children of Men*, made into a film by Alfonso Cuarón in 2006. In novels and films, the cessation of rebirth has already happened or rather, its condition has transmogrified and metastasized, because the memes and echoes of repetitions, copies and simulacra are alive and well. But the last generation, whatever that was, has been and gone. Whether we speak of Joyce or Foster Wallace, Tarkovsky or Goddard, the novel and the film, these cultural colossi have, finally, reached certain end points. What comes now?

Cheng Ran proposes that a unified story is impossible but that a fragmented narrative is still a narrative and that the narrative takes place outside of the story told. A story can exist as a complete novel, can also be broken up into segments, read over days, or weeks, or months, perhaps read aloud, re-read, translated, and rendered in film, but a narrative – the distinction is deliberately artificial – can be explained, discussed, forgotten, remembered, mis-remembered and reinterpreted. A metaphor for this might be circadian rhythms, the geographical and seasonal rhythms of life, which are endogenous but adjust to the local environment, such as daylight. In this case we comprise the local environments.

Circadian Rhythm is also the title of a novel by Cheng Ran. And it is also the title of an exhibition he held in 2011 in Hangzhou. The novel – some 100,000 characters – is being published in different forms¹, including posted on the walls, like newspapers in public parks in China, but in this case involving a spiral reading room, a magical story-telling vortex, that forces you to trace the wall, straining to read the lines at the top, crouching to read those at the bottom, slowly moving into the core, slowly drawn in by the narrative thread.

Except some parts are missing. Certain nominated leitmotifs have escaped the text, non-existent chapters and paragraphs have concretized in our “reality”. In *Tide Conversations* (2013) miniature scholar stones – white coral, volcanic basalt – collected on Cheng’s travels around the world (including Iceland, Africa and Mongolia) are gathered together as totems “in conversation” with one another. A “hotel” stage-set, *Mermaid Hotel* (2013) displays other *objets trouvés* that Cheng has altered in different ways. The key chains themselves are from an old five-star hotel and found at an Amsterdam flea market, and these also inform the novel. Another of Cheng Ran’s altered objects, *Eagle and Deer* (2013), is a fusion of a traditional European autoharp and an old portable record player, with an eagle feather for a stylus (again, writing – cutting even, as Derrida remarked). Another work involving a vinyl LP player – and which also bares a certain retro-resonance quality – includes sound recordings from Cheng’s trips around the world – Amsterdam, Iceland, and l’île de la Réunion, off the coast of Madagascar –, including gulls, a gun being fired, people talking, church bells, guitar music, a distraught woman’s rant, all interspersed with electronic music, an artistic form rooted in quotation, appropriation, repetition and distortion. Snippets from the novel appear on the detritus paper acquired during travel – on train and theatre tickets, on

receipts and Post-It notes –, sometimes a whole story, sometimes only a few words, but always connected to the original usage purpose of the paper on which they are written. And then there is a manually embroidered rug of pure New Zealand wool – a magic carpet straight out of Scheherazade’s tales, a prisoner who avoids death by lyrically describing those of others. And on this carpet are the opening lines of Dicken’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), but each sentence has been semantically inverted:

It was not the best of times, it was not the worst of times, it was not the age of wisdom, it was not the age of foolishness, it was not the epoch of belief, it was not the epoch of incredulity, ...

The importance of slippages of interpretation in Cheng Ran’s methodology and inspiration are signposted by aluminium boards, *Hit-or-Miss-ist* (2013), which elevates chance to dictum and philosophy. Accordingly, a number of Cheng Ran’s recent films are transformed through slight shifts of (sometimes happenstance) staging, and thus join his inter- and con-textual narrative. For example, a film shot in Amsterdam presents a dancing couple but the soundtrack has been manipulated so that instead of dancing to music, fragments of speeches are heard.

Another film, *The Last Sentence* (2013), was produced in Iceland. The title refers to the last words of people (our last “generation”) and also to last sentences in books, such as those spoken by the hero, Sydney Carton, in *A Tale of Two Cities* before being guillotined: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” It is also the title of Jan Troell’s 2012 film about Torgny Segerstedt, a Swedish journalist who spoke up against Fascism in the 1930s. Cheng’s film begins with scenes of stars, echoing the opening of Lars von Trier’s 2011 film *Melancholia*². A couple

narrate in Chinese excerpts from *Gone with the Wind* (1939), arguably the most successful film ever, ostensibly a saccharin American Civil War romantic tragedy, but also a warning against the then rising tide of fascism. This is sub-text. What follows is a road-trip film through various dramatic landscapes in Iceland and encountered by Cheng on his travels. And it ends with a geyser exploding. The road trip's references, and potential references, are endless but we should note Frank Ocean's music video for his song *Swim Good* (2012), about a murder-suicide road trip which includes visual references to Samurai culture (sword, robe), and ends with his Lincoln Town Car exploding. Youthful self-obsession.

The final film returns us to the written word, to the themes of "Circadian Rhythms" and to youth, and its longings, its confusions and romance, and simultaneously its moping self-indulgence and greedy consumerism. It is also a signal instance of how Cheng Ran's practice is inspired by circumstance and chance. *Secret Notes to Nan Goldin* (2013) is a single-channel film, a story told in eight, handwritten notes. In spring 2012 Cheng was staying in a friend's apartment in an old building in the former French Concession of Shanghai. Before departing, he learnt that the next guest would be the American photographer, Nan Goldin. This prompted him to engage in a conversation with her, by leaving messages secreted all over the house. While the film is not formally part of the novel, it resonates with its structures, themes and devices. The parallel narrative engaging with Nan Goldin, whose work documented the Punk generation in New York in all its seediness and celebrity, creates connections with Cheng Ran's own musings on youth culture and accordingly also "Circadian Rhythms".

In a small notebook, sentences are written with a fountain pen, in English. The writer then rips the pages out, but only keeps the text (the surrounding empty paper is also ripped off, discarded). The remaining note is then folded very small, and squeezed into a crevice in a domestic room. "What is love." is forced into a corner between a window and a tile wall. The camera retreats, revealing a brimming bath and on its edge a *memento mori* skull supporting a burning candle (the skull is possibly plastic, and therefore also tied to associations of kitsch and "bad" taste.) The gushing tap is audible. On the edge of the bath lies the notebook and pen, recalling Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Marat* (1793), a propagandistic elegy to a revolutionary hero, murdered by a counter-revolutionary woman. Cheng Ran replays the political assassination as a lovers' tragedy (the note), indulging the viewer's romantic desire (for repetition and cliché). Murder becomes a suicide, and film (narrative) rewrites history (story).

In the second, American country and western music plays on a radio in the background (mark the associations of sentimentality). This time the note reads "Does aged flesh make you sad? or smile?" Finished with folding, the hands open a wardrobe door, its polished face baring a Rorschach-like pattern. The door creaks (of course). There is a momentary directorial double-take – a visual *trip-up* to make the viewer pay attention – before sparkling dresses and chain necklaces are revealed. As the door continues to slowly open, a mirror on the inside of the door is also revealed, and in it the reflection of a print on the wall opposite: Carravaggio's *Bacchus* (1593), in which the torso of a louche young man lounges, proffering a glass of wine and foregrounded by a wine carafe and a still life of fruit³. The print is surely another *memento mori*. Meanwhile the mirror recalls the tiny reflection in the carafe, of the painter, Caravaggio, himself. This scene is an homage to cinema, not only to its renaissance,

mannerist aesthetic but also to painter-film-maker, Derek Jarman's 1986 titular film, which reimagined – re-invented – the artist's biography. Cheng's writer squeezes this note into the corner of the metal fixture holding the mirror to the door. A wedding ring is visible as the hand works, as is Bacchus's reflected head. The door closes.

Note 3 asks "Who do you want to be with at the last moment of your..." – life? The camera pulls away before we can read the last word clearly. The notebook rests on a scrunched sheet (recalling Bacchus's robe). It is folded below a table lamp; the scene prepared so that the view looks up into the old-fashioned filament light bulb – lit. We glimpse the last word: "yourself". The note is secreted below the socket.

Note 4: "Do you remember everyone that you ever loved?" is written in pencil across a fine crack in the wall, close to the skirting board. The lower left corner of the Bacchus print is visible. The camera retreats to reveal the end of an old leather sofa and a pair of high-heels.

In Note 5 the conversation becomes tense. "Art you bitchy?" is written next to cracks, descending like lightning bolts down to the skirting board. And in Note 6 the tone continues to darken: "What is in your hand when you are shooting a dying friend?" Strewn on the stairs are a gold watch, an expensive fountain pen and jewellery. This time the note is secreted between the board and the wall. Music and other sounds fade in and out.

And in Note 7 the correspondence becomes voyeuristic: "How to make a stranger [get] undressed before you?" [sic] The camera retreats to reveal a desk still life, with an androgynous model's head from a picture in an open book of Goldin's photography and

reflected in the mirror of an empty gold makeup compact – a device for checking that facial costume is in order, as both sexual decoration and defense.

Finally, “Is photography your life? If life is bittersweet and painful, would you like to stop it?” – Stop your life? Stop it being bittersweet and painful? So melodramatic! So clichéd! What a relief, at last pathos has become bathos. It too goes between the wooden parquet floor tiles. But that is the cynic speaking. In the parallel stories of a young man, let us say a character we will call “Cheng Ran” and who is an artist speaking with an absent lover, and that of the artist Cheng Ran, actually speaking with Nan Goldin, albeit in an artificial tonal register, one of cliché and pop quotation, there exists too something of the philosophical conversations between Hans Castorp and Settembrini in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (2007).

This is the last generation, the last in the series, the end of the novel, the story over. But not the narrative, because, as we know, parts of that have escaped – some into the gallery space, others sketched in travelogue recordings, or written on fragments of tourist detritus – train tickets and receipts. Yet others have been hidden in the skirting boards of a house somewhere, waiting to be discovered, if ever. The novel has been fragmented and now is open. As for the circadian rhythms, the organic beat of turning seasons and lunar tides, of sunrise and sunset, waking and oblivion, well while we await our respective parts, we may adjust our chair, as if we too were sitting on Mann’s sanatorium terrace in Davos, tuck in our blanket, chat with our neighbor, pick up our book or iPad, and eventually slumber, eventually expire. All except for Cheng Ran: he is writing, weaving, collecting and collaging together stories that loop and intersect and play and subvert.

*The bull and the bear are marking their territories
They're leading the blind with their international glories*

*I am the screen, the blinding light
I'm the screen, I work at night*

“Daysleeper” R.E.M

Notes:

¹ The novel will be published in book form in both Chinese and English versions in limited editions.

² The extraordinary *Götterdämmerung* opening sequence of *Melancholia* is accompanied by the prelude from Richard Wagner's 1865 romantic-tragedy opera *Tristan und Isolde*, in a famous 1931 recording at Bayreuth, with Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting the Chor & Orchester der Bayreuther Festspiele.

³ Another Renaissance reference in Cheng Ran's work is Leonardo da Vinci *The Battle of Anghiari* (1505), which Cheng has cited as inspiration and appears to have inspired Cheng's equine video *Hot Blood, Warm, Blood, Cold Blood* (2011).