

Ghost Choir Karaoke (2.1.1.)

Two sites in China: A building ground in Hohot and a Karaoke Club in Beijing.¹

Great Ghost Ground:

Ghosts: Boris Schiøler and Frans Jacobi

Voice-over: Yvette Brackman

Camera: Lars Ravn

Ghost Choir Karaoke:

Ghosts: Boris Schiøler, Stine, Marianne, Frans, 2 Chinese, 1 more Dane?

Soundtrack, music and singing (live + playback): Lonely Boy Choir

Camera: Yvette Brackman

Scene 1: Great Ghost Ground

We are in an immense building site at night, scanning the area. The artist/researcher speaks.

THE ARTIST/RESEARCHER:

So here we are in China. It's early May and the night is warm. I am the artist/researcher, and I am here with my friend Boris². We are in an immense building site, walking around, trying to understand. Going to China nowadays is often a strange science-fiction-like experience; the places you visited last time are often hard, if not impossible, to find. As the economy is growing, whole parts of the cities are being rebuilt - streets, houses, building-blocks, whole areas - everything is erased and replaced by new cities. It is as if history is being erased and the future is installed. A bright shiny design for an ultra capitalist future. As at this spot: the art academy used to be on the other side of the street, on this side there was a mess of low storage buildings and an intermezzo of small shops and bars. Now there is a huge, new hotel of glass and steel on the other side of the street, and on this side we have this big hole out of which some new superstructure, also of glass and steel, will arise.³

Now two white ghosts enter the scene, they stand at the edge of the immense building site. Shouting.

TWO GHOSTS:

Seize the hour! Seize the day! Wake up! China! Wake up! Seventy years are too long; Seize every minute!⁴

THE ARTIST/RESEARCHER:

What we are trying to do here is a kind of double commemoration. It is the 4th of May 2009 today. May 4th is almost holy in Communist China. The May 4th Movement is the name of the nationwide demonstrations staged in 1919, provoked by the Treaty of Versailles and identified and celebrated by the Chinese Communist Party as its intellectual origin⁵. Today marks the 90-year anniversary of the 1919 uprisings.

But why ghosts?

Ghosts represent something unresolved in history. Someone has died, but they cannot rest in peace. Something in their lives or in their death has been left unresolved; the dead has not been given the proper respect or their proper place in history. So the dead are left to wander

around as ghosts until their positions are resolved.⁶ So these commemorations are about something unresolved.

But then why do the ghosts claim that seventy years are too long?

Ninety minus seventy makes twenty. The other event we are trying to commemorate happened on this day twenty years ago, on May 4th 1989. May 4th was one of the key dates in the Tiananmen Square Riots, or the 1989 Democracy Movement, as this crucial moment in the recent Chinese history is also called.⁷ This movement is still highly controversial in contemporary China; so controversial that the government actively tries to erase it from history.⁸

So here we are, trying to commemorate May 4th in a double manner; or more correctly: we celebrate the way that the 1989 Democracy Movement celebrated the 1919 May 4th movement. But let's start with a little background history:

On April 18th 1989 a kind of alternative commemoration of the death of the former Secretary General of The Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, occurred.⁹ In the days following, this initially small student movement gathered enormous momentum, and already on the night of April 21st, the day before Hu Yaobang's funeral, 100.000 students and others marched to Tiananmen Square.¹⁰ This was the beginning of the famous riots that led first to the occupation of Tiananmen Square for an entire 48 days, a series of dramatic hunger strikes, and in the end - on June 4th - to the infamous crack-down on the student activists by the Chinese military.

One of the early highlights of the new student movement was the cloning of the traditional communist May 4th celebrations. When the new student movement used this 70-year celebration as their platform for criticizing the regime, it became very hard for the regime to label them as anti-communist or orchestrated by the West.¹¹ The new movement marched with red flags and classic communist slogans like "Democracy and Science!" quoted directly from the 1919 campaign; even the singing was classic communist aesthetics. I call this 'cloning'. It is taking the forms - the aesthetics - of the original event and re-using them for a new purpose.

Cloning and revitalizing communist aesthetics? The form is the message; if we - in the spirit of the post-modernism it closely resembles - apply this idea to the 1989 Democracy Movement, it was the aesthetics that

mobilized the masses. But what were the student leaders actually doing to achieve this? They were taking on a range of aesthetic signifiers of communist revolts of the early 20th century: the red flags, the banners, the slogans, the songs. During the 70 years that Chinese communism had evolved these signifiers, these aesthetic forms had been monumentalized and standardized by the party and the regime, they had become the stiffened and dead iconography of a brutal system, emptied of their original meaning. When re-using them in 89, the students remade this iconography in a very hands-on way; they simply re-did everything by hand and by themselves. The red flags were simple pieces of red fabric attached to whatever poles available, the slogans were hand-painted in yellow on red headbands or on cardboard signboards, the songs were sung by the students themselves while marching.¹²

All these hand-made, spontaneous aesthetics created a new authenticity, a new raw energy that made the claim for revolt and change plausible. Sincere. The do-it-yourself attitude was accessible for everyone; it was easy to join the movement, it didn't take training, uniforms or special skills. The parades were inclusive, in a very basic democratic sense. This was the new raw decor of communist revolt.¹³

TWO GHOSTS:

Democracy and Science!

The purpose of news is not the deception of the people!
Do we have to wait for another seventy years?¹⁴

THE ARTIST/RESEARCHER:

A central part of the whole movement, right from the beginning to the dramatic end on June 4th was the Arts Choral Group. The Arts Choral Group was a loosely assembled choir of art students who took part in the demonstrations; their function was to energize the participants with singing, and providing the movement with an emotional and artistic identity. They were singing a range of agitation songs and other worker-songs from the repertoire of classic communism. The number one song on the repertoire was of course 'The Internationale', the iconic socialist anthem. Whenever the demonstrations needed encouragement and collective spirit, the Art Choral Group started up 'The Internationale' which then united everyone in passionate singing.¹⁵

Philip J. Cunningham reports:

"Why sing a song embraced by the establishment? The idea is brilliant in its way. If you sing it enough, you own it. The Communist-indoctrinated youth of Beijing are waving the red flag to beat the red flag, employing the iconic rhetoric of rebellion to remake China in their own image."¹⁶

This is exactly what I mean by 'cloning'.

In the crackdown on June 4th 1989 the Arts Choral Group disappeared. We will now take you back to Beijing to bring the choir back into an environment that fits this idea of cloning. Here we are at the Blue Sky Karaoke Club, commemorating May 4th 1989.

Scene 2: Ghost Choir Karaoke

We are now at a spectacular karaoke club in Beijing. 7 ghosts enter the stage, find their positions and stand still. Music starts. A male voice-over asks questions, bewildered, in English. A female voice asks the same questions in Chinese.

DAI WEI:

"What happened to me? I see Tian Yi and me....hand in hand....running for our lives. Is that a memory? Did it really happen? The tanks roll towards us..."

TIAN YI:

"What happened to me? I see Dai Wei and me....hand in hand....running for our lives. Is that a memory? Did it really happen? The tanks roll towards us..."¹⁷

6 ghosts now gather in front of the microphone, center stage.

ARTS CHORAL GROUP:

"Bright flame of youth! Stand tall and erect!"

"Arise! We don't want to be your slaves!"

"Freedom! And Democracy!"

"Bright Flame of Youth!"

"Unite! Under the sky! For All The People!"

"Bright Flame of Youth! Stand tall and erect!"

"Freedom! And Democracy!"

"Bright Flame of Youth! Stand tall and erect!"

"Democracy and Science!"

"China's Soul! China's Soul!"¹⁸

"China's Soul! China's Soul!"

"Unite! Under the Sky! For All The People!"

The ghosts return to their positions. Two of them unfold a long, empty, white banner. Two others climb the two dancing-poles; turning, turning. The Lonely Boy Ghost starts singing.

LONELY BOY GHOST:

"Midnight moon of Tiananmen,

When will I see you again?

Look for you everywhere,

Going in circles around the square...

Riding with you down Chang'an Jie,

Memories I'd like to share

Shadows dancing in the dark,

Lovers talking in the park...

Follow you here,

Follow you there,

Bathing in you,
Sweet moonlight everywhere...
Midnight moon of Tiananmen,
When will I see you again."¹⁹

*Still singing, the Lonely Boy Ghost follows the other 6
ghosts off stage.*

THE END

Notes:

¹ Ghost Choir Karaoke was performed as part of the 10th anniversary of the 10th OPEN Performance Art Festival in Beijing, China in September 2009. It was then two separate performances: 'Great Ghost Ground' performed without audience in an anonymous building ground in Hohot, Inner Mongolia and 'Ghost Choir Karaoke' performed at the Blue Sky Karaoke Club (RO JI GAO LAN TIAN CLUB) in Beijing.

² Boris Schiøler aka Lonely Boy Choir, the composer, singer and Lonely Boy Ghost in these performances.

³ We are in Hohot, the local capital of Inner Mongolia in northern China. The art academy is now outside of the city where its new shiny campus is as big as a whole suburb.

⁴ These slogans are quoted from:

Philip J Cunningham: *Tiananmen Moon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2009) and Han Minzhu, editor, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

⁵ Zhao Ziyang: *Prisoner of the State* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd 2009), p.11

⁶ ghost *lgōstl* noun - an apparition of a dead person that is believed to appear or become manifest to the living, typically as a nebulous image : the building is haunted by the ghost of a monk / figuratively the ghosts of communism returned to haunt the living. (New Oxford American Dictionary)

⁷ 'New May Fourth' was the title of a journal on political reform, founded by the student activist Wang Dan in the winter of 88/89. Wang Dan was a central figure in the emerging student movement, organizing those 'democracy salons' at Beijing University. It was also from Beijing University the first large-scale demonstration, where three thousand students marched to Tiananmen Square, started out shortly after midnight on April 18th 1989.

See also Han Minzhu, editor, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.15 and p.9

⁸ An example of this censorship is the 'umbrella-tactics' employed by the Chinese authorities on the 20-year anniversary of the crack-down on June 4th 1989. On June 4th 2009 all Western television reporters trying to film and report from the Tiananmen Square were curiously blocked by young men holding up umbrellas in front of the tv-cameras. A nice example is still to be seen on:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8080437.stm>

The American artist, Annamarie Ho, has done the dance and video work 'The Umbrellas of May 35th' about this incident. Her video was first shown at the the 10th anniversary of the OPEN Performance Art Festival in Beijing, China, which 'Ghost Choir Karaoke' was also part of. Her statement on 'The Umbrellas of May 35th':

"For the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen Square on June 4, 2009, the Chinese government prevented memorials from occurring and blocked many popular websites. Furthermore, any online postings originating from China were censored from using "June 4"; bloggers creatively began referring to the date as "May 35" instead.

Western journalists attempted to report on the anniversary from the square; however, Chinese policemen posing as tourists blocked cameramen with umbrellas. The Umbrellas of May 35th reimagines the umbrella-wielding undercover policemen as Red Guard dancers from Red Detachment of Women, a propagandist Communist ballet from the Cultural Revolution."

<http://www.annamarieho.com>

⁹ List of Seven Demands: Students from different Beijing Universities gathered to mourn Hu Yaobang, whom they felt were being cast as a scapegoat by the government to justify anti-reform politics. The students used the occasion not only to mourn the deceased but also to formulate a list of 7 demands for the government:

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- (1) affirm as correct Hu Yaobang's views on democracy and freedom;
 - (2) admit that the campaigns against spiritual pollution and bourgeois liberalization had been wrong;
 - (3) publish information of the income of state leaders and their family members;
 - (4) end the ban on privately run newspapers and permit freedom of speech;
 - (5) increase funding for education and raise intellectuals' pay;
 - (6) end restrictions on demonstrations in Beijing;
 - (7) hold democratic elections to replace government officials who made bad policy decisions.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiananmen_Square_protests_of_1989#Protest_development

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiananmen_Square_protests_of_1989#Protest_development

¹¹ As the American journalist, Philip J Cunningham, writes in his personal account of the uprisings that he took part in as a young exchange student: "There it is again. The students are willfully making parallels between their situation and the progenitor of all student demonstrations. The social and creative explosion that followed the May Fourth demonstration at Tiananmen Gate in 1919 led to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. Once the party took over, it enshrined the 1919 student demonstration as an icon of Chinese Communism."

Philip J Cunningham: *Tiananmen Moon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2009), p.?

¹² See commentary 2.1.4.2.: Cloning

¹³ See commentary 2.1.4.2.: Cloning

¹⁴ These slogans are quoted from:

Philip J Cunningham: *Tiananmen Moon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2009) and Han Minzhu, editor, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

¹⁵ Modern History Sourcebook: "The Internationale is the international song of both Marxist and non-Marxist socialist parties. It was written in French by Eugene Pottier, a woodworker from Lille, after the fall of the Paris Commune of 1871, and set to music by P. Degeyter. The "Internationale" referred to is the International Working Men's Association, the so-called First International (1864-76), part of which had supported the Commune. It has been used across the world as a song of resistance to oppression. Perhaps its most dramatic use in recent years was its repeated singing by the students in Tiananmen Square in 1989 - although, curiously, the Western press did not comment on this."

¹⁶ Philip J Cunningham: *Tiananmen Moon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2009), p. 22

¹⁷ Dai Wei and Tian Yi are characters from the novel 'Beijing Coma' by Ma Jian (see commentary 2.1.4.1.: Demolition). Their questions are a direct quote from the beginning of the novel. Dai Wei was shot and severely hurt in Tiananmen Square in the early morning of June 4th 1989. The question is his first conscious thought after 10 years of coma. Here it is doubled and turned into a conversation between two ghosts.

Ma Jian: *Beijing Coma* (London: Vintage 2009), p.3

¹⁸ The slogan China's Soul! refers to the former Secretary General of The Communist Party Hu Yaobang. He was generally seen as one of the only Chinese leaders with high morals and progressive ideas.

¹⁹ The text of the song, Tiananmen Moon, is by Philip J Cunningham taken from his book *Tiananmen Moon*. He composed the song after a midnight bicycle ride to Tiananmen Square a couple of years before the 1989 riots, but he uses its title for his book of personal memoirs about the Democracy Movement. In all its banal reverie the text has a nice subdued undertone of something else. I gave the text to Lonely Boy Choir (Boris Schiøler) who made up a new tune for it and recorded it in his bathroom in the hotel in Beijing, where we were preparing the two performances that make up Ghost Choir Karaoke. We were searching for subdued references to the 1989 Democracy Movement; the heavy monitoring of every kind of communication by the Chinese authorities for references or criticism, especially from foreigners, on everything concerning the anniversary of June 4th 1989 was felt quite strongly, even in the social circles surrounding the OPEN Performance Festival. After a rather unpleasant confrontation with a translator in a seminar, I decided to do a kind of 'hidden'

commemoration of 89 – this resulted in the toned-down mysterious references and use of texts from the Democracy Movement. The use of the Tiananmen Moon song was part of this 'camouflaged criticism'. Ghost Choir Karaoke was intended as a kind of lament, an emotional memorial, situating the sad return of the activists in a present as far from their hopes and aspirations as one might think possible.

Philip J Cunningham: *Tiananmen Moon* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2009), p. ix (preface)