

**PAUL BOWMAN, ED. (2010) *THE REY CHOW*
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Esther Whitfield

The *Rey Chow Reader* brings together selections from the many books and articles that this celebrated cultural theorist has published over the past twenty years. It is a tribute to the breadth, complexity and perspicacity of Chow's work and, at the same time, an indication of where her thinking might take us in years to come. Paul Bowman's excellent introduction gives a clear sense of the reach and implications of these chapters, situating them thoughtfully in their theoretical context.

Chow's work spans a number of disciplines, challenging the premises and testing the limits of each. She is, for example, author of several foundational essays in postcolonial studies although, as she writes here, she is less concerned with the field's singularity than with what she considers its 'genealogical affinities with the radical implications of Marxism, deconstruction, and feminism' (22). She is widely known as a scholar of Chinese culture but reads China as so deeply inscribed in Western theoretical and political discourses that her object of inquiry becomes a much broader world; as, indeed, does the sphere in which her work is useful for thinking through local culture. Feminist theory is a further field with which her work has engaged, and to which it has contributed, for decades; and she has published extensively on film, pushing the notion of visibility to the core of cross-ethnic relations and testing the politics of visibility. As Chow has said of her own intellectual practice, she rarely begins with 'a bird's eye view of a field', but instead works with 'features of specific works that strike [her] as demanding more thought, more discussion, more debate; that suggest that there has to be a larger set of issues that have led to those features' visibility and intelligibility' (Chow, 2010: 457). Her theorising resists abstraction, and much of the exquisite nuance of all her work lies in this unflinching insistence on specificity.

Each chapter of *The Rey Chow Reader* attests to the curiosity and agility with which Chow thinks and writes. Chapter Two, 'The Postcolonial Difference: Lessons in Cultural Legitimation', first published in *Postcolonial Studies* in 1998, does so in ways that anticipate the methodological apparatus of some subsequent chapters. These include the autobiographical account that opens the chapter as a manifestation of the centrality to her work of how details are experienced; of the modesty with which she frames such experience not as authority but as merely place from which to speak; and of her sensitivity to what Bowman, in his introduction, calls 'the fraught, felt, lived, and very real political stakes, exigencies, and urgencies that congregate, condense, and flare up around aspects and issues of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity' (xi). Chow draws her schooling in a Hong Kong where English literature was accorded a discrete but definite superiority over Chinese, and subsequently as a graduate student in the U.S., into a reading of the processes of 'cultural legitimation' that regulate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge in colonial settings. It is, she claims, its capacity to address these processes both theoretically and historically that makes the field of postcolonial studies 'an intellectually exciting event' (28).

'The Postcolonial Difference' is a reflection on the complexity of situation: China is its immediate referent, the United States a necessary point of engagement, the unevenly postcolonial world its broader context. It shares with other chapters in the first part of this book, titled 'Modernity and Postcolonial Ethnicity', its concern with how difference is manufactured in the language of both the state and the academy and with poststructuralist critique as both valuable and problematic. Chapter One, drawn from Chow's *The Age of the World Target: Atomic Bombs, Alterity, Area Studies* (2006), exposes the military rhetoric that enabled both the destruction of Hiroshima and the creation of 'area studies', a military concept whose absorption into the social sciences cast the Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East as 'target fields', or 'fields of information retrieval and dissemination that were necessary for the perpetuation of the United States' political and ideological hegemony' (15). In the third chapter, from *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (1993), Chow suggests that this xenophobic construction of the rest of the world finds echoes among humanist scholars of China, be they melancholic Orientalists who would keep the East at a distance or 'militant Maoists' who thrive on the guilt of being Western; while in Chapter Four, from *The Protestant Ethnic: and the Spirit of*

Capitalism (2002), she unearths not only the complexity of deploying, but also of doing away with, cross-cultural stereotypes. Chapter Five, from *Ethics After Idealism: Theory – Culture – Ethnicity – Reading* (1998), portrays the cultural studies scholarship that followed poststructuralism as ‘both an accomplishment and a setback’ (58): it has both allowed the individual subject to be understood in nuanced ways and, at the same time, downplayed ‘issues of structural control – of law, sovereignty, and prohibition – that underlie the subject’s relation with the collective’ (58). These ‘issues of structural control’ determine whether an individual is admitted as part of a community, a question that underpins both this chapter on Frantz Fanon’s problematic positioning of women of colour and the following one, “‘When Whiteness Feminizes...” Some Consequences of a Supplementary Logic.’

The second part of *The Rey Chow Reader* is titled ‘Filmic Visuality and Transcultural Politics’, and its chapters are drawn principally from Chow’s work on China in film. The chapters push explicitly at the cross-ethnic, political dimensions of visibility and visibility that are as important to postcolonial and feminist analysis as they are to film, the resonances between chapters on such a range of material revealing a rigour and consistency to Chow’s thinking that does not in any way compromise the richness and originality of each argument. ‘Seeing Modern China: Toward a Theory of Ethnic Spectatorship’ - from Chow’s first book, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between East and West* (1990) – poses an indispensable question for much of her subsequent work and the many fields that it has influenced: ‘who is seeing whom, and how?’ The chapter channels this question to equally provocative ones about what China stands for in the articulations of Western enthusiasts Bernardo Bertolucci and Julia Kristeva; what this means for Chinese modernity and the formulation of a ‘Chinese’ subject (94); and, broadening its scope to a world of postcolonial relations even as it ostensibly narrows it to China, about how the bilateral relationship at the basis of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ might be complicated to accommodate the figure of the ‘ethnic spectator’ (114).

This latter question threads through several essays, in the first place as an attempt to redress misuses of Said’s work and the ease with which ‘Orientalist’ can become a comfortable and self-righteous explanation and accusation. Chapter Nine’s Lacanian reading, through David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*, of the centrality of fantasy to cross-cultural exchange explicitly counters the anti-Orientalist

and homoerotic interpretations of this film that would insist on its revealing repressed, but stable, identities. Chow opens the book's final chapter, drawn from her recent *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visuality* (2007), by observing that 'knee-jerk anti-orientalist reactions' (197) dominate scholarly reaction to works that 'inhabit the East-West divide', and that such reactions obscure not only the critical potential of these works but also their engagement, and sometimes alliance, with Orientalism critique. Her analysis of the political economy of vision in two of Zhang Yimou's films find there an 'imaginary Chineseness' (200) that speaks to spectators both inside and outside China.

The 'ethnic spectator' of films about China is a further, and constant, preoccupation. Chapter Ten, from *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995) brings this figure into a discussion of ethnography, turning to the autoethnography of the discipline's erstwhile objects to argue that Laura Mulvey's 'being-looked-at-ness', rather than the act of looking, 'constitutes the primary event in cross-cultural representation' (153); and, via this emphasis on visuality, that ethnography must be understood as translation. Chapter Twelve, from the introduction to *Sentimental Fabulations*, retraces the question of the ethnic spectator to the crucial shifts in the idea of spectatorship that feminist film theory ushered in. Exploring how contemporary Chinese cinema assumes the post-Mulvey 'visibility of visibility', wherein being visible means 'participating in a discursive politics of (re)configuring the relation between center and margin' (189), Chow identifies 'sentimentality' – in a specific and far-sighted sense – as this cinema's mode and strategy. The emotional excess conventionally associated with sentimental representations is merely one aspect of the 'fraught ethic of human sociality' (194) that such representations access; an ethic that, whether conceived as longing for a deferred ideal or as a more positive affirmation of collective identity, is the means by which Chinese film, opting out of the avant garde aesthetic of much consciousness-raising film in the West, 'gauges the textures and nuances of a society's moral duplicity' (194).

The variety, clarity and sheer critical scope of these chapters is startling. They stand as a testament to an exceptional intellectual trajectory that, despite the retrospective connotations of the 'reader' genre, has by no means run its course. Chow continues to write at an impressive pace, and her work continues to make its mark on a wide

range of scholarship. Coinciding with the publication of the *Rey Chow Reader*, Paul Bowman edited special issues of *Postcolonial Studies* and *Social Semiotics*, whose contributors engage with Chow's work to address, among other topics, fashion and the female body; translation and emotion; martial arts fantasia; post-socialist biopolitics in Bulgaria; the 'rest of the world' as a target for Euro-American theory; and the relationship among poststructuralism, nationalism and ethnicity. It is a mark of the brilliance of *The Rey Chow Reader* that one reads it with as much excitement at what is yet to come as admiration for what has already been written.

References

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