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## Review of Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory-Culture-Ethnicity--Reading*

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**Rey Chow, *Ethics After Idealism: Theory--Culture--Ethnicity--Reading*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. i-xxiii + 235 pp. ISBN 0253333636 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Jane Hedley, Bryn Mawr College**

*Ethics after Idealism*, volume 20 in the Theories of Contemporary Culture series sponsored by the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Kathleen Woodward, General Editor) brings together Rey Chow's most recent work in film studies, cultural studies, and post-colonial theory. The essays are linked together by a constellation of issues and projects that have occupied her for some time now as a comparatist and cultural critic: the status of popular film as "one of the most effective apparatuses of subject-formation in our age" (p. 104); the vicissitudes of "multi-culturalism" and identity politics; the need to move postcolonial studies beyond its initial phase of Orientalism-critique; the elaboration of hitherto neglected forms of postcoloniality. If you have been reading Chow's essays as they came out in other venues there will not be anything new for you here: each of this book's ten chapters has already appeared in journals such as *diacritics* and *Diaspora* or in edited collections, and it looks as if only the first and perhaps the second have been substantially revised. Around the middle of the third chapter, from which the whole collection gets its title, it came home to me that while *Ethics After Idealism* is pretending to be a book, what it really is instead is a convenient way to catch up with Chow's most recent contributions to a set of loosely related conversations that are still ongoing within the academy. Chow does some of her best work viva voce and in journals like *diacritics* that exist to give such conversations a wider audience in print. If this book is an attempt to expand her audience still further, to make Chow's critical agenda accessible to critics and scholars who have not been actively involved in these conversations, then it does not succeed.

Until now my own knowledge of her work began and ended with a few of her published articles and the unforgettable experience of hearing her speak. After working my way through this book I found that in order to understand both what I had been reading and why it mattered, I had to go back and read Chow's two previous books, *Primitive Passions*, her 1995 study of contemporary Chinese cinema that won the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell prize (full title: *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. [Columbia UP, 1995]), and *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, published by Indiana University Press in 1993. Both of these earlier books offer clearer, more sustained explanations of what is at stake in the discursive arenas Chow has chosen to enter and the work of reading she has chosen to do. If you are not yet familiar with her positions and ideas I would suggest beginning with one of the earlier books, or with the fourth or fifth chapter of *Ethics After Idealism* (on Frantz Fanon and the film of *M. Butterfly*, respectively). And yet I don't mean to suggest that Chow is merely repeating herself in this book. As a new series of strategically chosen sites of reading, all of these essays are provocative and illuminating, both of the particular texts she has chosen to work with and the political questions and cultural trends she uses them to bring into focus.

The argument of Chow's first chapter is likely to be of particular interest to specialists in Comparative Literature. Chow contends that in the 1990s Comparative Literature needs to change and is changing both its methods and its parameters of study, which in recent years have

"far exceeded the traditional European parameters of the discipline." The question of "what kinds of comparative relations should be introduced" and the related question "what kinds of media should be 'compared'" are both newly open for discussion. At this moment of disciplinary crisis Chow suggests that cultural studies has "very interesting alternatives to offer in terms of the study of non-Western cultures and literatures, and of other kinds of media." Her own work exists to showcase such alternatives. Although the theory she deploys is European, her proof-texts are mostly Asian and Asian American; they are mostly films, popular songs, and other "mediatized" products of contemporary culture; and her juxtapositions are often startling, as when she compares the film version of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* with Stephen Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* or uses a Western feminist lens to discredit the utopian third-worldist politics of Frantz Fanon. Chow observes, however, that students and teachers of comparative literature have not shown much enthusiasm for cultural studies, and she speculates that this is because they think cultural studies is "anti-theoretical." This assumption is one that Chow has found to be widely shared by both proponents and opponents of cultural studies, and she worries even more about proponents whose aversion to theory prompts them to undertake and defend cultural studies for the wrong reasons. The danger she foresees, and thinks we need post-structuralist theory to guard against, is that cultural studies could self-destruct by reifying "culture" (just as social scientists used to do in the name of "area studies") and by promoting a feel-good multi-culturalist identity politics that evacuates the critical potential of cultural studies vis-à-vis the ideological legacies of Western imperialism.

As an advocate of cultural studies Chow continues here, most explicitly and programmatically in her first chapter, to position herself as a suspicious reader of anthropology and an outright adversary of Western sinology and area studies. Having grown up in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 70s (her mother was a popular filmmaker there) she is the self-conscious bearer of a hybrid national identity, and hence well positioned to argue that national identity as such -- "Chinese-ness," for instance -- is a deceptive and potentially destructive ideal, whether it has been imposed from without by scholars with a professional investment in its perpetuation or from within the country itself by a strongly centralized, authoritarian government. In *Writing Diaspora*, Chow proposed that Chinese intellectuals in diaspora, such as herself, have a special opportunity and responsibility to strive for "a loosening of the positivity of the sign 'Chinese'. . . ." What this involves in practice is using "the history of the sign 'Chinese' . . . as a base for an alliance with other types of work that are not done exclusively in China-related areas." This kind of work is important for China, according to Chow, because the historical tendency within mainland China to idealize "Chinese-ness" has become allied since the Tiananmen massacre with government opposition to political pluralism, which is refused on the grounds that it is a westernizing tendency, and as such inimical to Chinese national identity. It's time, Chow insists, for China as well as the West to stop idealizing "Chinese-ness" and recognize the extent to which Chinese modernity is implicated in larger, global phenomena such as the mediatization of everyday life. In this way Chow has tried to intervene simultaneously in the institutional politics of Western China studies and post-Maoist Chinese politics, working to give Westerners a more sophisticated understanding of contemporary China while at the same time urging Chinese intellectuals to grasp the extent to which their own cultural life is part of a bigger picture, the global "trauma that is 'modernity'" (*Writing Diaspora* 74).

In her title, *Ethics after Idealism*, Chow exploits the ambiguity of its copular preposition to convey that she intends to "come after" idealism not in the sense of making a clean break with it, but to "follow idealism's alluring traces and remnants" with "non-benevolent readings" of its presence and effects. By "idealism" she means both "idealization" and "turning-into-an-idea" -- as when, for example, we idealize non-Westerners by privileging the vantage point we attribute to them and positing that vantage point as a univocal repository or site of Otherness. What Chow means by ethics is more elusive, in part because the chapter with which the book shares its title is a comparative discussion of the theoretical projects of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Slavoj Žižek, originally written for *diacritics*, in which she professes to find both thinkers "provocatively instructive" but stops short of telling us what her own agenda has to do with theirs. Chow's propensity for unexpected juxtapositions and alignments prompts the inference that this one too is unexpected, or goes against the grain of both Spivak's and Žižek's work. But although her discussion will probably be of real interest to readers who already know these two theorists' work, those who do not will get no intellectual context or lineage for either of them from Chow beyond the introductory observation that they are both "post-Marxist" writers and the later suggestion that they are both engaged in an "attempt to plot an alternative ethics." In the context of this book, if it really were a book rather than a collection of disparate essays, we should be able to learn more about Chow's own attempt to plot an alternative ethics and how it is related (or for that matter opposed) to Spivak's "affirmative deconstruction" and Žižek's "enthusiastic resignation." "Provocatively instructive" doesn't tell us enough about this.

One reason why she has not laid out her own ethical commitments more categorically is that ethics is emphatically not, for Chow, a set of precepts or a credo. At the end of her Introduction she explains that ethics is "a term I use in contrast to mores and its cognates morality and moralism," and in association with a tactics of boundary-crossing, political "incorrectness," transgression against entrenched intellectual parameters and assumptions. A tactics rather than a strategy, since the latter term would imply the intention to stake out and occupy a theoretical domain or territory of her own. As a brief illustration of her ethical commitment to this kind of risk-taking, Chow cites the negative responses she got from people to whom "various avant-garde journals" sent an earlier version of her second chapter, in which she argues that multiculturalism as currently practiced amounts to a New Fascism of the academic Left. "'Only she could write something like this,' some readers charged" -- "meaning, I suppose," remarks Chow, that only a 'woman of color' and therefore a double minority, could possibly mount a criticism of multiculturalism as such without . . . being labeled 'racist'" (xxii). Chow's comeback is that if that is true, so be it: she will reinterpret the attempt to "censor" her reading as having created an ethical obligation for her to persist in it. It seems to me, though, that the courage to voice unpopular ideas is not an ethics in the full sense Chow seems to have in mind in chapter three, when she is teasing out Spivak's and Žižek's ethical commitments.

Chow frames her arguments and readings deconstructively, in the sense that she almost always begins by setting up an asymmetrical binary opposition (between, say, comparative literature and "cultural studies," or nativism and cosmopolitanism, or the past and the present) both of whose terms she then re-defines or puts in question, often through canny close-reading of a strategically chosen text--a movie, popular song lyrics, occasionally an illustrative anecdote drawn from everyday life. What is least persuasive to me in this strategy of argument is its first move, whereby the issue or the problem gets defined in terms of opposing attitudes or *partis pris*, at

least one of which is understood to be the product of partly unconscious hypocrisy or bad faith. Chow begins her first chapter, for instance, by alluding to "openly negative sentiments" toward cultural studies from all over, including an interview with Harold Bloom in which he gloomily anticipated the imminent takeover of literary studies by "the astonishing garbage called 'cultural criticism.'" It's not really Bloom whose opposition to cultural studies interests Chow, but the opposition she locates in the "theory" establishment (by which she means "high theory," with its European legacy through Derrida to Heidegger, Nietzsche and Kant). And yet the language of Bloom's hyperbolic prognosis keeps reappearing in her characterization of "once avant-garde theorists" who are driven to try to "junk" cultural theory by their vested interest in remaining the privileged Other within the academic Ivy League. In this way Chow has framed the debate about cultural studies not as a set of discussible questions or issues but as a battle for turf in which nobody --except she herself and Harold Bloom-- is willing to come clean about what is at stake for them. I'm not sure what to do with this picture, except to wonder what particular settings and venues it references. The people I teach with are not trying to "junk" cultural theory; nor is there much to be gained, that I can see, by taking Harold Bloom seriously when he makes these kinds of flamboyant prognostications. For me the most valuable part of Chow's discussion of cultural studies is its positive characterization of "the momentum of cultural studies as it is being practiced today." For Chow that momentum stems from "the sense that 'culture' is an unfinished process, a constellation -- never in pristine form -- of social relations that are to be continually unworked and reworked" (xiv). The preoccupation of cultural studies with objects its critics hold unworthy of serious intellectual attention, modern and even contemporary objects for the most part, "has precisely to do," she suggests, "with this unfinished quality of culture itself. For what moment in time is more emblematic of the open-endedness of history than 'now,' and what objects are more suggestive of the open-endedness of evaluation than those consigned to the dustbin of history?"

Chow's commitment both to dusting off such objects of study and to studying culture as an "unfinished process" are everywhere apparent in this book, and they give rise to one tour de force of reading after another. She is especially persuasive as an apologist for the tenacity and subtlety with which certain contemporary films like *M. Butterfly*, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Rouge* (by the Hong Kong filmmaker Stanley Kwan) are themselves doing cultural criticism by staging the operation and thereby exposing the inner logic of such powerful cliches or commonplaces as nostalgia, romantic love, and ethnicity. I value these readings for showing me how to understand the visual language of film as a medium that has the potential both to undermine such commonplaces and to renew them and keep them in circulation.

A major disappointment of last December's MLA convention, for the hundreds of participants from both English and foreign language departments who attended a high-profile session on "The Globalization of Literary Study," was that the weather kept Rey Chow from reaching San Francisco to join with Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Stephen Greenblatt in a discussion of how (and whether) this process of globalization has come about and what it implies. Chow has been insisting for some time that postcolonial critics are committed by their own political rhetoric to devoting the same kind of critical scrutiny to the cultural production of the "East," its processes of political and psychological subject-formation, its experience(s) of modernity, that the first generation of postcolonial critics gave to western representations of the East's mysterious Otherness. In *Primitive Passions* Chow pointed out that in "contemporary studies of

the non-West that derive their ethical impetus from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the visual culture of postcoloniality is usually associated . . . with "Europe's dominating, exploitative gaze" (p. 12) But the East is "equally caught up in the dialectic of seeing" (p. 13): thus, for example, both in *Primitive Passions* and in many of the essays reprinted in *Ethics after Idealism*, Chow makes it her business to explore how film has reflected and helped to shape Chinese modernity. Said, for his part, has begun to resist both the globalization of literary study and the increased attention to film and popular culture that have come along with it. In the latest MLA Newsletter he suggests that American departments of language and literature have lost their moorings by abandoning literary texts and the history of European literature in favor of high theory and "jargonized subjects of discussion" that are "not completely anthropological or sociological or philosophical or psychological, although they seem to carry some of the marks of all these disciplines." Said argues that in thus defecting from their traditional and expected mission, departments of literature have allowed the university to become all the more vulnerable, ironically enough, to co-optation by the forces of global capitalism. A confrontation thus appears to be shaping up between Said and Chow over the scope and mandate of the still emerging field of postcolonial studies. Perhaps the special issue of PMLA on this topic that is to include contributions from them both will give us an even better sense of how and why these two prolific and important theorists have come to differ not only about the value of cultural studies, but also about the priorities and parameters of postcoloniality.