

***Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about  
Capture***

**Rey Chow**

**Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, 208 pp., \$21.56 paperback**

**ISBN: 978-0822352303**

**Reviewed by Vuslat Demirkoparan, Soka University of America**

Keeping with her broader interests in cultural studies, diaspora, and visual media, Rey Chow's latest book, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking About Capture*, stands at the intersection of aesthetics and politics to confront the role of the mediated image in renewed modes of transnational communication. In each of the eight chapters, written as separate essays throughout 1999-2010, Chow consistently and convincingly weaves together a theory of what she calls "entanglements"—a critical terminology anchored within and against poststructural and postcolonial interests in global ruptures, displacements, and local specificities. "Entanglements" as a theoretical framework for transnational cultural studies indicates that physical proximity and historical continuity are no longer sufficient measures of the spaces of cultural contact; neither is rupture the only remaining line of difference. Hence, "entanglements" offers a wholly other and self-proliferating mode of address for rethinking ties to political visibility and representation, captivity and victimization, and retributive justice, and collective power. Two axial planes seem to organize the book: the first six chapters are interested in evoking an emancipatory field with respect to captivity, victimhood, agential mimesis, and reflexivity as parts of a social structure, while the final two return to the Foucaultian maxim—visibility is a trap—in order to suggest entanglement as a political practice in place of resistance against hypermediated transnationalist governance.

An interesting, yet necessary, place for theorizing entanglements is estrangement. A detailed exegesis of "estrangement" and its various conjectures as iterated by Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin allows Chow to begin laying the ground for "entanglements," rooted as a logical extension of twentieth century critical thought on subjective experience and material reality. By moving away from the formalist measures of proximity (distance) or affinity (identification), Chow tracks situations that have arisen since the wide-scale redistribution of the scattered and fragmented: "if art since modernism has been about a heightened sense of estrangement (or defamiliarization), estrangement itself is often a result of the intensification—one could

say infinitization—of the part and the partial, and of partitioning.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than abandon the work of formalist critical distance, Chow embeds it within the history of antagonisms as a necessary political response. To that end, Chow takes an Adornian approach to ethical philosophy even if there is no direct reference to Adorno.<sup>2</sup> The intensification of the part and the partial, both as formal aesthetic features and political epistemology, not only challenges the assumptions of historical continuity and causality, but gets at the core of the historically realized subject. The fragment, finally, exposes not so much the outside of the image as it does its negotiability for issues of domination and control, power and resistance, deterritorialization, global mass mobility, and reflexivity. Indeed such questions continue to underpin key interventions in poststructuralist and postcolonial critical thought and are especially pressing for understanding the points of overlap across various activist and social movements globally.

The first chapter, “When Reflexivity Becomes Porn: Mutations of a Modernist Theoretical Practice,” reflects on the dialectic of form and content, and the force of media reception and affect. Chow critiques how “the demand to think is entangled with specific artistic media,” but wants to redeem the “political potential” of a mediated work in the process of it being *staged*. When and how reflexivity becomes porn, however, lies in the pleasure that the receiver of the mediated image gets when he *exposes* the image, *lays bare* its body, and *exhibits* the way in which it inserts itself into the core of everyday life; “*by ripping off the medium’s clothes, as it were.*”<sup>3</sup> This kind of reflexivity gives the receiver of the image a perverse sense of pleasure for having arrived at thought—a pleasure effect of thought that is again entangled within the very process of staging the image. In other words, for Chow, reflexivity, or “thought’s self-awareness (or self-distancing)” is possible “on account of its status as phenomenon rather than as actuality” staged, hypermediatized, and reproduced *ad infinitum*.<sup>4</sup> Chow extends a similar critique in the closing chapter, when she questions the act of seeing.

In the second chapter, “On Captivation: A Remainder from the ‘Indistinction of Art and Nonart’” (co-authored with Julian Rohhuber), Chow tackles the boundary

---

1 Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 2-3.

2 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (New York: Verso, 2005). Adorno wrote large sections of *Minima Moralia* throughout the Second World War and published it in 1951 as a philosophical investigation of what subjective reflexivity means in the context of mass destruction and global displacement. It is in this collection of essays that Adorno reiterates estrangement as the only viable antidote to fragmented life and alienation. He writes, “the detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement” (26). Chow’s critique of reflexivity and critical distance matches Adorno’s.

3 Chow, 29.

4 *Ibid.*, 22-25.

between the inside and outside in an attempt to reveal emancipation as its underlining value. Whereas cultural anthropologist Alfred Gells wanted to bridge (Western) art and (non-Western) practical object through *the trap* as the paradigmatic object, for Chow the trap as a device for hunting actually “underwrites the zone of contact as a site of cruelty, domination, subordination, and asymmetrical power dynamics.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, any gesture toward cultural equality only ends up reinforcing captivity as a functional prerequisite for social order. Even in the ethical goal to emancipate, victims and captives remain indexically bound to one another, and captivation serves as “the deranged remainder that is unassimilable to the metanarratives of freedom that underlie both capitalist consumerism...and socialist revolution.”<sup>6</sup>

If emancipation is a trap, what then remains of selfhood? In the following two chapters, “Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She,” and “Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood,” Chow intends, with some success, to theorize a notion of selfhood as itself the originary rupture. By reading the Chinese writer Lao She’s narrative, “Attachment,” Chow searches for modes of desire and affinity not contingent on nationalist or capitalist imperatives. Taking a Benjaminian stance, she claims that the endeavor to collect gives life to the collector through the objects he collects.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, chapter four works through a number of theorists—Agamben, Fanon, Irigaray, and Girard—to rescue mimesis away from its conservative anchor in representational politics as substitution or alternation, and instead posit mimesis as evidence of other relations of commemoration and exchange.<sup>8</sup> And yet, while the critique of the emancipated subject is convincing, the notion of alterity problematically remains. Insistence is thus on a primordial urge to stay alive in the face of disposable, hyper-capitalized mass culture.

Having widely and somewhat pessimistically discussed the notions of victimhood and entrapment, in chapter five, “‘I Insist on the Christian Dimension’: On Forgiveness...and the Outside of the Human,” Chow explores mercy as the logic of global social order. There may be no way out and retributive justice might always already be foreclosed, but mercy and forgiveness remain as ideal ends. On this note, in the next chapter, “American Studies in Japan, Japan in American Studies: Challenges of the Heterolingual Address,” Chow offers Naoki Sakai’s theory of translation as an act of figuring the self and engaging the Other indeterminate from the narrative search for

---

5 Ibid., 43.

6 Ibid., 52.

7 Ibid., 61.

8 Ibid., 90.

forgiveness or recognition. Rather than searching in the Other responses to questions of distinction, the heterolingual address incepts mutual and multiplied reciprocity.

The final two chapters seem to be doing something else—perhaps more captivating and direct. Chapter seven, “Postcolonial Visibilities: Questions Inspired by Deleuze’s Method,” brings together Foucault and Deleuze to trace the historical trajectory of social conduct and the intimate connection between confinement and visibility. If, as Foucault argues, light is the instrument of rendering things observable by institutional power, then that which is brought to light is simultaneously brought to surveillance. Visibility is therefore a trap since regulatory and corrective practices do not need to rely on explicit or coercive arrest; logistics of confinement operate through “enabling, generative dimensions of soul making and reformation that turn modern incarceration into such an efficient, cost-effective space-time of social control.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, visibility continues to be crucial for entanglements, for it is no longer a process of laying bare or establishing critical distance, but “caught up in the shifting relations of political sovereignty and discontinuities among different representational regimes that constitute human sciences and the concept of man that emerges interstitially in their midst.”<sup>10</sup>

Since visibility is a limit barrier, a trap, then how might it work against itself, as a kind of appropriation to make visibility visible? While Chow’s discussion of Foucault restates major themes, her most interesting contribution to the field of visual and cultural studies extends the Foucaultian critique on Foucault himself. Foucault, despite having been criticized for his limited focus on Europe, actually places Europe under the lens of scrutiny. By bringing Europe to visibility and therefore making it observable, Foucault sets Europe not as an originary force to be mimicked, but as itself a finite and vulnerable structure limited by its own entangled position within a subversive global network. Rather than provincialize Europe or reinforce the countless “West and the rest” models, reading Foucault through Chow’s entanglements allows reading Europe both as an institutional (regulatory) power over others and a product of that regulatory power.<sup>11</sup> In other words, if the visible is less about the ability to see and be seen, and more about the ethical distribution of justice and equality, then bringing visibility to should move toward a total heterolingual address with which we can be receptive to Europe’s own complicated positioning as simultaneously the one and the Other.

---

9 Ibid., 153.

10 Ibid.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Whereas Chakrabarty wants to go against Eurocentric universalist historicism and historicist consciousness by trying to proliferate political philosophy through the vantage of the prepolitical and the nonwestern, the discourse ends up resorting to temporal, almost primitivist distinctions.

As mentioned earlier, the final chapter returns to reflexivity and Chow comes full circle with “Framing the Original: Toward a New Visibility of the Orient.” Arguing through the films of Ang Lee that the Orient is no longer contained as a veiled mystery but stands fully exposed, “stripped naked...[and] opened up in the most unmentionable of perspectives,” Chow returns to Foucault’s warning of visibility as the trap and China as the paradigmatic case of our hypermodern transmedial networks.<sup>12</sup> What Chow observes in Lee’s filmic laying bare of Chinese national history is that seeing is itself the spectacle—that we are not only looking at China, but we are aware we are looking at it, and that awareness provides perverse pleasure. Confrontation with the act of seeing reveals the brutality of visibility.

“Entanglements” is a theoretical position on the complex of postmodernist and hypermediated networks of social encounter and exchange. As its name suggests, the theory leaves more issues knotted together than resolved. Chow defines entanglements as an “enmeshment of topics,” or a “topological looping together.”<sup>13</sup> If the book provides no easy way out, it at least acknowledges the situation in which relationships among things, humans, and images are simultaneously terrifying and vulnerable. Nevertheless, Chow also recalls the necessity of hopefulness given the histories of struggle against racist and imperialist entanglement, new and morphing technologies of power and violence, and various forms of life that have transpired since the collapse of epistemic borders. One of the primary intellectual commitments of the book is to theorize agency when captivity paradoxically remains as the structural centerpiece of the representative paradigm. To what extent is break possible given “the trap” at the heart of all representational regimes? The answer is not to submit, but to subvert. If the affective force of captivity and capture reveals bodies literally and metaphorically caught in power, then resistance to it or emancipation from it, at least in contemporary Asian societies, indicates that protest, activism, and social change work through subversive practices beyond claims to alterity.

---

**Vuslat Demirkoparan** received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Irvine, with emphasis in Critical Theory and MA in Visual Studies. Her research focuses on contemporary Turkish film and visual culture, postcolonial critique, and comparative cultural studies. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor and Writing Center Manager at Soka University of America.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.