

Performing Fear in Television Production: Practices of an Illiberal Democracy

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How does one account for the resilience of authoritarian regimes through the study of television production practices? Following Ien Ang, John Fiske, John Hartley, and Virginia Nightingale on the notion of audiences as a discursive construct, Siao Yuong Fong's *Performing Fear in Television Production* offers critical insight into Singapore Chinese-language television production through the analysis of first-person accounts of work on game shows, dramas, and reality TV, which are often fascinating and riveting.

Structured around five main chapters alongside the introduction and conclusion chapters, Fong (2022) identifies the state and its censorship system as the *condition* rather than the *problem* of everyday production. This enables a move from Foucault's biopolitics and governmentality, often used to discuss authoritarian resilience, to Deleuze's (1992) "societies of control" to make sense of the "unpredictability of imagined audiences." (p. 12) This is illiberal capitalist Singapore where producers' actions are "modulated according to relational, situational and constantly shifting standards," (Deleuze, 1992, p. 12) and audiences constitute the "affective super-addressee," (Deleuze, 1992, pp. 85–114) a notion skillfully drawn from Williams's (1997) "structures of feeling," Anderson's (2012) "affective conditions," and Bakhtin's (1986) idea of the "superaddressee,"—someone whose response is presumed distantly, either in a metaphysical or historical sense. In Fong's study, the "affective superaddressee" is the audiences whom producers imagine as constantly disapproving rather than desiring. It is this "anticipatory paranoia" (Fong, 2022, p. 18) about audiences which underlies the implication in the book title, "Performing Fear." Firstly, producers perform fear by avoiding risks, creating moralistic binaries, and eliminating ambiguity in programming. While inconsistencies and incoherencies exist, they routinely contribute to "assemblages of performances through which

state-sponsored ideas about Singapore” emerge through the “lenses of fear.” (Fong, 2022, p. 179) Secondly, fear is also performed through the “affective meaning-making practices of producers that conjure and sustain audiences as anxiety-inducing.” (Fong, 2022, p. 20) These fears are underscored by the actuality of viewer complaints, which can result in monetary fines and internal disciplinary action, thereby highlighting the affective impact of audiences on producers.

Chapter 1, “Fear and the Fragility of Myths” describes the sociopolitical context of where her study takes place. Following Laclau’s theorization of “dislocations” and “antagonism,” Fong investigates the myths of capitalism, meritocracy, and divide-and-rule multiculturalism in Singaporean nationhood based on diverse primary and secondary sources. She argues that the recurring articulation of Singapore’s socioeconomic “vulnerability” shapes the work of producers, who grapple with the lack of media pluralism and the duality of state-owned enterprise MediaCorp—a free-to-air monopoly—which commissions their work but withholds viewership ratings from them. Producers are not only constantly torn between fulfilling Public Service Broadcasting goals and achieving commercial profit but are also drawn into the vicious cycle of imagining audiences as “mass” alongside their multiple roles—whether as propaganda targets, ratings, consumers, fans, or complainants.

In Chapter 2, “Playing Games with Heritage,” Fong discusses her observations of the making of state-funded game shows on national heritage. Noting how producers ignore complexities constituted by class, taste, gender, and ethnicity in heritage issues, she witnesses the opting for “safe” quiz questions based on official accounts to circumvent controversy. Comically, to conceal dislocations in Singaporean society, producers transfer viewer attention to game participants performing speciousness and intergenerational emotional bonds, and by staging meritocracy based on the appearance of fair competition through excluding footage on contestants receiving help by non-participants.

The production of a cybercrime drama makes another interesting case study in Chapter 3, “Drama Writing and Audiences as Affective Superaddressee,” which details how producers embody multiple roles as creator and censor for MediaCorp and the government regulatory body Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA). Sitting in for male-dominated scriptwriting meetings, Fong observes their gender prejudices on casting and fears of not representing the police positively. They also express anxieties about how to clearly distinguish between “heroic and villainous characters” based on IMDA’s programming code (Fong, 2022, p. 93). These discussions are often sidesplitting for the reader, as producers actually worry that audiences believe the depiction of crime on screen makes it acceptable in real life. Gender discrimination extends beyond producers’ assumptions about the screen roles men and women should play to the value of the woman researcher/intern’s opinion in the production room: while the men ask Fong for her views, they also immediately interrupt and talk over her. Rather than critically belabor gender inequality, she describes these experiences unaffectedly. This could be understood as her adopted writing style to create an “interpretive space” (Fong, 2022, p. 30) for readers to judge for themselves, as mentioned in the introductory chapter.

Chapter 4 “Producing Art, Producing Difference” also demonstrates how “anticipatory paranoia” continues to dominate production through the case of an ambitious Singapore English-language director aspiring to introduce new perspectives on art. The examined drama features a schoolboy’s dreams of becoming a graffiti artist, a contentious artform, as graffiti artists are often arrested under the Vandalism Act which purports to uphold social order. Following countless exhausting meetings with Chinese-language counterparts in the team, a school principal, and a graffiti artist over what constitutes good citizenry on screen, the director’s ambition of challenging “Chinese viewers” as expressed in his self-metaphor to “swing his dick around” shrivels. Initially he was adamant that the plot should be amended for a supposed pitfall, but the executive producer convinces him to back down with the countersuggestion that “Chinese viewers” are not intellectually capable enough to spot the issue. This results in the persistence of uninspiring creative norms and tired cultural myths based on fears surrounding cultural and linguistic difference, not least the absurdity of the final decision to avoid contention by depicting commissioned art instead of spontaneous graffiti.

As someone observing and participating in productions, the ethnographer repeatedly records the affective exhaustion of television professionals (including herself) from constantly worrying about audiences’ policing power operating contingently and unpredictably in a Deleuzian fashion. Insidiously, in Chapter 5, “Making Reality TV: The Pleasures of Disciplining in a Control Society,” Fong candidly professes the “comfort” she experiences from adopting Foucauldian surveillance and disciplinary regimes in a reality singing competition. Being able to exercise control over contestants in a panopticon set-up through surveillance offered more predictability and even pleasure compared to the unpredictability of dealing with viewers’ complaints. For this program, IMDA outsourced censorship responsibilities to a private media company, which engaged part-time, hourly-paid student interns who were advised to “just censor” when in doubt (Fong, 2022, pp. 149–50). More amusingly, instead of capturing “money shots” of emotional outbursts and dramatic spontaneity typically found in reality TV, producers engaged a vocal teacher to enforce military-style discipline on set, which served to restrain individual expression and cultivate group conformity. In place of emptied-out spectacle, the real entertainment resides in Fong’s account of the production chaos and producers’ pleasure in their surveillance and discipline of contestants. All possibilities for rupturing social imaginaries have hence been eliminated, culminating in the perpetuation of authoritarian resilience. This is an absorbing and sophisticated media ethnography on affect, which is no easy feat for any researcher to undertake. Moving dexterously across fieldwork data, analysis, and theories, Fong demonstrates strong self-reflexivity in her identity as ethnographer and participant throughout. Although this fieldwork is emotionally taxing, Fong’s empathy is reserved in her “interpretative space” for producers as she suspends judgements on their responses to “anticipatory paranoia.” While the state has long attributed “fear” to the unverifiable “conservative” Singapore “majority” to shift its own political intolerance to “the people,” (Fong, 2022, p. 56) the book notes how media authorities are now subject to this “audience problematic” too (Fong, 2022, p. 184). Responding to increasingly overwhelming viewer complaints to government departments, decreasing

viewership, and audience fragmentation in recent years, MediaCorp and IMDA have implemented industrial changes, including initiatives to chase ever elusive “audiences.” In an era of social media and video on-demand, this is indeed a challenge for many illiberal states. The many critical questions raised in this exciting monograph will greatly inspire scholars, lecturers, and students working in media studies, cultural studies, television studies, audience studies, censorship studies, production studies, and media anthropology.

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