
Nicholas Mirzoeff’s most recent publication, The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality, is an extensive interdisciplinary project that develops an alternative paradigm within which to interpret history and the history of visual culture. In critically evaluating modern visuality as conceived by Thomas Carlyle, Mirzoeff identifies visuality as fundamental in the historicisation and hegemony of the ‘West’, as distinguished from its Others. Presented as a specifically de-colonial genealogy of the resistance to visuality, The Right to Look answers hegemonic visuality with a countervisuality that seeks to visualise a space from which the historically subaltern might speak and, importantly, criticise hegemonic authority. According to Mirzoeff, countervisuality opposes authority’s dismissive imperative, ‘Move on, there’s nothing to see here’, and claims autonomy to challenge the hegemonic nomination of what is visible and to whom.

The Right to Look masterfully engages with a wide range of visual artefacts that have disseminated visuality and countervisuality in modernity. These artefacts are manifestations of what Mirzoeff dubs the plantation, imperial and military-industrial complexes of visuality. Each complex visualises authority in a three-tier strategy of classification, segregation and aestheticization. Notably, the intensification of each complex as simultaneously the consequence and subsequent motivator of coloniality’s entanglements is further explicated. Within this discursive context, countervisuality is considered and shown to oppose visuality with a strategy comprising education, democracy and sustainability. Accordingly, a counterhistory is indeed realised in Mirzoeff’s de-colonial genealogy.

Chapter one traces the establishment of the regime of oversight within the transatlantic slave triangle and the claim to autonomy made by the enslaved in the Saint-Domingue revolt. The regime legitimised the overseer’s authority using mapping, natural history and the force of law. Although an intensification of slavery followed the revolt, Mirzoeff claims a new imaginary in counterpoint to visuality was made possible. The regime of liberty with its modern imaginaries of dissensus is then discussed in chapters two and four. In counterpoint to monarchy and plantation slavery, liberty was visualised in the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen’ and embodied in the vernacular hero. However, the vernacular hero’s desire to create a nation-state and the persistent use of violence marked his failure to embody the people’s desire for local sustainability. Mirzoeff contends that this conflict within the revolution made counterrevolutionary visuality possible.

The intensified plantation complex met with resistance in the abolitionist and decolonialist hero’s claims for the rights to look and to be seen, as demonstrated in abolition realism. The argument put forth is necessarily complex and methodically explores the entanglements between the plantation and the metropole. Mirzoeff’s investigation successfully reasons that the revolutionary imaginary produced a countervisuality that contested the real. Usually omitted from hegemonic accounts of modernity, a comprehensive examination of the key confrontations of realisms is included. In Mirzoeff’s view, abolition realism countered visuality by representing the people’s revolution as art, which had the important effect of sustaining abolition.

Chapters three and five consider the imperial complex and its visualisation of authority in Carlyle’s Hero and James Anthony Froude’s new Caesar. The military-general was able to visualise the entire battlefield and imagine History as it unravelled. Carlyle’s view that the Hero could arrest the chaos of modernity through governance of the formerly enslaved embroiled in conflict effectively validated
imperial expansion. Furthermore, supported by anthropological studies that visualised culture and history as a continuum in space-time, imperial visuality reified the racialised hierarchy and separated the ‘civilised’, Anglo-Saxon coloniser from the ‘primitive’, indigenous colonised. It is telling of countervisualities’ victories, Mirzoeff comments, that imperial visuality should visualise itself as engaged in a war for the real, where hegemonic reality was permanently threatened.

Evading the techniques of imperial visuality, indigenous and proletarian countervisualities were assembled. Within Mirzoeff’s framework, countervisuality’s momentous success here would inevitably intensify imperial visuality and produce fascist visuality. The new Caesar’s panoramic vision and exaltation demanded his segregation from the mass, already segregated by the imperialist racial hierarchy. Mirzoeff argues that unlike Carlyle’s Hero, the fascist Leader required the mass to make him visible while they remained invisible. Genocidal violence was thus understood as the Leader’s artistic work to render racialised Others permanently invisible, thereby legitimising his absolute authority.

Antifascist countervisuality’s politicisation of art through the filmic lens is analysed in chapter six. Whereas fascist visuality’s ordering and enforced invisibility negated the right to look, antifascist countervisuality (re)claimed the metaphorical South as the base of resistance from which the subaltern classes could visualise an alternative reality. By depicting the violence of fascist visuality, antifascist neorealism – manifested as films such as The Battle of Algiers and J’ai Huit Ans – sought to deconstruct aestheticised segregation. The concluding chapter emphasises the impact of the prolonged conflict of Algerian decolonisation on the emergence and intensification of the military-industrial complex. Post-panoptic visuality wields the image as a tactical weapon and visualises the crisis of a global insurgency that legitimises permanent surveillance of populations and regulates the flow of information. Furthermore, technological mediation of the visualised battlefield disallows any expression of a countervisuality in visuality’s terms.

Crucially, instead of Nazi Europe, Mirzoeff focuses on Algeria as the site of the confrontation between fascist visuality and anti-colonial countervisuality. In this way, the author not only pursues a counterhistory of visuality; rather, with earlier reinterpretations of history to include countervisuality, The Right to Look seems to align itself with the decolonial genealogy first envisaged by the radical proponents of the general strike. Perhaps Mirzoeff’s stirring declaration on page one which resonates with Derridaen desire – ‘I want to claim the right to look’ – triumphs here. Viewed as a potential revolutionary product, the deployment of first- and second-person pronouns in recounting the 2011 transformation of Tahrir Square into a revolutionary space, and in closing, might suggest a desire to identify with the reader. This rhetorical device is possibly aimed at implicating the reader as sharing Mirzoeff’s critical awareness of the constructedness of reality. Such awareness would suggest the possibility for an alternative imaginary that counters post-panoptic visuality.

The decolonial genealogy in The Right to Look confines its study to Anglo-French-American coloniality and thus, as the author acknowledges, excludes the confrontations of realisms and the imaginary of decolonisation in South and East Asia. Apart from this qualification, The Right to Look is an intensely stimulating read with a well-referenced, meticulous analysis conducted to support the arguments put forth. The Right to Look is further appended with an extensive bibliography, and includes eleven colour plates, fifty-nine figures and three counterpoint studies. Especially commendable is the author’s consistent modelling of the theoretical methodology that substantiates his interpretive paradigm. Yet, due to the inherent complexities of the subject, the discursive structure of The Right to Look is unavoidably dense and as a comparative decolonial framework, the text assumes vast prior knowledge of its reader. The text, however, is highly recommended for a target audience of postgraduates and academic professionals interested in visual culture, structures of power and decolonisation.

Charmaine Fernandez, The University of Western Australia