



The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality

Nicholas Mirzoeff

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In *The Right to Look*, Nicholas Mirzoeff develops a comparative decolonial framework for visual culture studies, the field that he helped to create and shape. Casting modernity as an ongoing contest between visuality and countervisuality, or “the right to look,” he explains how visuality sutures authority to power and renders the association natural. An early-nineteenth-century concept, meaning the visualization of history, visuality has been central to the legitimization of Western hegemony. Mirzoeff identifies three “complexes of visuality”—plantation slavery, imperialism, and the present-day military-industrial complex—and explains how, within each, power is made to seem self-evident through techniques of classification, separation, and aestheticization. At the same time, he shows how each complex of visuality has been countered—by the enslaved, the colonized, and opponents of war, all of whom assert autonomy from authority by claiming the right to look. Encompassing the Caribbean plantation and the Haitian revolution, anticolonialism in the South Pacific, antifascism in Italy and Algeria, and the contemporary global counterinsurgency, *The Right to Look* is a work of astonishing geographic, temporal, and conceptual reach.

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