Book Review

Review of Kapadia, Ronak K. 2019. *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 334 pp. Paperback. US\$28.95. ISBN: 9781478004011.

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Ronak Kapadia's *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* is a fascinating and innovative book that engages with and amplifies the challenges to US (neo-)colonial militarism developed in the work of a range of diasporic visual artists, primarily based in the US. The artists and works under consideration are recent, and both they and Kapadia's book offer novel engagements with areas that have been mined extensively in the years following September 11, 2001: racist backlash; anti-terror legislation and action; endless war; the entrenchment of surveillance and repression targeting a range of communities, particularly Muslims; drone warfare; and the expansion of new military and security regimes. One key virtue of the book, however, is that the "forever war" Kapadia evokes is not simply the post-9/11 "long war" promised by Donald Rumsfeld in 2006. Instead, he argues that the forever war extends back across the twentieth century to the colonial wars of dispossession on which the US was founded; this long perspective gives his work a depth that is often lost in writing that reads 9/11 as a caesura. Building on this foundation, his book offers a profound reconceptualization of the visual practices of US military and security apparatuses through the work of a range of diasporic visual artists.

Kapadia's book is beautifully constructed not only intellectually in the breadth and depth of its analyses but also physically: it is richly illustrated with many of the artistic works that he discusses, a number in full-colour plates. These illustrations are crucial to the book's production of meaning, enabling us to feel deeply the "complex interplay between visibility and invisibility and between beauty and terror" (5) that structure the book. This framing situates the book at the productive but under-researched border of visual culture and surveillance studies. As Kapadia details in the lengthy introduction, surveillance practices, and especially forms of visual surveillance, are inextricably bound up with aesthetic questions. Whether in military surveillance, drone warfare, border security, or policing, surveillance regimes themselves are built around aesthetic principles, in particular as they elaborate and extend racist logics. The diasporic visual art under consideration thus offers more than simply a critique from outside; it in fact navigates and seeks to destabilize or queer the very terrain on which US surveillance and military systems operate.

The introduction is notable for its careful attention to specific changes in US military practice, particularly the turn to counterinsurgency and surveillance-based strategy associated with the revolution in military affairs and notions of asymmetrical warfare. This provides the platform for Kapadia's theorization of an

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insurgent aesthetics, “an alternative articulation of minoritarian knowledge produced by those populations and their diasporic kin most devastated by the effects of the homeland security state and its forever wars” (11). This passage captures some of the tensions that animate the book, which turns on the particular role played by US- and UK-based diasporic artists. They occupy an unstable place in this global dynamic: on one hand, they are caught up in the networks of racist surveillance and repression running through the domestic and transnational logics of the forever war, but on the other hand, they are shielded from some of the more direct forms of military violence experienced by those living in Iraq, the Af-Pak region (the area straddling the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan), Yemen, Palestine, and elsewhere. Both Kapadia and the artists themselves are profoundly aware of the tensions that their position produces, with their collective work seeking to use this positionality to crack open the ostensibly seamless logic of the American surveillance and military state. Indeed, Kapadia insists, one of the chief contributions of these artists lies precisely in dispelling the ideology of inevitability that surrounds this state logic, showing it up as contradictory, partial, and myopic.

The first chapter expands on the context-setting of the introduction by looking in depth at the American prosecution of drone warfare outside the US, the visual registers in which that counterinsurgency warfare operates, and the ways in which it is entangled in domestic forms of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence. Kapadia's work here echoes that of a number of recent studies of drone warfare in highlighting the violence implicit in the drone's god's-eye view and the way in which that perspective mobilizes an inherently orientalist “view from above.” Central to his analysis is the “double-tap” strike, the practice of repeatedly firing on the same location, thus killing people coming to the aid of those killed or wounded in the initial drone strike. Especially compelling here is Kapadia's emphasis on the way in which these strikes erode practices of care and community organization, violently and deliberately breaking the bonds of social solidarity. Responding to the “cultural turn” in military strategy that was exemplified by the experimental Human Terrain System program, which sought to incorporate cultural interpretation into warfighting and occupation strategies, Kapadia's work foregrounds the extent to which drone warfare is embedded in much larger networks of surveillance, militarized visual cultures, and violence.

Chapters two, three, and four take us into the artistic responses to drone warfare and surveillance practices, the heart of Kapadia's book. Chapter two focuses on the Iraqi-born American artist Wafaa Bilal, whose visceral and deeply uncomfortable work has become one of the touchstones in recent studies of surveillance art. Here Kapadia draws out the implications of several of Bilal's major projects, including *3rdi* (2010–2011), *Domestic Tension* (2007), and *...And Counting* (2010), and takes us on a brief detour through elin o'Hara slavick's series *Protesting Cartography or Places the United States Has Bombed* (1998–2005). Bilal's and slavick's works, Kapadia suggests, “produce a queer calculus of forever war” (95) that troubles the lines of visibility and invisibility enabling imperialist violence. This notion of a “queer calculus” runs through the book as a whole, marking the moments of “wildness” (a term drawn from Jack Halberstam's work), where artists manage to disrupt militarist and security logics. Bilal's work is an especially visceral instance of a broader tendency to foreground the bodily impacts of war in these queer works. Bilal's own body becomes the stage on which violence is (re)enacted and the viewer/participant is forced to confront their own differentiated implication in these logics. Crucially, though, Kapadia stresses that Bilal's works make visible the fact that “there is nothing precise or expert about US forever wars, and this impression of wartime violence leads to a possible methodology of resistance for the dispossessed” (100).

Chapter three turns to the US, and to a number of New York-based artists and collectives whose work traces the logics of (in)visibility in the domestic context. They deploy “warm data,” which Kapadia describes as “a conceptual art strategy and feminist methodology to conjure the violent absences and haunted abjections in carceral archives of US military detention” (107). At issue in these works are the redacted documents, secret files, and disappeared people of the post-9/11 security state, which has predominantly targeted Arab, Muslim, and South Asian people. Again, Kapadia is careful to stress that these developments are not novel but rooted in much longer histories. At the heart of the chapter, and of the artworks under discussion, is a powerful sense of the ways in which archival and classifying practices enable this supposed war on terror. Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh's web project *How Do You See the Disappeared? A Warm Database*

(2004–present) provides Kapadia with the notion of warm data. The project seeks to challenge the “cold” assemblages of surveillance documents that make up the archives of the US security state, a perspective developed through painstaking engagement with those archives in Ghani’s *The Trespassers* (2011), Rajkamal Kahlon’s *Did You Kiss the Dead Body* (2009–2012), the Visible Collective’s *Disappeared in America* (2004–2010), and other works.

The fourth chapter of *Insurgent Aesthetics* represents Kapadia’s one detour out of the US via the work of the London-based Palestinian visual artist Larissa Sansour. The chapter emphasizes both the common aspects of US and Israeli security state practices and the specificities of Israeli settler-colonialism. Many of Sansour’s short films and photos create alternative worlds, science fiction visions of a luxurious Palestinian separate state that invite us “to reach toward an elsewhere of Palestinian freedom unbridled by the strictures of settler security states” (157). Hers is an architectural Arabfuturism with affinities to Afro- and Indigenous-futurisms, but while works like *Nation Estate* (2012) make space for a vision of Palestinians as agents and creators of a technologically rich world, they also retain a strong dystopian sense of the impossibility of justice in the context of asymmetrical violence and a settler-colonial surveillance and security state. Along with many of the other artists discussed in the book, Sansour’s insurgent aesthetics opens up possibilities “of escape, of being illegible, of missing in action, perhaps of being unreadable even by the super-panoptic gaze of global security states as they try to reach up ‘all the way to Heaven’” (185).

It is this focus on the complex politics of (in)visibility and (il)legibility that makes Kapadia’s argument especially compelling for surveillance scholars. The artworks that he brings together challenge the complacent ideologies of the security state, making visible the extent to which their dreams of a totalizing vision are elaborate fictions, albeit fictions with exceptionally real and deadly implications. The diasporic artist, Kapadia argues, is well placed to navigate the tensions and make visible the impacts of the surveillance state. The obvious critique here is that such an approach risks again displacing the voices of those living in Palestine, Afghanistan, or Yemen, a risk that Kapadia acknowledges and engages productively with. While bringing in some artists based outside the US, this is very much an American-centred book, an accounting for the potentials and limitations of an insurgent aesthetic erupting within the diasporic heart of a state whose projections of militarized power enmesh the globe.

The great virtue of Kapadia’s book is its restless scope, its desire to read the current “forever war” in relation to the long histories of colonial occupation and war, and to capture its densely global reach. This sometimes (and necessarily, perhaps) leads to a glossing over of historical specificities, but in an often presentist field, the wider view and the sense of historical continuity is extremely valuable. What is perhaps most important about the book is its insistence that art does not only offer critical perspectives on surveillance and securitization but also brings out the extent to which surveillance practices are themselves inextricably grounded in visual and aesthetic practices. Kapadia’s work is thus an important contribution to the small but growing attention being paid to art and visual culture in surveillance studies, prompting us to rethink relations of visibility and invisibility, the role of classification and archiving, and the bodily dimensions and impacts of surveillance practices and military violence.