The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality, written by Nicholas Mirzoeff, is a critically committed and historically extensive undertaking, clearly written as an intervention into the field of visual culture studies. Treating visual culture as a dynamic and constitutive element in social and political life, the text crosses multiple disciplinary borders, moving between post-colonial theory, art history, media studies, political theory, and contemporary social thought. One of its overarching aims is to contribute to shifting the field of visual culture into the domain of ‘weighty issues’ through the deployment of a comparative decolonial genealogy of visuality. While readers of this journal are no strangers to weighty issues, the broad conceptual framework and comparative use of historical materials that guide Mirzoeff’s text offers a potentially rich and challenging resource for surveillance scholarship.

The Right to Look proceeds from the assumption that the present scenes of global counterinsurgency and post-panoptic visuality—in which any one of us can become a suspect at any time, while life and death are meted out in ‘other’ places in the names of freedom, democracy, and the ‘heroic’ overcoming of danger and terrorism—retain traces of 17th-18th century slavery and 19th-20th century colonial imperialist practices. Beginning from late 17th century Atlantic plantation slavery, the narrative moves from British imperialism into European fascism; it ends in the present period of counterinsurgency, identified as a militarized ‘necropolitics,’ with the US at the helm. Mirzoeff tells his reader in the preface that the book was partly inspired by the quandary left by his previous work on global visual culture and the Iraq ‘war’: how could the disturbing and prolific war imagery, including the shocking images of detainee torture at the hands of US military at Abu Ghraib, have had so little political impact (at least in the context of US electoral politics)? Drawing upon a rich variety of visual and textual materials, Mirzoeff addresses such a question, implicitly, by exploring the multiple ways in which Western imperial power has been envisioned, in every sense of the term, and continues to be rendered authoritative across time and place. An integral part of this story is how such power has also been resisted and radically transformed by the revolutionary re-imaginings and creative re-orderings of subalterns. The modern imaginary, Mirzoeff argues, was formed at the point in which “the enslaved and their allies … visualized themselves as making history” (p. 79), renaming themselves “the people.” Since the time of the Haitian revolution, whose social and political reverberations are discussed in vivid detail, visuality has been haunted (and motivated) by the spectre of emancipation and, more broadly, by “the fear of (its) undoing” (p. 276). Modernity is thus formulated as an ongoing and unfinished confrontation between visuality and countervisuality (or what Mirzoeff calls, ‘the right to look’).

From the outset, Mirzoeff emphasizes that neither ‘visuality’ nor ‘countervisuality’ are about visual perception per se; nevertheless, these are slippery terms and his somewhat enigmatic designation of the latter as ‘the right to look’ invariably contributes to some conceptual confusion along the way. The reader
is asked to consider visuality in relation to its (original) 19th century designation by the Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle. Visuality, which refers most generally to “the visualization of history” (p. 2), includes both imaginative/interpretive and material dimensions. As it is developed through the use of diverse examples, from maps and missionary expeditions, to GPS coordinates and ‘leaked’ execution videos, “violence is the standard operating procedure of visuality” (p. 292). Its first significant materialization was the slave plantation, surveilled by the ‘ overseer,’ who stood as proxy for the sovereign, rod in hand. What is at stake is the ability to *assemble a visualization* and render it authoritative, over and against any claims of autonomy on the part of those subjected to its material effects.

The chapters are organized around what Mirzoeff identifies to be three major and distinctive modalities, or ‘complexes’, of visuality: the plantation complex, the imperial complex, and the military-industrial complex. As he convincingly argues, each is in some degree active in the present world, and each is composed of a distinctive, albeit intersecting, configuration of three techniques: classification, social organization, and aestheticization. Together, these analytically distinguishable moments work to naturalize relations of domination and subordination, aiming to render the association between power and authority neutral. (A comical example is the “outing” of drones used in today’s military “as environmentally friendly, relative to ground operations” [303]). Each complex, the author further argues, takes on both a ‘standard’ and ‘intensified’ form. Within this comparatively useful typology, for instance, 21st century global counterinsurgency can be seen as the intensified form of the military industrial complex.

Written as a counterhistory, *The Right to Look* is also, importantly, a story of resistance, envisioned from the point of view of subalterns and the “places of visuality’s application” (p. 8), in the fields, in the streets, and in the skies. Mirzoeff names as ‘countervisuality’ the active refusal of visuality’s claims to authority. Empowered by conceptions and images of decentralized collective agency and the irreducible autonomy of all persons, countervisuality has taken many shapes and forms throughout history, from slave revolts and general strikes, to gestures of refusal, public displays, art forms, and even parody. Its creative and visualized forms, Mirzoeff argues, can be seen to be doing revolutionary work. Caricatures, engravings, posters, revolutionary paintings, and anti-imperialist/anti-fascist films (e.g. Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *the Battle of Algiers*, to which Mirzoeff devotes considerable attention) are thus theorized as objects in struggle; rather than being viewed as mere illustrations, such forms can be seen as attempts to bring into view, and into being, alternative ways of imagining and modes of becoming, that aim to challenge and undo authoritative regimes. At other times, Mirzoeff interprets visual materials as offering evidence of the lived embodiment of such alternatives. For example, responding to group portraits taken of the Parisian Communards by unknown photographers, he marvels at the conviction intimated by their poses “that history was on their side, no matter what happened in the short term” (p. 187); rather than reading these as images of death foretold, they are regarded as visual traces of a transformative relation to the everyday, whose power appears in the refusal to authorize authority.

Overall, the seven major chapters are dense and multi-faceted, punctuated by meticulously researched examples and insightful interpretations of historical instances and visual materials to which no review could possibly do justice. The text is supplemented with a useful visual guide (p. 35-47), along with numerous illustrations, a series of plates, and extended examples of what Mirzoeff considers to be exemplary instances of countervisuality. The diverse array of examples he engages to flesh out, and think through, the ongoing contest between visuality and countervisuality within the broad context of modernity and, specifically, Western imperialism, is one of the book’s many virtues. However, the relative absence of detailed instances of resistance or collective movements against authoritarian visuality in the contemporary period is somewhat disappointing and inconsistent with the guiding orientation of the text. For example, it would seem to me that the imaginative and material manifestations of the anti-globalization/anti-capitalist movement of the early 2000’s, inspired by the slogan ‘*Another World is Possible,*’ would offer a strong example of countervisuality.
While *The Right to Look* is above all a scholarly examination, it can also be read as a subtle call to action, grounded in the possibilities that its author suggests are before us, in what he interestingly identifies to be a time of “paradoxical emergency for authoritarian visuality” (p. 308). Mirzoeff’s own political commitments, in particular his solidarity with the oppressed, subjected, and rebellious, are made amply available throughout. In the end he suggests that now is a time of potential transformation; making optimistic reference to Tahrir Square and seeming to have anticipated something like the Occupy movement, he proposes that the tools of “democratization, education, and sustainability” and a new “praxis of the everyday” (p. 309) are before us. While it is hopeful, the ending is also mildly unsatisfactory in that Mirzoeff does not develop what such a praxis might look like today, in both senses of the term. Perhaps this is for the best, as it is for readers to imagine and envision what it might mean to stop playing second move to visuality, and create new futures out of this present world in which we all may already be suspects, anyway.