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Nicholas Mirzoeff, **White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 339 pp., $29.95 (hardcover).

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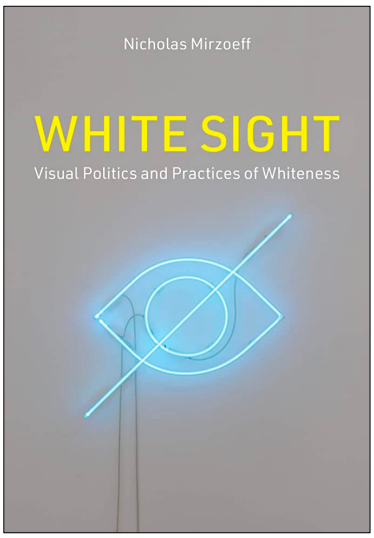

Nicholas Mirzoeff's ***White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness*** thoughtfully illustrates an important truth of our history, in two overall movements: first, how whiteness was carefully and deliberately *built* as an optical and physical "infrastructure" of American (and British) society; and second, that those constructions continue to inflect and affect—and refract, to use the author's term—our sociopolitical reality.[1] From the imperial and colonial origins of the visual aesthetics that constitute "white sight"—an effective extension of his previous discussions in *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Mirzoeff, 2011)—to the physical construction of statues as aesthetic "infrastructure" of whiteness, Mirzoeff leaves us with a powerful set of analytic frameworks for understanding both "visual politics" and how they manifest as "practices of whiteness." In fact, his book takes us all the way to the entitled White backlash that fueled the insurrection on January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol building—and to potential modes of resistance to it.

White Sight is an important contribution to the field of whiteness studies, both for its orientation toward visual culture in particular and for its ambitious—but also carefully calibrated and paced—historical scope. With key images illustratively placed throughout the book, Mirzoeff describes in detail an ongoing educational (disciplinary) project to inculcate a generalized sense of monohumanist (a concept he, helpfully, borrows from Sylvia Wynter, 2015) white superiority in Anglo-European, settler-colonial contexts. This book rigorously examines a huge range of artistic works and scholarly practices ("an unlikely coalition of philosophers, art historians, and natural historians") to convey how, over time and "by condensation, whiteness became beauty" (p. 68). Mirzoeff observes that, "In response to challenges of abolition and revolution from the late eighteenth century to Emancipation in the United States, whiteness invented aesthetics," as a preservationist imperative that he ultimately traces right up the steps and inside the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021 (p. 68). The construction of the scaffolding of white supremacy was

[1] While I capitalize "Black" and "Blackness" in this text, I have intentionally left "white" and "whiteness" uncapitalized. This does not conform to the APA style guide, but is a practice that is well-explained in the Associated Press. As they explain, this discrepancy is justified as a deliberate writerly choice for a few reasons, including the fact that "white people generally do not share the same history and culture, or the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color," and furthermore, that "capitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" (Associated Press, 2020, paras. 4–5).

always a response to a crisis to preserve the superior status of Anglo-European people (most often, as the book shows us, with the aid of art, especially statues).

Mirzoeff also effectively integrates analyses he has been conducting in parallel in his writing for many years—his political ecological interrogations of visual culture (see his "Visualizing the Anthropocene," 2014) and his broader project of tracking and tracing settler-colonial visuality. The chapter titled "The Natural History of White Supremacy" expertly steers us through the many entanglements between museums, 18th- and 19th-century scientific communities (especially the proliferation of the study of eugenics), and the philosophical commentary that came to hugely inform our own cultural unconscious—such as Herbert Spencer's genocidal (distortive) formulation of hierarchies of human beings as "survival of the fittest" (pp. 96–97). Discussing taxidermy, museums, and photography (and specifically that of John James Audubon), Mirzoeff offers readers a clearer picture of how fixing the supremacy of whiteness firmly in place had depended upon a whole range of practices that transcended consideration of the human as such. Perhaps Mirzoeff's discussion of birds—Audubon's and others, to which he returns in his conclusion to speculate on the revolutionary power of the "murmuration"—is among the most compelling and nuanced in the book. The bird is revealed to be a complex figure, its multiple states indexing freedom, extractive commodity capitalism, and settler-colonial fixation all at once (pp. 100–101).

Discussions of cultural phenomena—artistic practices ranging from statuary to bird taxidermy—are continually and effectively explicated as functions of the colonial and imperial machinations that developed into what Mirzoeff calls "white sight . . . as a collective psychic projection onto reality from the cultural unconscious" (p. 176). Thankfully, the book pushes beyond critique to showcase iterations of resistance to these visual practices that came to coalesce as "a decolonial consensus among African, Caribbean, and Jewish thinkers," a useful "counterhistory" to connect with present-day struggles (p. 181). Mirzoeff guides us through the "decolonial strike" against statues that began in 1962 and continues to today, where imperial statues were attacked and removed from public spaces from Algeria to Angola. He picks up this thread in the 2015 South African "Rhodes Must Fall" movement, which, he argues compellingly, "set in motion a possible undoing of white reality" (p. 204). Mirzoeff then effectively identifies the historical ties between those events and the subsequent widespread resistance to propagandistic confederate statuary that litters southern America, beginning in Charlottesville, Virginia, of all places. We are left with a deep understanding of the real stakes of opposing monuments as aesthetic "infrastructure" of whiteness; as he notes, this infrastructure had "placed those designated 'non-white' on notice that white supremacy was always watching" (p. 221).

White Sight makes the critical stakes of understanding racialized aesthetics very clear: Mirzoeff, citing Katherine McKittrick (2013), observes that, absent persistent scholarly work to unpack the operations of this cultural power, along with fearless activism in the form of a "general strike," white supremacy will constrain us to its "plantation futures." If there is a place this book leaves readers wanting to understand better, it is the many interfaces between activism, artistic practices, and scholarship that have the potential to alter this future. Mirzoeff does an excellent job motivating us to a new degree of scholarly militancy—to refuse to compromise in face of the possibility of neo-Confederacy in the United States—but more could be said about the sorts of collaborations and critical spaces (many of them digital spaces) that led to this very book. In his acknowledgments Mirzoeff refers to opportunities he had, despite and because of the pandemic,

to contemplate these histories and futural possibilities with others in groups like the Testing Assembly and the Center for Convivial Research and Autonomy. Reading *White Sight*, one cannot help but want to participate in these sorts of collaborations, and hopefully Mirzoeff will pick up this thread and fill an organizing role in projects to come. This book has the potential to instigate new assemblies, alliances, coalitions, and platforms that transcend academia or the art world, if we take its invitation to strike seriously.

Ultimately, Mirzoeff's powerful visual cultural history generates a new awareness in readers that George Yancy (2012) calls "flipping the script" on whiteness—by racializing otherwise naturalized and universalized white, Eurocentric art historical practices, we come to understand that they are not benign and should not be taken for granted. Instead, we get a strong profile of a whiteness that is always watching and always ready to strike back if necessary to re-fix its own position of dominance. Such is the case in the recent politicization of education (and historical knowledge itself) in the state of Florida with Governor Ron DeSantis's Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act (or "Stop WOKE Act"). The law attempts to ban the representation of "moral superiority" of groups of people based on their race, sex, and so on—shielding patriarchal whiteness from critique at the level of morality itself (and seemingly a classic example of what most psychologists would call "projection"). This unfortunate law and the politics around it have already had a disruptive chilling effect on speech about race and racism throughout the state's education system. Mirzoeff would observe this as a key site of cultural disciplinarity, where whiteness and patriarchy—in the form of Governor DeSantis and his allies—seek to preserve their "plantation futures" against the potent forms of resistance rising to challenge white supremacy in our political present. Identifying white sight is a crucial first step toward understanding how we can perhaps contend with this powerful historical force, supporting a general strike against whiteness that our society sorely needs. With this dynamic account of persistent and resilient settler-colonial aesthetic control and powerful decolonial resistances to it, Nicholas Mirzoeff calls on us to assemble, to conference, in leaderless murmuration (think of birds vocalizing grievance, in revolt) so that we might, one day, return to "the past future that still awaits" (p. 259).

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