
Reviewed by Sa‘ed Atshan

Mainstream scholars of security would benefit tremendously from Ronak Kapadia’s *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War*. His critical perspective on the United States’ ongoing “war on terror” (since September 11, 2001) is important to understand the dangers of US/Israeli Empire on populations in the “Greater Middle East.” While some scholars would take issue with Kapadia’s characterization of US violence in this vast part of the world as “infinite” (10), “limitless” (21), and “barbaric” (33), the evidence Kapadia marshals on US and Israeli militarization and torture is compelling and devastating.

Kapadia connects the local and the global, recognizing the connection between domestic legislation and foreign policy, and between federal policing and global military power. He argues that police and the military are “two faces of the same system of global repression and racism” (73). *Insurgent Aesthetics* insists on the need to understand the affective politics of US imperial violence to unearth “intimate details of suffering and immiseration experienced by those anonymous detainees who are tortured, killed, or both during military detention” (143). Kapadia demonstrates that the sensorial life not only animates imperial violence as experienced by its victims, but also underscores the “insurgent aesthetic” practices of those who resist imperial logic.

The book illuminates these insurgent practices by featuring the cultural production of diasporic artistic workers who live in the heart of Western empire and produce forms of solidarity with communities in their respective nations of origin in the Middle Eastern, Muslim, or South Asia. Kapadia selects radical artist-activists who reflect how aesthetics can serve as alternative forms of knowledge and critique. Thus, a “queer calculus” emerges through the “alternative logic or system of reasoning produced by cultural workers” (24).

With Kapadia’s queer feminist approach in producing this “cultural archive of insurgent aesthetics” (25), he adopts a definition of queer theory that transcends gender and non-normative sexualities. He describes this as a queer feminist methodology, discerning how the racialized body reveals “a complex insurgency against

Sa‘ed Atshan is Assistant Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Swarthmore College
empire’s built sensorium” (190). Kapadia’s discussion of the work of Iraqi diaspora artist Wafaa Bilal is haunting. His artistic performances include the application of pain against his own body in order to shed light on the suffering of his family and people in Iraq. To channel their aggression against his body, he becomes the physical and psychological target for supporters of US violence, who are often motivated by Islamophobia, racism, and homophobia. Bilal articulates his hope that these individuals will ultimately reconsider their attitudes and practices. Kapadia critiques Bilal for not adopting enough of a robust and nuanced conceptualization of women in the latter’s analysis of gender. Yet this critique of Bilal’s representation of women was fleeting, and it would have been helpful had he developed it more deeply in the book. How would Bilal respond to this critique, I wonder?

It is particularly striking to follow Kapadia’s application of his theoretical framework and methodological approach to analyzing the remarkable cultural production of Palestinian diaspora artist and filmmaker Larissa Sansour. The author contextualizes Palestine as the “archetypical laboratory for experimenting with new technologies of global counterinsurgencies and asymmetric war-making” (41). He adds that US and Israeli imperial militarism is leading the securitization of aero-space more broadly. In Kapadia’s view, Sansour imagines Palestinians reaching the moon, thereby representing them as technological innovators of scientific modernity. Her work does not deny, nor render inevitable, the Israeli occupation. Sansour’s work moves beyond the gritty and objectifying realism of documentaries on Palestine. She states, “When you are constantly in a documentary, and portrayed as victims and the object of analysis, you realize the position of the analyzer actually has a lot of power” (169). Kapadia is commending Sansour’s work for providing an artistic counterinsurgency to securitization.

In sum, this is a brilliant book. Anyone who has experienced political violence can relate to the way that Kapadia captures the sensory experience of the effects of living under the “forever war” (1). This will resonate with many very deeply. Yet I appreciate that Kapadia did not leave it at that. He captures the sensory and affective forms of resistance that Arab and South Asian diaspora artists engage in, to process and represent the violence that their families have left behind. Kapadia considers the psychological effects on Palestinians who have to always endure being analyzed and articulates their powerful agency for a better future by the rendition of the imaginative analyzer.

The generosity of these artists and their solidarity with loved ones are deeply moving. Kapadia has done profound justice to the cultural workers that he features—and his book is a welcome contribution to knowledge production and a living example of what true intersectional scholarship looks like. This work will appeal to scholars of security studies, international relations, ethnic and cultural studies, history, and anthropology. With its analysis, insights, and many powerful images, Insurgent Aesthetics is itself aesthetically breathtakingly beautiful as a text—and insurgent.