# Asserting the Right to Look: Visuality, and Resistance in 2020 #EndSARS Movement

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**Abstract**
In October 2020, thousands of Nigeria youth took to the streets in one of the country's most significant uprisings in recent history. The #EndSARS protest, originally sparked by decades of police brutality, particularly at the hands of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), quickly evolved into a broader critique of state violence, corruption, and systemic erasure. This paper examines how the #EndSARS protest exemplifies what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the right to look," a political demand for visibility, recognition and agency in the face of state sanctioned visuality. Drawing on Mirzoeff's concepts of "visuality," "countervisuality," and the "right to look," I analyze a selection of protest images preserved in the digital archive of the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre, focusing on how they function as acts of countervisuality. Erwin Panopsky's method of analysis is used to unpack the symbolic and historical meanings of these works. Ultimately, this study shows that the protest was more than a demand for police reform but a radical act of visual reclamation by the Nigerian youth. The #EndSARS protest stems from a long history of resistance in postcolonial Nigeria. It follows the trajectory of earlier struggles but transforming them through global connections and digital media.
**Keywords:** EndSARS, Protest, Visuality, Countervisuality, Digital, Police, Brutality

## Introduction

In October 2020, young Nigerians filled the streets in a decentralized movement across the country demanding the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigerian Police Force notorious for brutality, extortion, and extrajudicial killings. While the initial call was to "End SARS," the protest quickly evolved into a broader critique of governance, corruption, and impunity. Usman et al suggests that "The scale and spontaneity of the protest demonstrated a new mode of citizen mobilization, driven largely by decentralized youth networks, facilitated by digital platforms, which rendered traditional hierarchies of protest obsolete" (3). Beyond the chants, placards, and sit-ins, the protest unfolded with bodies in public spaces, digital illustrations, viral images and videos, and live streams. These visuals not only documented injustice but demanded to be seen, forcing the state and the world to reckon with their presence.

This paper interrogates the visual politics of the #EndSARS protest through the theoretical lens of Nicholas Mirzoeff's concepts of "visuality," the "right to look," and "countervisuality." In his seminal work *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (2011), Mirzoeff argues that visuality is not merely a way of seeing but a technology of authority that disciplines how subjects are made visible and how space is ordered (7). To "look back," in this framework, is to contest the terms of visibility imposed by power. Drawing from this insight, I examine how Nigeria youth in the #EndSARS movement mobilized visual strategies to resist objectification, assert their political agency, and reclaim the right to define how they are seen.

I analyze selected images from *Ar(c)tivism* a digital visual archive hosted by the Centre for Socially Engaged Theatre (C-SET) at the University of Regina, Canada. This collection includes

protest photographs, performance documentation, and digital art that center on the youth led resistance in Nigeria. Through a combined iconographic and iconological analysis, I explore how these images construct meaning, what they depict, how they function symbolically, and what historical structures they expose or unsettle. The protest images operate as both a record and a rupture. They capture moments yet exceed the capturing by opening visual dialogues across time and space.

In Nigeria, acts of dissent are not only criminalized through physical violence but also through visual erasure. From manipulated news coverage to silence around key protest events like the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, and to freezing the bank accounts of major protesters, the state exerts control by deciding what is seen, how it is framed, and what must be forgotten. This is the visual problematic I take up. A system where visibility itself becomes a site of struggle, and protesters must not only speak, but create images that allow them to exist in the national memory. As Judith Butler asserts, "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what they count as reality (73). If, as Mirzoeff argues, visuality is a system of power, then #EndSARS is a rebellion not just against police violence, but against the visual order that conceals it.

Crucially, this paper also places #EndSARS within a longer genealogy of protests in Nigeria. From the Aba Women's Revolt of 1929, the "Ali Must Go" protest of 1978, and the fuel subsidy protests of 2012. Nigeria political culture has long involved a contest over who may speak, who may be seen, and whose suffering counts. The 2020 movement did not emerge in a vacuum, it drew on earlier struggles, adapted their forms, and innovated new strategies for a digital and globalized world. The protest represents not just a demand for police reform but a radical assertion of visual sovereignty. In refusing invisibility, in refusing the official line that "there is nothing to see here" (Mirzoeff 1), Nigeria youth enacted countervisual politics rooted in presence, performance, and digital circulation. This study contributes to visual theory by highlighting how postcolonial resistance reclaims gaze and reshapes contemporary protests.

**Theoretical Concept – Visuality, Countervisuality, and the Right to Look**

Nicholas Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look* (2011) marks a pivotal shift in visual theory, offering a robust framework for understanding the politics of visibility and resistance. This paper reads the EndSARS protest through Mirzoeff's triad: *visuality* (the state's control), *countervisuality* (youth resistance), and *the right to look* (the ethical, mutual gaze). For Mirzoeff, "visuality" is not a neutral act of seeing, but a strategic regime of perception that historically operates in the service of authority. From colonial mapping to police surveillance, visuality operates as a technique of power, organizing the world through classification, hierarchy, and control. (Mirzoeff 3). Visuality is thus aligned with power. It tells subjects not just what to see, but how to see and when to look away. In contrast, "countervisuality" emerges from below, from those who refuse this imposed way of seeing. It is the "look back," the disobedient gaze of the colonized, the oppressed, and the marginalized. It is a contestation of the right to look, and of the authority of those who command us to move on, to avert our eyes, to forget (Mirzoeff 24). Countervisuality refuses invisibility and rejects the erasure inherent in visuality's gaze. It insists on presence, on seeing differently and being seen differently.

Central to this resistance is what Mirzoeff calls "the right to look." He writes: "The right to look confronts the police who say to us, 'Move on, there's nothing to see here.' Only there is, and we know it, and so do they" (1). This right is not simply about optical seeing but about claiming the space of visibility. It is about mutual recognition, about being looked at without being objectified, and about looking back at power with dignity and defiance. This theory draws from and departs from Jacques Derrida's concept of "the right of inspection," which explores vision as a mechanism of control and surveillance. Derrida contends that power depends not just on seeing, but on the right to withhold sight, to dissimulate and obscure. While Derrida emphasizes the gaze as an extension of institutional power, Mirzoeff reclaims it as a site of insurgency, arguing that vision itself can be a tool of freedom. Applied to the 2020 #EndSARS protest in Nigeria, these concepts become urgently relevant. Through placards, public performances, live videos, and memorial icons, Nigerian youth asserted their right to look, and more radically, to *be seen* by the state, by fellow citizens, and by the international community. Their images challenged the state's attempt to make them disappear. In the face of curfews, violence, and a Twitter ban, they insisted: *we are here, and you will see us*.

**Visual Archive**

The visuals examined in this paper are drawn from the *Ar(c)tivism* digital archive, a curated collection of protest art, photographs, and video stills created in the wake of the #EndSARS movement. Hosted on the Ar(c)tivism digital archive of the Socially Engaged Theatre owned by the University of Regina in Canada. This digital collection curates protest art, performance documentation, and activist imagery from global justice movements, including an extensive collection from Nigeria's 2020 youth-led demonstrations. It is a decentralized, democratized visual field, offering artworks, photography, and mixed media submitted by artists and protest participants themselves. Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive is instructive. He writes, "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" (4). The archive functions not just as a repository but as a form of resistance. It preserves what the state seeks to disappear, the faces, symbols, and ruptures of a generation that chose to be seen.

To analyze this archive, I adopt a two-pronged visual methodology rooted in Erwin Panofsky's framework of iconographic and iconological analysis. This method will enable a layered reading of the visual motifs, gestures, symbols, objects, and probe what they mean within a broader cultural, historical, and political context.

**Genealogies of Protest in Nigeria: A Historical Continuum from 1929 to 2020.**

As a postcolonial country who fought her way to freedom, Resistance is not new to Nigeria. The #EndSARS protest is part of a much longer genealogy of resistance. To understand the visual strategies fully, we must read them alongside previous uprisings, where protests were not only political but visual too. From colonial revolts led by women to student demonstrations under military regimes, to mass mobilizations against economic injustice, Nigerian protestors have long used the body, symbol, and public performance as tools of dissent. Each of these moments represents confrontation with visuality. These historical moments, though separated by decades, share a visual lineage. From the bare-chested women of 1929 to the handwritten placards of 1978, Nigeria protests have long used the body, the banner, and the street as visual instruments of refusal.

**The Aba Women's War (1929)**

Often overlooked in discussions of Nigeria protest history, the Aba Women's War was one of the earliest mass resistances against British colonial rule. Falola Toyin stated that The Aba women's war was a significant anti-colonial revolt where women organized massive protests against taxation and policies (225). Thousands of Igbo women mobilized against exploitative taxation and patriarchal colonial governance. Their protest tactics include dancing in public squares, exposing their breasts (a culturally charged gesture of shame and condemnation), and surrounding colonial offices in coordinated masses. Allen Judith notes that these women were not only resisting taxation, but they were also disrupting the colonial order that erased them from political space. These protests asserted "countervisuality" centuries ahead of its naming. The women insisted: *you will see us*. They did so not by appealing to colonial authority but by staging their own visibility.


*Internet image of Aba Women Protest*

**"Ali Must Go" Student Uprising (1978)**

The 1978 protests, led by the National Union of Nigerian Students, erupted after the military government increased food and accommodation fees in universities. The chant "Ali Must Go," aimed at the then Education Commissioner, became a visual mantra spray-painted on walls, printed on banners, and worn on shirts. Crucially, the protesters created martyrs. Funeral processions became processions of protest, and images of mourning bodies circulated as political statements. In Mirzoeff's framework, this protest was a direct challenge to the postcolonial military visuality that demanded obedience and invisibility. The students' banners, processions, and bodies claimed

space and visibility. Their slogan was a demand for not only better policy, but for the right to imagine a different Nigeria and to make that vision seen.

*Internet Image of Ali Must Go Protest*

**Occupy Nigeria -Anti-Fuel Subsidy Protests (2012)**

In 2012, mass protests broke out across Nigeria when the government attempted to remove fuel subsidies. The strategies used include street occupations, homemade placards, and candlelight vigils occurred alongside viral memes, infographics, and Twitter storms. Placards bearing "We No Go Gree" (Pidgin for "We won't accept this") appeared both on street photographs and as WhatsApp profile pictures. The parallels with #EndSARS are strong. In both cases, protesters documented events, shared updates globally, and created icons out of moments of state violence. However, what #EndSARS adds is a greater sophistication in visual strategy.

*Internet Image of Occupy Nigeria Protest*

**#EndSARS 2020**

A youth driven protest that began online and spilled into the streets, calling for an end to police brutality, particularly by SARS officers. Protesters used social media platforms to live stream violence, and coordinate across geographic locations. Uwazurike states that "EndSARS is not merely about ending a notorious police unit. It is a movement that encapsulates young Nigerians' demand for dignity, accountability, and the right to live without fear of those meant to protect them" (*Harvard Human Rights Journal,* 2020).

The visual strategies employed include bloody flags, face masks with slogans, night vigils, and symbolic gestures (e.g., Kneeling, clenched fists). Mirzoeff explains that "visuality sutures authority to power and renders the association natural" (1). The protest directly challenged the state's attempt to manage visibility. They exposed brutality in real time, refused silence and resisted disappearance. #EndSARS is a visual continuation of Nigeria's protest lineage. It updates the symbols and platforms, and carries forward the same impulse, which is to be seen, to be heard, to interrupt the visual order that erases, dehumanizes, or renders invisible. As Mirzoeff puts it, "the right to look is not about merely seeing. It is about the political relation that looking entails" (1). In 2020, Nigerian youth did not merely see, they invited the world to look. Despite new technologies, many visual tropes like banners, chants, public bodies, martyrs still endure. What has changed is the scale and reach of these images, and the ability of youth to control their circulation, giving birth to a new form of postcolonial visual sovereignty.

**Visual Analysis of the Protest Imagery**

Images are not merely reflections of protests, they are protests. They do not just represent resistance, they perform it. During the 2020 movement, Nigeria youth created a compelling visual lexicon that asserted both the right to be seen and the right to look back at the structures of violence. These images became transnational symbols of defiance and dignity. This session unpacks four core visuals to understand how they functioned as acts of countervisuality.

**The Bloodied Nigerian Flag**

*Bloodied Nigerian Flag from #EndSARS Protest*

The image of the blood-stained Nigerian flag emerged following the tragic events at Lekki Tollgate. The photo was taken during the youth massacre on October 20, 2020, when soldiers allegedly opened fire on peaceful protesters who were singing the national anthem and waving the Nigerian flag. The flag soaked in blood became a powerful visual representation of the state's violence against its citizens.

At the iconographic level, the image draws heavily on the symbolic weight of the Nigerian flag. The green stripes represent agriculture and natural wealth, while the white stands for peace and unity. The presence of blood on the white band thus introduces a violent rupture. The peace is no longer unblemished. The very object meant to unite now testifies to disunity and betrayal. Achille Mbembe in his theory of necropolitics states that "Sovereignty requires the strength to violate the prohibition against killing" (28). This image ruptures the idealized image of a nation. It serves as a stark reminder of the sacrifices made during the protest and the urgent need for systemic reform. The flag here transforms from a symbol of statehood into a site of trauma. It

testifies to the violence the state wishes to deny. Performing what Mirzoeff calls "the disobedient act of looking" The image is also an ethical demand directed outward to the global community to witness what the state said did not happen. The image harks back to "Ali Must Go" student protests in 1978, where banners soaked in blood were carried by students mourning their slain peers.

**Aisha Yesufu and "Soro Soke" Banner**


*Soro Soke Protest image from C-SET digital archive*

The image of Aisha Yesufu in her hijab, standing with a clenched fist was taken during the protest. The accompanying text, "Soro Soke," (a Yoruba phrase that translates as "Speak up") turned her image into a viral emblem of the movement. The phrase *"Soro Soke"* marks the urgency and intimacy of the message it tries to convey. Yesufu's stance and visibility challenge multiple forms of power: Patriarchal, religious and state. Captured mid-stride, clad in her hijab, with her fists clenched, and unyielding, became a popular image that echoes across murals, posters, and digital art. Her attire and posture defy both state repression and social expectation. As a Muslim woman leading a secular, youth-driven protest, she disrupts gendered and religious stereotypes.

The now-iconic image does not emerge in isolation. It is part of a visual genealogy of Nigerian women who refused silence. Yesufu stands in the long shadow and legacy of Queen Amina of Zazzau, the 16th-century warrior queen of what is now northern Nigeria. Amina was not merely a symbol of female strength; she was a sovereign woman who commanded armies and expanded territories. While Yesufu is not a warrior in the literal sense, her stance in the face of state power mirrors Amina's refusal to be excluded from the battlefield. Both women are Muslim, and both broke through the constraints of their time by entering public space without apology. Their visibility then and now disrupts patriarchal assumptions about who leads, and who commands. The image also resonates with earlier Nigerian protest histories, where handwritten signs were used to resist military rule in the 1980s and early 1990s. Students, market women, and unionists would inscribe slogans in pidgin or local dialects, reappropriating everyday language for radical ends. "Soro Soke" continues this tradition of using local language on placards to make demands.

**Ezu River**

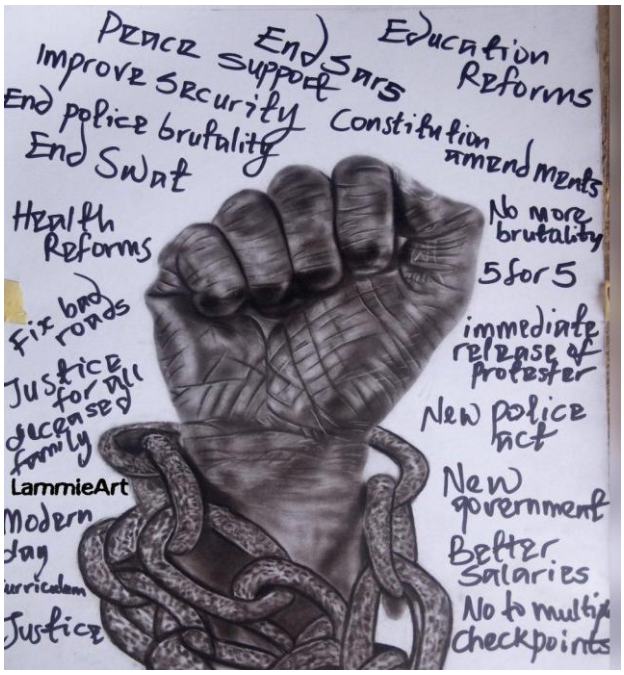
*Ezu River inspired Art from C-SET*

The artwork presents the partial face of a figure submerged in a crimson body of water. The face appears still, yet the red liquid swirls around it, thick like blood. No visible landscape features only the face, the open eyes, and the red. As Mbembe writes, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides… in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (66). The image invokes a dark moment in Nigeria's history when unidentified corpses were found floating in Ezu River, located in southeastern Nigeria. In 2013, the decomposing bodies were identified as victims of extrajudicial killings allegedly carried out by the same SARS unit that #EndSARS would later

rise against. The color red overwhelming in this image, stands for both blood and burial, a river turned into a grave. The water has a thickness that denies transparency, it hides as much as it reveals. And then, there are the eyes, wide open, unblinking. They float just above the surface, refusing to shut.

The image is the protest's unresolved grief. A meditation on unresolved violence and collective memory. The river becomes a site of mourning and memory, a silent witness to the state sanctioned disappearances. By resurrecting this image during #EndSARS, the artist links past and present, insisting that these bodies and the violence done to them cannot be submerged. The image does not speak, but it accuses. It is a body both erased and present, a ghost in the archive. There is no placard here, no slogan, no chant, just the ethical demand for justice. The image serves as an act of countervisuality in its quietest, most terrifying form. It does not shout, does not plead for pity, does not protest. It looks, and in that act, forces you to look back. The image tells us that violence doesn't end when bullets stop, it continues in what is forgotten, what is covered, and what is never named.

**Clenched Fist**



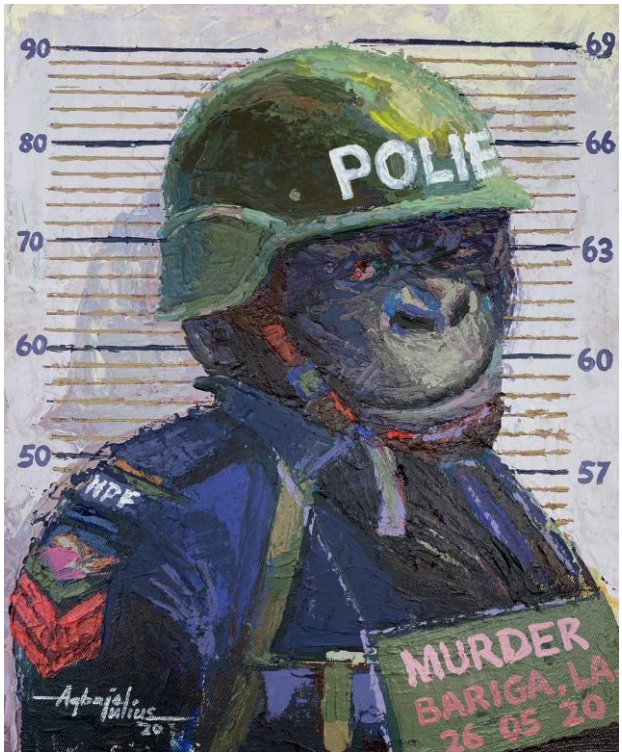

*Clenched Fist from the C-SET Archive*

A single, clenched Black fist rising from the center of the image, breaking through a field of text and chain. The image is drawn in a hyper-realistic with fragments of protest slogans like "End SARS," "Stop Police Brutality," "Reform the Force," "We Demand Justice." The clenched fist, a universal symbol of resistance, and solidarity was prominently featured during the #EndSAR movement. The Image was featured on T-shirts, placards, and banners across protest grounds. The text fragments surrounding the image are not merely decoration, they are written demands. The chain signals both historical slavery and present-day oppressions. The image speaks to a deeper

lineage of political resistance. A gesture carved out of a long arc of struggles, from anti-colonial struggle to Black Power movements, to anti-military, and now anti-police movement. It carries the weight of ancestors. The clenched fist is an emblem of unity that confronts state violence with symbolic strength. As Mirzoeff writes, "The right to look confronts the police who say to us, 'Move on, there's nothing to see here'" (1). The clenched fist subverts that logic, it is a refusal to move on.

**Acts of Countervisuality and Disrupting the Gaze.**

If visuality as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues is a system through which power makes itself visible and renders others governable and invisible, then, countervisuality is its insurgent opposite (25). The #EndSARS movement, while grounded in physical protest, was an explosion of countervisual practices. An uprising as much against police violence as against the regime of representation that normalized it. While banners, placards, and photographs formed the core of the protest's visible presence, the digital sphere was equally a vital terrain of resistance. Zeynep Tufekci observes that digital technologies have transformed landscapes, seemingly to the benefit of political challengers. In tandem with more traditional protest visuals, the youth turned to memes, satirical skits, and infographics, to subvert state narratives. Through these acts, they stripped the state of its aura. According to Mirzoeff, "The right to look refuses to allow authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to power, first as law and then as the aesthetic" (25). The once-feared SARS officers were stripped of their pageantry and recast as bumbling caricatures. The aesthetics of authority were decomposed, rendered laughable, and dragged down from the pedestal.




*A satirical image of the police from C-SET Archive*

One of the most notable acts of countervisuality was the widespread use of VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) to bypass the government's 2021 Twitter ban. This was not a technical workaround; it was a symbolic refusal to be silenced. Twitter is not simply a social media app, it is the platform on which videos were posted in real time, where hashtags trended globally, and where youth shaped their narrative outside the state's control. By using VPN, they refused to be silenced and more than that, they refused to be unseen.

Another crucial countervisual tactic was real-time live streaming, usually done through social media platforms. These livestreams bore witness in the moment, resisting erasure and official denials. In the absence of institutional protection, mobile phones became protest shields and tools for constructing the truth. These livestreams immediately place the viewer in the moment, collapsing the gap between seeing and acting, and transforming global spectators into potential participants. As Susan Sontag reminds us, "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness… that terrible things happen (11). Ariella Azoulay, in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, argues that the act of viewing an image of suffering or resistance creates an implicit civic relationship between viewer and viewed, a contract of responsibility and recognition (14). The livestream viewers across the world do not merely consume the images, they become morally entangled with it.

**Conclusion**

The #EndSARS movement was not simply a protest against a rogue police unit, it was a collective reckoning with the visual and structural logics of power in Nigeria. The protest marked not only a critical turning point in Nigeria's political history, but also in its visual culture of resistance. Through bloodied flags, handwritten placards, live streams, and hashtags, the youth demanded the right to be seen and heard in a nation where the gaze of power has historically worked to suppress, disappear, or distort them. Through Nicholas Mirzoeff's concepts, we have seen how the act of seeing and of being seen became a mode of resistance, a refusal to remain invisible, and a demand for accountability. The selected images are not merely records of an event. They are acts of countervisuality, asserting the presence, pain, and power of those who refuse to be silenced.

By situating the #EndSARS protest within a longer genealogy of Nigerian uprisings, this paper has shown how protest in postcolonial Nigeria has always involved a struggle over visibility. While bodies and banners have long filled the streets, #EndSARS marks a new chapter where protesters themselves author the images, disrupt state-sanctioned narratives, and archive their resistance for global and historical witness. In reclaiming their right to look and be looked at, Nigerian youth have expanded the terrain of protest and redefined the aesthetics of resistance in the postcolonial world.

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