

The Politics of Sight: Revisiting Timothy Pachirat's *Every Twelve Seconds*

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In his ethnography of industrialized slaughter, Every Twelve Seconds, Timothy Pachirat coins a label to describe political interventions that use visibility as a catalyst for reform—the “politics of sight.” We argue that the politics of sight rests on three premises that are all mistaken or misspecified: (1) that exposing morally repugnant practices will make us see them, (2) that seeing such practices will stop us from acquiescing to them, and (3) that owning up to such practices is preferable to keeping them concealed. To develop our argument, we propose an alternative interpretation of Pachirat’s own ethnographic material informed by theories from social psychology—one that leads to a different critique of the politics of sight than the one Pachirat offers and to a different understanding of the conditions under which it can succeed. Methodologically, we seek to illustrate the value of reanalyzing interpretive research through close reading.

INTRODUCTION

“Don’t Look Away,” urge the Editorial Board of the New York Times (2019). Our eyes fall to a drawing of the torture technique called waterboarding by Guantánamo Bay detainee Abu Zubaydah. The sketch is detailed and harrowing, and serves as a “sickening reminder” of what the United States is capable of. Zubaydah’s collection of drawings “strip away the euphemisms, justifications, lies and legalisms” that shroud the US torture program; for this reason, they “must be seen.”

This opinion piece is characteristic of a broader impulse to use visibility to produce political change. This impulse rests on a presumption, shared by movements across the political spectrum, that making a society’s repugnant practices transparent will serve as a catalyst for reform. From distressing images of dolphins and baby whales caught in commercial fishing nets, to disturbing accounts of distant sweatshops where our smartphones are made and warehouses closer to home from where they are shipped, our newspapers, social media accounts, and television screens are replete with stories that seek to reveal, expose, unveil, or unmask what lurks behind the smooth patina of ordinary life. These strategies rest on the transformative potential of sight: the belief that making a society’s “shameful and disturbing” practices visible will stir the moral sentiments of those of us who were previously shielded from the sight and awaken us from slumber. Visibility would thus loosen the hold of modes of power that operate by hiding, masking, or mystifying.

The political scientist Timothy Pachirat has coined a convenient label to describe such political

interventions—“the politics of sight.” In his ethnography of industrialized slaughter, *Every Twelve Seconds*, Pachirat defines the politics of sight as those “organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden and to breach, literally or figuratively, zones of confinement in order to bring about social and political transformation” (2011, 15). He then proceeds to offer an influential description, enactment, and critique of the politics of sight.

On our reading and analytic parsing of Pachirat’s book, the politics of sight rests on three fundamental premises. Pachirat does not state these premises in the schematic way we are about to do, but they are our best attempt to render explicit the underlying commitments of the view he describes and ultimately criticizes. The first premise of the politics of sight is that exposing a society’s repugnant practices will make those of its members who were previously shielded from the sight of such practices see them. The second is that seeing such practices will motivate people to stop acquiescing to them. The third is that even if such practices did go on, a world in which people owned up to their society’s repugnant practices would be preferable to one in which these practices remain dissimulated. Together, these premises suggest that activists should expose repugnant practices because this will either prompt people to revise such practices or, at the very least, to revise their attitudes towards such practices, combating the real or feigned ignorance in which they could until then find comfort.

While we find the premises of the politics of sight alluring, we will argue, along with Pachirat, that all three are mistaken or misspecified but for different reasons than Pachirat proposes. Sight is of course an essential ingredient in the activist toolkit (if something remains hidden, how could it possibly change?), but more sight is not always better and visibility can at times imperil the very transformative goals that proponents of the politics of sight seek to advance. To develop our argument, we turn to *Every Twelve Seconds*, and offer an alternative interpretation of Pachirat’s own ethnographic material

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through a close reading informed by the social psychology literature on cognitive dissonance, emotion regulation, and motivated cognition. The reading we propose leads to a different diagnostic of what can block sight, to an awareness of the sometimes counterproductive effects of visibility, and to a more positive appreciation of the functions an obstacle to sight can serve. In so doing, we hope to achieve two things: (a) to contribute to theorizing the politics of sight and the conditions under which it can be successful by engaging the book's argument, and (b) to demonstrate how to critically revisit an interpretive ethnography, not by venturing into the author's field site or replicating their research, but by revisiting the narrative presented on the basis of such research.

We focus on *Every Twelve Seconds* not just because it offers a fascinating journey through the hidden world of industrialized slaughter, but also because it is one of the sterling examples of interpretive work in recent political science. Despite belonging to a genre not common in our field, ethnography (see Schatz 2009; Wedeen 2010), it has acquired hundreds of citations and rave reviews across disciplines, with one prominent intellectual historian even lauding it as the best scholarly book of the decade (Moyn 2020).

If Pachirat's book has had such success, it is, in part, because the slaughterhouse stands as a microcosm for life in advanced industrial capitalism, where the bidding of the privileged is so often done by others who are conveniently out of sight, where deeds are mediated by technologies that allow action at distance, and where exchanges are sanitized through the odorless medium of money. What are the implications of living in a world where repugnant practices remain hidden from those they benefit? Is transparency the answer to concealment? These are the questions that *Every Twelve Seconds* raises.

Pachirat's own stance toward the politics of sight is complex. *Every Twelve Seconds* is, in essence, an invitation to practice critical reflexivity about how power works in modern society. To achieve this purpose, Pachirat takes us on a journey into the slaughterhouse, one that "breaches the zone of confinement that is industrialized slaughter," "making visible a massive, routinized work of killing that many would prefer to keep hidden" (2011, 15). In this respect, the book is an enactment of the politics of sight, as Pachirat himself recognizes (2011, 255). The introduction and conclusion, however, explain that this enactment is no endorsement. It becomes clear there that Pachirat does not take himself to be revealing the ultimate "truth" about the slaughterhouse or endorsing the responses of moral and physical repugnance that many readers have when taking up the book. His point, rather, is to underscore the extent to which our experience and response to industrialized slaughter are shaped by the vantage point from which we approach it. How could something that strikes us, situated outside the slaughterhouse, as so repugnant, become tolerable to those who are inside? To answer that question is to better understand "how distance and concealment work as mechanisms of power" (2011, 19) and why the three premises of the politics of sight are flawed.

As against the first premise, Pachirat argues that *given the working conditions in the slaughterhouse*, especially the pace and demands of work, visibility and concealment are in fact compatible. One can be so absorbed in the tedium of work as to stop registering what takes place before one's eyes. To rebut the second premise, Pachirat draws on the work of Norbert Elias (2000) to suggest that the politics of sight will *eventually* run up against its own foundations because it relies for its transformative potential on moral sentiments that are themselves tributary to forms of concealment. To counter the third premise, Pachirat notes that the act of making the hidden visible "may be equally likely to generate other, more effective ways of confining it" (2011, 253).

Using Pachirat's own ethnographic material, we offer an alternative reading of the slaughterhouse that leads to a different critique of the politics of sight and to a different appreciation of the conditions under which it can be successful. The latter is a research agenda that Pachirat has himself called for (2011, 255) and to which we hope our interpretation can contribute.

Specifically, we draw on theories of cognitive dissonance, emotion regulation, and motivated cognition to suggest that Pachirat does not sufficiently distinguish between two reasons why individuals may not see: because they are prevented from seeing or because they would prefer not to see. Where Pachirat attributes the compatibility between visibility and concealment to working conditions in the slaughterhouse, we propose that it may spring instead from workers knowingly or unknowingly cultivating side involvements to take their minds off the killing. By implication, what we described as the politics of sight's first premise could fail regardless of working conditions. Even if the pace and demands of work were relaxed, making repugnant practices visible does not entail that workers will actually see them.

While we are persuaded by Pachirat's claim that the politics of sight would eventually run up against its own premises, we believe this detracts from a more immediate and worrying way in which its second premise can fail. The problem with sight as a catalyst for political transformation is that its effect is underdetermined. Although sight may motivate people to suspend their participation in repugnant practices, it may also promote brutalization, helping legitimate participation in these very practices. The problem with the politics of sight is not just that it may be ineffective but that it can be dangerous.

Finally, we take issue with the third premise of the politics of sight. A world where a society's repugnant practices are in plain view is not necessarily preferable to one where they are selectively concealed. Pachirat is skeptical of the lure of transparency, but even so, he insists that the "answer to distance and concealment as mechanisms of domination [...] is not more distance and concealment" (2011, 252). We want to go further and explain why some forms of concealment may in fact be desirable. If repugnant practices must or will go on, selective dissimulation can be a way to minimize the

number exposed to moral injury and a condition for everyone else to continue registering the moral cost of such practices. Rather than a transparent world, perhaps it would be preferable to live in a world in which people strategically shield themselves from their society's repugnant practices so they can continue seeing them as repugnant. By promoting a world without walls, the politics of sight detracts from the more pressing question of where, and how porous, our walls should be.

Methodologically, this article seeks to demonstrate that there is value to reanalyzing qualitative data gathered within an interpretive approach to empirical inquiry, as is more common these days with quantitative data in positivist approaches. The distinction between these two traditions of inquiry has resurfaced lately in debates around the operationalization of research transparency, prompted by "scholars' inability to replicate findings published in leading journals" (Björkman et al. 2019, 1). As part of the push for greater openness, interpretive ethnographers have been asked to make their interview transcripts and fieldnotes publicly accessible, just as other scholars are now expected to make their datasets available (Büthe and Jacobs 2015).

Interpretivists have, by and large, resisted this call by pointing out that transcripts and fieldnotes are not raw data, both because what appears in them is already filtered through the ethnographer's interpretive sensibility and because they only reveal their meaning in light of what the researcher has experienced in the field (Cramer 2015). Interpretivists have insisted, moreover, that while revisiting a researcher's field site can be generative of insights, there is no guarantee that one would reach the same conclusions. This is because what transpires in the interaction between researcher and subject of research depends in large part on who the researcher is and what they bring to the field. As Katherine Cramer puts it, there is no way "to remove 'me' from the analysis" (Cramer 2015, 19).

But if replicability is a standard ill-suited for interpretive work, how then is one supposed to engage critically with it? Are we meant to take what ethnographers say at face value? Interpretivists, of course, claim no such thing (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014). They insist that it is possible to probe and contest the trustworthiness of interpretive work (Schwartz-Shea 2014) and that one can do so even without access to the researcher's field notes or research site. Our purpose in this article is to illustrate what they mean by practicing the kind of criticism they invite. We do this by conducting a form of close reading involving the analytic reconstruction and parsing of arguments, most commonly used in our discipline by political theorists and applied to philosophical texts, redirecting it instead toward the text of a published ethnography.¹ Our intention is not to

convince the reader that our interpretation is superior to Pachirat's but, more modestly, to identify tensions, to question inferences, and to suggest alternatives to the account he has offered—in short, to critically engage with it and to propose a dueling framework for making sense of the evidence presented in the book. We offer the result as a response to the "anything goes" charge sometimes leveled at interpretive research (Schwartz-Shea 2014, 122), leaving the question of how to assess the comparative merits of the two frameworks to future researchers.

This is a kind of sustained engagement that Pachirat has himself invited. In a short methodological essay, he maintains that one of the primary criteria for the persuasiveness of an interpretive ethnography is "the degree to which the finished ethnography includes enough detailed specificity, enough rich lushness, about the social world(s) she is interpreting that the reader can challenge, provoke, and interrogate the ethnographer's interpretations using the very material she has provided" (Pachirat 2015, 29). We seek to illustrate just how far such critical engagement can go. That we can do this is, of course, a tribute to the richness of Pachirat's ethnography: ours is a critique grounded in admiration for a work sufficiently generous to repay close attention and to make alternative readings possible.

We should note at the outset two limitations of our analysis. The first is that we reinterpret the slaughterhouse as presented to us by Pachirat (as revealed and constituted by his positionality, as filtered through his interpretive sensibility, and as staged by him for presentation in a monograph) rather than revisiting the slaughterhouse independently through our own participant observation (which would have been colored by our own positionality and reflexivity).

The second is that the interpretive standpoint from which we approach Pachirat's text is itself not beyond criticism. While the literature on cognitive dissonance, emotion regulation, and motivated cognition is well established in social psychology (see Cooper 2007), it has its origin not in the rich, multilayered realities of ethnographic fieldwork but in the neat and controlled world of laboratory experiments. This raises questions about the transferability of results (Schwartz-Shea 2014). That literature involves moreover a leap into the individual psyche that many ethnographers are, for understandable reasons, reluctant to make on both epistemological (it is not observable) and ontological grounds (it involves explaining social phenomena in individualistic terms). Yet for all this, insights from social psychology have been used in illuminating ways to make sense of episodes of violence and their aftermath (e.g., Browning 1992; Glover 2000), and we believe they provide a valuable framework through which to apprehend the evidence presented by Pachirat. As we proceed, however, it is important to

¹ A number of studies have recently examined what an ethnographic sensibility can contribute to political theory (Longo and Zacka 2019).

Our essay does the opposite: it shows how a way of reading widely used in political theory can unlock new areas of significance in a published ethnography.

keep in mind that both the social psychology literature we draw on and Pachirat's interpretive stance rest on underlying accounts of the social world—on social and political theories—that we do not have the scope to dissect in this essay, but that may account in part for the different readings of the slaughterhouse these interpretive frameworks make possible.

We should add that *Every Twelve Seconds* is a disciplined exercise in participant observation. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, Pachirat stays as close as possible to his subject matter and largely refrains from making broad theoretical claims, letting the “corporeal complexity of the slaughterhouse take precedence over neatly hewed analytical insights” (2011, 18). As a result, his arguments are often conveyed suggestively. This makes for a great read but complicates the job of the critical interlocutor. In what follows, we try to pin down the analytical insights with supporting evidence from the text; where the arguments leave room for ambiguity, we turn to reviews as evidence for how the book has been read.

Our attempt to extract and formalize analytical arguments from Pachirat's otherwise lush narrative makes for a stark shift in genre. This comes at the risk of drawing distinctions that are perhaps too sharp between dimensions of social reality that overlap, and whose interplay a narrative might better hold together. The upshot, however, is that we can more carefully parse out the underlying mechanisms at play, identifying zones of ambiguity and proposing alternative pathways that could be productively examined in future research.

We begin with a brief description of *Every Twelve Seconds* as instantiating the three premises of the politics of sight. We then challenge and revise each of these premises in turn, articulating each time how our critique differs from Pachirat's and how it casts the slaughterhouse and the politics of sight in a different light.

Exposing Industrialized Slaughter

Every Twelve Seconds is an account of industrialized slaughter written from the perspective of the workers who carry it out.² The book draws on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted over a period of two and a half years in a slaughterhouse in Omaha, Nebraska. During this period, Pachirat spent five months undercover as an employee, working through various sections of the slaughterhouse—starting in the cooler, where carcasses and body parts are chilled, moving to the chutes, where live cattle are driven into the knocking box to be shot, before finally taking up a position as a quality control official.

Pachirat describes, from these three vantage points, how the gruesome work of killing is organized. While his ethnography occurs in a single location, it is multisited (Pachirat 2018, 87–8), as these roles offer different levels of involvement in the act of killing (direct for

chute workers; indirect for line workers and quality control officials) and different levels of visibility onto the process of industrialized slaughter (localized for chute workers and line workers; panoramic for quality control officials).

The question that holds the narrative together is disarmingly simple: how could the killing of live beings, which fills many of us outside the slaughterhouse with dread, be rendered tolerable to those who do it every day? One of the main contributions of the book is to show in detail how organizational processes work around moral sentiments and fragment moral perception. In this, the book harks back to a long tradition of research on the organization and routinization of violence (e.g., Arendt 1963; Glover 2000; Hilberg 1961).

Notice that the puzzle at the heart of the book presumes that killing is experienced as dreadful, at least initially. If newcomers to the slaughterhouse do not experience it as such—or if you, the reader, do not—the question loses its grip, for there would be nothing there to render tolerable, nothing to hide or overcome, for the killing to take place. One would be left with a portrait of working life “on the clock” at the lower ends of the labor market, something not too dissimilar from what one may find at Wal-Mart or in an Amazon warehouse (e.g., Guendelsberger 2019). Pachirat's wager is that there is something more happening in the slaughterhouse—that for workers and readers alike, the work is not just grueling and repetitive, but also disquieting and hard to stomach. This assumption appears validated by the book's reception: “How can something be right, if it feels so horribly wrong?” asks the reviewer for *The Atlantic* (Myers 2012). In what follows, we assume it is true.

To someone susceptible of being disturbed by violence directed at animals, the scenes described by Pachirat are bound to appear at once repugnant and grotesque. In excruciating detail, we read of cows hoisted upside down to receive an “incision from the anus to the inside of the right back leg.” Hoofs are cut with “huge, handheld mechanical shears,” nostrils and ears are stretched and sliced off, after which a “narrow but forceful geyser of blood often spurts out,” and hide is stripped by foot-long mechanical clamps to expose the fat underneath (Pachirat 2011, 67–8). Dragged along a metal roller, each cow transforms into a “pearly white creature with bulging eyeballs, broken teeth, and perforated head”—heads that will soon be severed and sent floating on a separate chain through the kill floor (69–70).

Rendered through Pachirat's precise prose, the violence is neither gratuitously sensationalistic nor the descriptions moralizing. Pachirat does not presume that the reader will be repelled and infuriated *in principle*—the language of animal rights, for instance, is entirely absent. He enjoins us instead to look at industrialized slaughter for what it is, while also giving us a taste for what it's like to do it. From a phenomenological standpoint, his observations are rich, and the writing rises to the occasion. As readers, we encounter not just images, but smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile experiences, with the occasional nod to synesthesia. When first

² Our synthesis of *Every Twelve Seconds* draws on a review one of us previously wrote of the book (Zacka 2014).

approaching the slaughterhouse, we are told of putrid smells “so totalizing the nose sends them instantaneously to the tongue and plays them back as images in the mind” (3).

Pachirat's guiding concern is to understand how those working in the slaughterhouse come to live with the violence they encounter on a daily basis. This is a question that most members of the public do not have to answer because the slaughterhouse conceals such violence from the rest of society. Pachirat's central finding is that the concealment of industrialized slaughter has a fractal quality: just as killing in the slaughterhouse is concealed from the public, so too is killing concealed within the slaughterhouse itself (236).

We learn that the production line is partitioned into several areas that are adjacent, yet physically and visually segregated. These internal divisions support linguistic and experiential barriers that fragment the violence (236). Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this orchestrated fragmentation is an architectural diagram of the kill floor, which shows that only around eight of eight hundred workers come into contact with live animals, and that even fewer actually partake in the act of killing (44). The diagram shows that the very act of killing is separated into multiple steps, so that it's not quite clear who actually deals the lethal blow: the “knocker” immobilizes the cow, the “presticker” makes the neck incision, and the “sticker” severs the cow's carotid arteries and jugular veins (54–6).

The division of labor is such that the vast majority of slaughterhouse workers do not deal with cattle, but with carcasses and body parts—material that has already been homogenized and stripped of individuating features. If we add to such deindividuation the frantic pace of the line (the title, *Every Twelve Seconds*, marks the cadence at which cattle are killed and processed), the minute parcellization of labor and its ongoing monotony, we can begin to understand why the experience of line workers is compartmentalized and why their attention is diverted from the ghastly sight of the dismembered animals hanging over their heads. This, at least, is the conclusion Pachirat draws from line work, where “at the rate of one cow, steer, or heifer slaughtered every twelve seconds ... the reality that the work of the slaughterhouse centers around killing evaporates into a routinized, almost hallucinatory, blur” (84).

We mentioned earlier that Pachirat is critical of the politics of sight, and we will turn to his reservations in a moment. We first want to underscore, however, the extent to which *Every Twelve Seconds* is also an enactment of the politics of sight (255). This is how Pachirat interpellates readers and draws them into the narrative—evoking in them strong emotive responses the conditions of possibility for which the study then investigates.

If the slaughterhouse works through fractal concealment, Pachirat's journey through it has the allure of a revelation. The barriers that prevented outsiders from seeing are peeled off one after another: the inconspicuous exterior architecture, the draconian legal restrictions meant to dissuade anyone from peering in, the

interior partition walls, the relentless rhythm imposed by the line, and so on. What readers are left with, after all that, is what Samuel Moyn (2020) calls “one of the most absorbing descriptions of horror I have ever read.” In this way, the book instantiates what we described as the first premise of the politics of sight: that when obstacles to sight are removed, people who were previously shielded from repugnant practices will see them for what they are. This reading coheres with the reactions of some reviewers, with Peter Singer, for instance, claiming that the book “opens our eyes to the kind of society in which we live.”³

Every Twelve Seconds also performatively enacts the second premise of the politics of sight. If the book changes the reader's attitude toward industrialized slaughter, it is not because Pachirat advocates for it. His descriptions and our upset stomachs do the work. Sight itself is transformative: the descriptions are “not merely incidental to or illustrative of a more important argument ... they *are* the argument” (Pachirat 2011, 19). This, at least, is what we infer from the effect the book has had on us, on our students, and on several reviewers. Says Moyn (2020), “I had once taught an entire class about animals, without ever fully convincing myself to abstain from eating them. On the strength of Pachirat's study I resolved to try.”

What about the third premise? Is the value of the politics of sight exhausted by its tangible effects? In the eyes of its proponents, we think not. Even if sunlight turns out not to be the best disinfectant, one might still think that there is something valuable, noble perhaps, in facing up to repugnant practices and coming to terms with them. If we as a society had the courage to raise a mirror to ourselves, at least we wouldn't be hypocrites. This, we think, is partly why the New York Times Editorial Board wants readers to look at Abu Zubaydah's drawings, quite apart from the hope that it will lead to a change in US policy.

Toward the end of the book, Pachirat asks us to imagine a world in which “distance and concealment failed to operate,” in which “those who benefited from dirty, dangerous and demeaning work had a visceral engagement with it” (2011, 240). This would be a world in which those carrying a death sentence would be drawn by lot, a world that is perhaps most familiar to us from the compulsory draft (240). Pachirat doesn't tell us what moral to draw from this thought experiment. Perhaps he means it as a *reductio*—in a world like this, people would stop engaging in practices they find repugnant. But it's possible, indeed perhaps more likely, that in a world like this they would continue engaging in repugnant practices but with reticence, only insofar as they are truly necessary. People who now benefit from the “dirty, dangerous and demeaning” work done by those with fewer socioeconomic resources would be less cavalier. In such a world, people may continue doing things that make them uncomfortable, but they would do them with a more

³ See Singer's blurb on the publisher's website: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300192483/every-twelve-seconds>.

fitting attitude. Insofar as it has this effect on readers, *Every Twelve Seconds* partakes in the third premise of the politics of sight: all else being equal, a world in which people own up to their society's repugnant practices would be preferable to one in which such practices remain hidden. In the next three sections, we take issue with each of these premises, explaining how our critique differs from Pachirat's and how, on our reading, the slaughterhouse can be seen in a different light.

PREVENTED FROM SEEING OR NOT WANTING TO SEE?

The first premise of the politics of sight is that breaching the zones of confinement that shield many people from their society's repugnant practices will make them see such practices. To this, Pachirat raises an important objection. He argues that repugnant practices can remain concealed even in conditions of full visibility. We agree. We want to suggest, however, that Pachirat provides an incomplete account of *how* things can be hidden in plain sight, and thus overlooks a more radical critique of the first premise of the politics of sight that is nonetheless consonant with his ethnographic observations.

Pachirat develops his argument about the compatibility between concealment and visibility by contrasting two ways of thinking about the relation of power to sight. The first, which is common in writings on ideology, sees power as operating through hiding, masking, or mystifying the true nature of social relations (Pachirat 2011, 9). The second, which is exemplified in the writings of Foucault and James Scott, presents visibility as an instrument of power, one that renders individuals and society legible and thus amenable to control (Pachirat 2011, 11). In the first formulation, power operates by putting up barriers to sight; in the second, by removing them. Inside the slaughterhouse, Pachirat proposes that these two seemingly contradictory modes of power actually work in tandem, a contention he presents as a central claim of the book (14).

The compatibility between visibility and concealment may initially appear rather unsurprising. One could imagine that concealment would be reserved for workers close to the killing and visibility for managers removed from it. Pachirat suggests, however, that both concealment and visibility can apply to the very same role. This comes out most clearly in his discussion of quality control officials. Unlike line workers, who are assigned to a specific station and whose field of vision is therefore localized, quality control officials have visual and physical access to the entire kill floor. As such, they can gain a holistic view of industrialized slaughter. How can they nonetheless bear the sight?

The answer, it turns out, is disturbingly mundane. Pachirat shows that quality control officials are absorbed in workplace struggles that divert their attention from the violence of everyday work (206). As soon as he takes up the job, Pachirat finds himself locked in a race against USDA inspectors whose criticism he had to preempt. His mind was no longer on the killing work

or on the possible contamination of the meat: he had become exclusively preoccupied with not being written up for safety violations, the threat of which became the "primary horizon" of his working day (183). As Pachirat puts it, "experiential compartmentalization is produced even ... under conditions of total visibility" (232). Organizations do not have to hide repugnant labor: it is enough for workers to be distracted by a more pressing concern.

This insight extends to the rest of the slaughterhouse. Whether it's the cold of the cooler, the pace of the line, the skill required in performing complex maneuvers, or the threat of being written up by inspectors—the working conditions are so challenging that workers do not see what they are up to even when no physical obstacle stands in the way. At times, Pachirat appears to suggest that the slaughterhouse is designed so as to achieve this effect. At others, he merely notes that it does in fact achieve it. In either case, it is the slaughterhouse itself that renders killing tolerable, either because "its internal divisions create physical, linguistic, and phenomenological walls" that hide the work of killing from those who participate in it (236) or because the pace and demands of work are such that even those who could in principle see do not. In other words, the slaughterhouse *supplies* concealment.

But why is Pachirat so confident in drawing such an inference? After all, the entire premise of the book is that killing is something most people find repugnant. And something repugnant is, by definition, something people shirk away from. If that is the case, it would be reasonable to expect a strong *demand* for concealment from the workers themselves. Indeed, the emotion regulation literature shows that avoidance is a common regulatory response to events that elicit unpleasant or negative emotions (Gross and Thompson 2007). Distraction is one form that avoidance can take. Confronted with the gruesome reality of slaughter, workers may find the sight disturbing and actively want to look away. Or their minds may play tricks on them to reduce the discomfort, providing distractions without them being aware of it.

Organizational ethnographers have shown that workers in industrialized settings tend to cultivate a host of side involvements to cope with the monotony of everyday work—including pranks, jokes, and small acts of resistance (Roy 1959). If boredom can elicit such adaptive responses, would the sight of ghastly carcasses not be enough to bring them about too? This, at least, is one way to make sense of the "songs, shouts, and whistles" on the kill floor, where workers "throw bits of fat around and shoot rubber bands at one another" (Pachirat 2011, 41). Isn't such horseplay providing welcome distraction from an uncomfortable sight?

The two interpretations we have just sketched have different implications for the politics of sight. According to Pachirat's "supply-side" story, if working conditions on the line were sufficiently relaxed, workers might well see and comprehend the killing. On the interpretation we have proposed however, which highlights the "demand" for concealment, visibility would not guarantee sight regardless of working conditions.

Even if the pressure applied by USDA inspectors were reduced, and if the killing took place every one hundred and twenty seconds rather than every twelve, workers might still find ways to distance themselves from the violence (unless the act of killing is, literally, held up under their nose, as it is for a handful of chute workers—but more on that in the next section).

This reading refracts back on Pachirat's interpretation of the architecture of the slaughterhouse, a centerpiece of his analysis. For Pachirat, divisions of labor and space “sequester the participants from the work of killing” such that workers cannot see or comprehend the overall work of industrialized slaughter (236). On our interpretation, however, one could look at the architecture of the slaughterhouse as offering instead a form of plausible deniability: the walls are such that workers can more easily bracket the violence or claim that they have not seen it, which makes it easier to go on participating in it. This function echoes Vaclav Havel's well-known discussion of the excusatory function of ideology in *The Power of the Powerless* (1985): walls, like ideology, allow everyone to save face while remaining complicit.

This way of reading the architecture of the slaughterhouse coheres with a reaction one might have to Pachirat's book. *Pace* the reviews, one might insist that the book is not in fact a revelation. Rather, it confirms impressions of industrialized slaughter one may have garnered from the occasional article or report on the evening news, from novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, or documentaries like Frederick Wiseman's *Meat*. How many readers of *Every Twelve Seconds* can honestly claim that the slaughterhouse was *terra incognita*? Or did most of us sense that something awful was taking place there, yet kept it at the periphery of our minds? The problem, on this view, is less that the slaughterhouse is hidden than that its distance is seized upon as a convenient excuse to plead ignorance.

So is the slaughterhouse preventing people from seeing? Or are they refusing to see? Or is myopia overdetermined, a combination of both supply and demand? One form of evidence that Pachirat might invoke to support the contention that the slaughterhouse prevents workers from seeing is his own personal experience on the job. Pachirat recounts how he struggled to meet the demands of work. Getting by was such an absorbing effort that he stopped staring at what was around him: “by liver number 2,394 or foot number 9,576, it hardly matters *what* is being cut, shorn, sliced, shredded, hung, or washed” (2011, 138).

But what exactly is the nature of the absorption here? Perhaps the idea is that monotony and repetitive exposure to violence breed callousness—a process that Susan Sontag (1977) described in her early work as characteristic of a world hypersaturated with images of suffering. Yet if that were the case, there would be no need for distraction or for an architecture of concealment: it would be enough for people to just do their job day after day. Sontag herself appears to have had second thoughts about this argument later in her career, suggesting in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004) that she may have overstated the extent to which

viewers become inured by repetition to the sight of violence. Tellingly, it is her later work that Pachirat cites approvingly toward the end of his book.

Perhaps Pachirat's point then is not about callousness but about the pace of work being such that he could no longer pay attention to what was being cut, shorn, and sliced. This aligns well with his account of the grueling demands of work. Yet a skeptical reader may wonder whether this is not to be expected of a newcomer to the slaughterhouse, one not yet used to the working conditions typical at the lower rungs of the labor market. The slaughterhouse is, beyond doubt, a harsh and challenging environment. But how does it compare with the jobs that Pachirat's coworkers, many of them immigrants living in precarious conditions, might have held elsewhere? Pachirat struggled just as we, the authors, certainly would. But is it reasonable to assume that working conditions take a similar toll on more seasoned workers? Is it true that they too could not find a moment to lift their heads? Perhaps the most parsimonious explanation for the compatibility between concealment and sight is that they would prefer not to.

All this suggests that the first premise of the politics of sight may be more deeply flawed than Pachirat acknowledges. Could we rescue it by construing it somewhat differently? Perhaps in order to be successful, the politics of sight must not just remove obstacles to sight, but also force people to see—prevent them from looking away.

UPSET STOMACHS CAN TURN EITHER WAY

This brings us to the second premise of the politics of sight. It holds that seeing repugnant practices will motivate people to rescind their acquiescence to them, ushering in social and political change. The politics of sight relies for its transformative potential on moral sentiments: it is because people feel appalled and shocked by what they see that they will be motivated to reform their institutions and practices.

This premise is the target of Pachirat's second critique. He argues that moral sentiments—of pity, compassion, or indignation—are not as timelessly universal as some, like Rousseau, would have us believe. They are, as Norbert Elias (2000) argued in his magisterial study, also the result of a “civilizing process” that hides and segregates what is distasteful. It is the segregation of violence from everyday life that allows for the expansion of the sentiments of pity or compassion (Pachirat 2011, 249). Pachirat leaves us with the troubling thought that the moral sentiments on which proponents of the politics of sight rely to criticize repugnant practices may be tributary to the existence of those very practices. “The politics of sight,” he writes, “feeds off the very mechanisms of distance and concealment it seeks to overcome; sight and sequestration exist symbiotically” (252). An implication of this argument is that the politics of sight cannot find resolution at the limits, a theme that some of the book's reviewers have underscored (e.g., Feldman 2014).

While we find the appeal to Elias insightful and provocative, we are not sure it presents a fundamental challenge to the politics of sight. Suppose that repugnance toward killing is a function of distance from it. If that distance were to lessen as a result of the politics of sight, repugnance might lessen too, but so would the way we kill since killing would, by stipulation, be done at greater proximity. What this suggests is that if the politics of sight were to run its course, it may result not in the abolishment of slaughter but perhaps in the abandonment of *industrialized* slaughter and the move (or return?) to other forms of killing. Would this be a defeat for the politics of sight, or a victory?

Be that as it may, we believe there is another, more immediate way in which the second premise of the politics of sight can fail. This stems from the recognition that the effects of sight are underdetermined. Instead of prompting people to abandon repugnant practices, sight may drive them instead to legitimate these practices.

Toward the end of the book, Pachirat alludes to a similar concern. Citing Susan Sontag, he writes that “making the repugnant visible [...] may as well result in apathy as action” (2011, 254). Pachirat does not flesh out this thought in any great detail but suggests two underlying mechanisms that might explain why the politics of sight would result in apathy. He proposes, first, that the gruesome may exert a certain fascination, enlisting people as spectators rather than prompting them to change their ways. “A world where slaughterhouses are built with glass walls,” Pachirat writes, “might lead [...] to one in which enterprising slaughterhouses charged people admission to witness or participate in repetitive killing on a massive scale” (2011, 254). While this may indeed be true—after all, crowds did gather enthusiastically to witness public executions—it is not substantiated by the ethnographic material Pachirat presents. Nowhere in the slaughterhouse do we encounter characters magnetically drawn to the spectacle.

Pachirat suggests a second possibility. The politics of sight depends for its transformative potential on shock value. Yet to maintain itself, shock value calls for ever increasing stimuli. The politics of sight could lead to apathy, on this view, because routine exposure to similar acts of violence would lead to a numbing of moral responses. The problem is that this doesn’t do justice to Pachirat’s material either. When he tells one of his coworkers that he shot three animals with the “knocking” gun, he is urged to stop. “Man, that will mess you up. Knockers have to see a psychologist or a psychiatrist or whatever they’re called every three months ... that shit will fuck you up for real” (152–3). Someone who has become numb to certain forms of violence can certainly do “fucked up” things. But it is not clear why *they* would be “fucked up” by the things they do, as the coworker clearly implies. Isn’t numbness a protection against that?

We believe there is a third way in which the politics of sight can shore up the practices it sets out to challenge that is actually consonant with the coworker’s reaction. There is material in Pachirat’s ethnography to

substantiate this alternative reading, though he does not interpret it as such. Consider the third category of workers that Pachirat joins during his fieldwork: those in the chutes, who have the rare opportunity to come into contact with live animals. Their job consists in keeping the cattle “moving up [...] and into the knocking box,” “keeping the line tight” so as not to slow down the production (144, 147). To keep forward momentum, chute workers are equipped with electric prods that they can use to shock the animals.

When Pachirat first takes up position in the chutes, he notices that workers use these prods “extensively,” “sometimes sticking them under the animals’ tails and into their anuses,” which makes the cattle “jump and kick,” and “bellow sharply.” One of the workers uses the prod “in almost rote fashion, shocking practically every animal,” “even when the cattle are tightly packed, with the nose of one animal pushed up against the rear of the animal in front of it,” “often causing the cow to mount the animal in front of it” and defecate on those behind (145).

Troubled by this seemingly senseless cruelty, Pachirat objects and refuses to comply, which leads to tension with his coworkers. “What’s the point of shocking them,” he yells, “They’re all moving through the line anyway.” “The point is pain and torture,” his coworker retorts, laughing, “Now do your motherfucking job and keep this line tight!” (148). Later on, Pachirat explains his coworkers’ insistence on shocking the animals by arguing that it does indeed make for a more “steady stream of raw material entering the plant.” “Once the abstract goal of keeping the line tight takes precedence over the individuality of the animals, it really does make sense to apply the electric shock regularly” (149).

But what if there was more to it than that? What if this was indeed cruelty rather than just a pragmatic strategy to achieve an abstract objective? Killing at close range is more difficult than from afar—it requires the killer to overcome moral inhibitions and sentiments not attenuated by distance (Glover 2000). In the chutes, animals are so close, Pachirat tells us that “I can run a bare hand over their smooth, wet noses, a millisecond of charged, unmediated physical contact.” “At close range,” he adds, “even caked in feces and vomit, the creatures are magnificent, awe-inspiring. [...] I see my distorted reflection outlined in the convex mirror of their glossy eyes” (Pachirat 2011, 145). How can one kill on an industrial scale at such proximity?

To answer this question, one might turn to the theory of cognitive dissonance, which proposes two broad families of responses to the psychological discomfort that arises in situations of this kind. One option is to change one’s behavior. That path, however, is closed for slaughterhouse workers, at least those who want to keep their jobs. The other option is to change one’s cognitions. The easiest way to do that is to take one’s mind off the killing by looking away or being distracted. This is what happens in the rest of the slaughterhouse. What is distinctive about the chutes, however, is precisely that one *cannot* look away because one is confronted viscerally with live creatures. This is why killing

at close range and killing from afar have received different treatments in the literature on violence in war (see Browning 1992; Glover 2000). So how else can one cope?

One adaptive response familiar from the context of war is brutalization—a devaluation of that which is to be killed, which warrants a desensitization to its plight (for a critical discussion, see Browning 1992, 159–62). Harold Garfinkel (1956) famously suggested that such negative reappraisals can be produced performatively through degradation ceremonies. In such ceremonies, that which is to be degraded “must be ritually separated from a place in the legitimate order,” it “must be made ‘strange’” (423). “[Its] former identity stands as accidental; the new identity is the ‘basic reality’. What [it] is now is what, ‘after all,’ [it] was all along” (421–22).

Lee Ann Fujii has described such resignifying performances in the context of war, proposing that actors sometimes enact transgressive violence to construct and project a new reality (2013, 421). Fujii writes of the My Lai massacre that extra-lethal violence inverted roles and roles in ways that “obliterated previous doubts about what was right and wrong, what the men were fighting for, why they were there, and who the real enemy was.” Brutalization emerged as an adaptive response: powerless in the face of “an enemy they could never find,” Charlie Company created a new, carnivalesque reality that cast residents of My Lai in the role of enemy, and “righted the terrible imbalance between their orders and the unforgiving reality on the ground” (417).

This puts the cruel behavior that Pachirat witnessed in the chutes in a different light. Rather than seeing it as gratuitous or pragmatic, we might look at it instead as one way of making do with the tension generated by killing at close range. The electric shocks degrade the cow in ways that facilitate its killing and lessen the discomfort of the chute workers. The cow is revealed for what it was all along—not a “magnificent, awe-inspiring” creature, but just meat. Note how our account differs from Pachirat's. On his reading, cruel behavior can be understood as a result of desensitization: as killing loses its capacity to shock, it becomes easier to partake in it. On our interpretation, cruel behavior is what paves the way for desensitization. What facilitates the killing of animals in the first instance is not indifference but a negative reappraisal of their worth, their reduction to a mere thing. It is in this sense that the job can “fuck you up.”

This leaves open a possibility that the politics of sight must take into account—namely, that forced visibility may not only be compatible with the degradation of animals but that it may, in fact, be an enabling condition for it. Not being able to look away heightens the disagreeableness of the deed, prompting the search for other, more circuitous ways to reduce the discomfort. Concealment, by contrast, might function as a safety valve of sorts, not in the sense that it prevents killing, but in the sense that it makes it possible to kill without degradation.

This brings us to a revision of the second premise of the politics of sight: whether visibility leads to positive

change depends on the adaptive responses available to those who must face up to repugnant practices. If the politics of sight is to succeed, it might have to work on two fronts: forcing people to see *and* blocking the pernicious adaptive responses toward which they may gravitate.

The problem with the politics of sight inside the slaughterhouse is that workers are left with no good way out. In such conditions, the politics of sight runs into a problem of second best. If people cannot change their participation in repugnant practices, on pain of losing their job, and if they cannot look away, they may reach instead for ways to legitimate their participation in these practices. Given the possibility of motivated cognition, it is not just that the “act of making the hidden visible may be *equally likely* to generate other, more effective ways of confining it” (2011, 253, emphasis added), as Pachirat puts it, but that it could in fact generate other, *more dangerous* ways of confining it. Without attention to these dynamics, the politics of sight may end up inadvertently fueling the very practices it sets out to challenge.

Walls to Obstruct or Walls to Shield?

The politics of sight aspires to foment social and political change. Yet regardless of whether change obtains, one might think that a world in which people own up to their society's repugnant practices would be preferable to one in which these practices remain concealed, their costs concentrated on those with fewer socioeconomic resources. This is what we described as the third premise of the politics of sight. It is a rallying cry against hypocrisy and self-delusion, which allow a great many to benefit from such practices without bearing their costs.

What exactly are these costs? Repugnant practices for Elias (2000) are a broad category, ranging from blowing one's nose inappropriately to violence against human beings. They cover things we may disapprove of on aesthetic grounds (how ugly!) or as a matter of taste (yuck!), as well as things we may feel uncomfortable doing for moral reasons (Murphy 1999). Where on that spectrum does the killing of animals fall? Judging by the book's reception, the force of *Every Twelve Seconds* derives in part from the presumption that for most people *here and now*, inflicting pain on sentient beings or killing them with indifference, as if they were raw matter, is not just unpleasant but morally unpalatable (see, e.g., Bastian and Loughnan 2017). Killing in such a way leaves a moral residue, it is something that “scrupulous people might, *prima facie* at least, be disinclined to do” (Williams 1981, 57), even if it is, all things considered, justified. The apt response to partaking in such a practice is not just revulsion, but a form of lingering disquiet.

This is crucial for understanding the kind of burden that those who participate in killing work must bear. They are tasked not just with doing something unpleasant, but with shouldering moral injury on behalf of those who consume the fruits of their labor while remaining at a comfortable distance from it. As Brett

Litz and colleagues define it, moral injury is “the lasting [...] impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (2009, 697; see also Levinson 2015, 220).

Now it is, of course, an open question as to whether repugnant practices, especially those that are *morally* repugnant, should exist in the first place. Perhaps it would be possible to do away with industrialized slaughter and, as a society, maybe we should. Even if we did, however, it is hard to imagine a world that did not involve some form of morally unpalatable labor. Even in a just world, resources may be limited such that public assistance is rationed. Someone will have to turn down unlucky claimants. Even in a society with the most reasonable legal system, people may break the law. Someone will have to sanction them.

If morally unpalatable work is here to stay, we as a society are forced to contend with two questions: How should it be distributed? And how should we live with it? Here again, Pachirat’s discussion of the slaughterhouse is instructive.

What is notable about the industrialized slaughterhouse is that it concentrates the burden of killing on a handful of individuals. This does not appear to have been intentional. Modern slaughterhouses were designed with an eye to hygiene, safety, efficiency and, through the activism of figures like Temple Grandin and animal welfare groups, with the goal of reducing animal suffering. As it turns out, these considerations all militate in favor of circumscribing the act of killing to a portion of the slaughterhouse. Doing so reduces the risk of meat contamination, confines the use of dangerous tools, buffers the production line from the vagaries of killing, and allegedly minimizes the infliction of pain by stunning and killing the animals as rapidly as possible. As a consequence, most slaughterhouse workers never see live cattle and are not involved at the point of death.

Pachirat tells us that the segregation of the work of killing within the slaughterhouse makes it possible for a myth to take hold according to which only one individual—the “knocker”—performs the killing. “The mythologizing of the work of the knocker,” Pachirat writes, “the almost supernaturally evil powers invested in the act of shooting the animals by the other kill floor workers, including, notably, the chute workers themselves—makes possible the construction of a killing ‘other’ even on the kill floor of the industrialized slaughterhouse” (2011, 159).

What should we make of such a myth and of the organization of labor that makes it possible? One might see it as an ideological ploy that serves to obscure reality, a form of wishful thinking or self-deception. Indeed, this is how Pachirat seems to interpret it. So long as the knocker exists, he tells us, it is possible for all other kill-floor workers to “concentrate the heaviest weight of the dirtiest work” on the knocker and to say, “I’m not going to take part in this,” even as they press ahead with their work (160).

But should we be so critical? After all, not all myths are pernicious. So long as the killing goes on, the

mythologization of the knocker may in fact be a useful fiction that shields the vast majority of workers from moral injury. Here, the demographics of the slaughterhouse matter because most of those who work there belong to socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (17) for whom quitting may not be an option. If their complicity in killing were blatantly affirmed, and if they had to go on, this would place them at risk of brutalization. Is that a fair burden to impose? So long as a society’s eating habits keep the slaughterhouse in business, do its members not owe it collectively to those working there to be able to perform their labor without being disfigured by it? Are slaughterhouse workers not entitled, in other words, to the architecture of plausible deniability and the exculpatory myth of the knocker that it makes possible?

This leaves us, the authors, with an uncomfortable thought: if one had to propose a way of organizing industrialized killing that would best protect vulnerable workers from moral injury, one might struggle to come up with something better than the configuration Pachirat describes. That of course may serve as an indictment of industrialized killing altogether. But whether a society parts ways with industrialized killing will owe more to the general public’s reactions than to the remonstrations of workers who are, by Pachirat’s own account, substitutable and in plain supply. In other words, even if one wanted to expose the slaughterhouse to the world at large, in the hopes of changing attitudes toward industrialized slaughter, there might still be a case for maintaining the slaughterhouse as it is for those who work in it, at least until the reactions of the general public prompt a change in practices.

With this in mind—and at the risk of belaboring the point—we would like to propose a different reading of Pachirat’s opening vignette, one of the most memorable in the book. The first two pages of *Every Twelve Seconds* recount an episode in which six cattle escaped from the holding pen of a slaughterhouse in Omaha. The police cornered one of the cows in an alley and, after failing to get it to cooperate, shot it repeatedly under the eyes of slaughterhouse workers who were out on break. Pachirat tells us that the incident was recounted the next day over lunch by a quality control worker, “her face livid with indignation,” and that it sparked “a heated lunch-table discussion about the injustice of the killing and the ineptitude of the police” (2).

Placed at the beginning of a book on industrialized slaughter, the anecdote is ironic: how could the death of a single cow be of such significance to workers who are involved in killing more than twenty-five hundred each day? Pachirat’s answer to the puzzle, as we have seen, is that fractal concealment is at work within the slaughterhouse so that workers are in fact partly shielded from the killing.

But could we not look at the same incident in a different light? One thing the escaped cow suggests is that even though the workers participate in industrialized killing, they are not entirely desensitized by it: when confronted with a live animal, they can still be moved by the sight, as one might indeed hope. This

would be tributary to the fact that killing, within the slaughterhouse, is concealed—either because workers are prevented from seeing (as per Pachirat's interpretation) or because they would prefer not to see and can afford not to (as per the interpretation we have suggested). In either case, this puts the incident in a new perspective. Rather than being ironic, could we not see the workers' indignation as the slaughterhouse's saving grace?

The argument we have presented so far is open to an obvious rejoinder: if something is done out of sight, with the burden shouldered only by a handful of individuals, then we as a society may do it with greater abandon. This brings us to the second question: how should we live with our society's morally repugnant practices?

This is a topic on which there is a well-developed literature in the domain of political action, with seminal contributions by Michael Walzer and Bernard Williams, among others. Both Walzer (1973) and Williams (1981) concede that politicians may sometimes be required to perform morally unpalatable actions. Both grant moreover that these actions may, at times, be the right thing to do all-things-considered. Yet both insist that even if these actions ought to be performed, one must nevertheless remain disinclined to do them. This is so for two reasons. First, because reluctance is the apt response to decisions that involve genuine moral cost. And second, and more importantly, because "only those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary" (Williams 1981, 62). We don't lose our scruples one day and regain them the next.

But what does it take to remain scrupulous, to retain a sensitivity to moral cost, in a line of work that requires one to repeatedly trade in the morally unpalatable? Social psychologists have argued that registering moral cost is uncomfortable. It creates dissonance between the image of ourselves as good and decent persons, which most of us are motivated to maintain, and the deeds we repeatedly perform (Aronson 1969). Psychologists have shown, moreover, that people tend to develop coping responses to reduce such dissonance, and that the pressure to gravitate toward these coping responses increases the more intense the discomfort is (Aronson 1969, 2–3; Zimbardo 2007, 220). If slaughterhouse workers' self-image is to remain positive and if they do not have the luxury to change their behavior because they need the job, then the only way to reduce the tension would be to see their doings in a different light (Sherman and Cohen 2006, 186). This is the slippery slope towards brutalization: workers develop new cognitions (this was beef all along) that explain why their actions (killing every twelve seconds) are something that a decent person might do, after all.

To think about how to counteract that drift, one can look for inspiration at professions that are routinely forced to make morally unpalatable decisions, often because of a shortage of resources. One recurrent piece of advice that social workers and welfare workers are given is to "protect themselves" on the job, not so they

become desensitized to the problems of their clients but precisely so they don't (Zacka 2017, 147–50). This stems from the recognition that dissonance is indeed the proper response to some of the difficult choices they must make, but that one can only sustain a state of dissonance over time by moderating its strength. Mitigating the force of dissonance, by exposing oneself only selectively to the suffering of others, is one way to resist the drift toward desensitization. Seen in this light, the very mechanisms of concealment that exist in the slaughterhouse—walls, myths—may serve not as instruments of self-deception so much as crutches that enable workers to retain the disposition most appropriate to a job that might otherwise push them towards desensitization.

The same holds beyond the walls of the slaughterhouse. If we find ourselves caught up, as citizens or consumers, in a society where our hands are bound to remain dirty, either through our own deeds or through those committed in our name or for our sake, the most pressing task may not be to remove all walls, as the politics of sight advocates, but to think carefully about which ones deserve to stay and how thick or porous they should be.

By presenting a choice between concealment and visibility, the politics of sight excludes the middle: the realm of selective concealment. And yet it is there, aware of our society's repugnant practices yet partly sheltered from them by walls, that we may be best positioned to muster the resources to maintain lasting pressure on such practices. Walls, not so we can make peace with what happens behind them but so we can remain disturbed by it, cultivating a "habit of reluctance" which, as Williams put it, "is an essential obstacle against the happy acceptance of the intolerable" (1981, 63). Walls, so we can shield our better angels from the transformative power of dissonance and the Faustian bargain it offers—peace of mind, at the cost of self-deception or brutalization.

CONCLUSION

Transparency is a shibboleth of our times. There is a seemingly endless appetite for it. Activists demand it tirelessly of government, of corporations, of universities, of researchers, sometimes even of security agencies and the Church. And for good reason. Power often works by concealing and mystifying its true nature, dark deeds frequently lurk behind the euphemisms institutions use to describe their practices, and the mild manners for which liberal societies pride themselves only flourish against a background of monopolized legitimate violence. This is what gives the politics of sight its immediate appeal, one that resonates particularly strongly in advanced capitalist economies, where so much of a society's morally unpalatable labor is done out of the sight of those who ultimately benefit from it.

As authors, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that we too feel the charm of this vision and its militant agenda. Sight is indeed an important prerequisite and stimulant for political change. Yet in this article

we have tried to argue that the politics of sight is neither the cure it professes to be, nor concealment the evil it is made to be. Shedding light on repugnant practices is no guarantee that we will see them, seeing them is no guarantee that we will change our ways for the better, and facing up frontally to such practices may not be the best way to live responsibly with them.

Is this a counsel of despair? Not quite. We have suggested that it may be possible to salvage something of the politics of sight's transformative agenda by revising its premises. For people to see their society's repugnant practices, it is not enough for obstructions to be lifted—they must also be prevented from looking away. If sight is to result in change, other adaptive responses to the dissonance that ensues must be blocked. All the while, concealment can be a useful ally if used selectively, enabling members of a society to maintain lasting pressure on the practices they find repugnant without succumbing to the temptation to reconcile themselves to them.

The politics we have in mind points beyond the dialectic of concealment and transparency, and focuses instead on how we might relate to the forms of life that surround us without degrading them. Judging by the overall arc of Pachirat's work and his repeated critiques of discourses centered on transparency (2009; 2015; 2018, 141–51), this is a turn he might well be sympathetic with. Is this still a politics of sight, given everything else it entails? Perhaps not. But it is a politics that also aspires to shake us from our torpor, only one that recognizes that it is not just obscurity that has the power to blind but light too, especially for eyes that have grown accustomed to the dark.

In parallel to engaging with the politics of sight, we have also sought to illustrate the value of taking a style of reading commonly used in political theory for the study and interpretation of philosophical texts—a combination of analytic reconstruction of arguments and close reading—and bringing it to bear on a different kind of text, a published ethnography. By revisiting the material presented in *Every Twelve Seconds* with an eye to theories of cognitive dissonance, emotion regulation, and motivated cognition, we have tried to show (1) that close readings can be deployed to critically engage with interpretive research, (2) that good ethnographies are pregnant with “surplus meanings” that can serve to generate alternative accounts that sit in productive tension with those proposed by the ethnographer, and (3) that these novel accounts can serve to reveal zones of ambiguity and suggest alternative mechanisms, thus paving the way for theory building and future empirical research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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