

IX

A Politics of Sight

A fear haunted the latter part of the eighteenth century: the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths. It sought to break up the patches of darkness that blocked the light, eliminate the shadowy areas of society, demolish unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented.

—Michel Foucault

“We’ve been watching you,” Donald says to me suddenly one day. It is 6:00 A.M., and I have just completed the pre-operational inspection. The two of us are standing near the vacuum stands, out of sight of the kill floor manager’s office. “We’ve

been watching you,” he repeats, “and we think you’re a pretty good guy.”

“Okay,” I respond warily.

“Well, you know there’s shit on this meat, don’t you? We’d like you to talk to us about what’s going on at this plant.”

I am silent.

“You have kids, right? You want them eating this meat? Think about it, will you? Why don’t you meet me tonight at nine at Dave’s Pub and we can talk about it more then.”

The rest of the day blurs by. I am three months into my quality-control position and already deeply uncomfortable with the simultaneous concealment (of food safety and humane handling violations) and surveillance (of kill floor workers) required by the job. Although I had initially planned to work on the kill floor for up to twelve months, my movement from cooler to chutes to quality control has already afforded me a thoroughness of access that I could not have anticipated when I first applied for work five months earlier. The initial fear that I might spend an entire year hanging livers has been replaced by physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion from the grueling physical demands and ethical conflicts of quality-control work. Given the level of access already afforded by my three slaughterhouse jobs, both the rationale and my personal motivation for continued direct participant-observation work on the kill floor has been weakened. And now, from one of the head USDA inspectors in the plant, comes an invitation to become a whistleblower.

Meeting Donald at the bar that evening, I disclose that I am a researcher interested in writing an account of industrialized slaughter from the perspective of those who carry it out. Incredulous at first, he eventually accepts my explanation and reiterates that he would like me to consider testifying about

what happens on the kill floor. I decline, noting that from the start my decision to access the kill floor as an entry-level worker without informing the management of my intention of writing about my experiences has included a commitment not to directly expose a specific slaughterhouse or individuals. At the same time, I offer Donald some insights into how the quality-control position in particular works, hoping to provide him with concrete steps he might take to increase the effectiveness of his food-safety monitoring. Several hours later, we part on amicable terms.

I quit at the end of the next day. During the day I let Ramón and a few others know that I am leaving, and we make plans to stay in contact. Noting the slaughterhouse's employment-at-will policy, which states, "Either you or the company may terminate employment at any time, with or without notice," I compose a brief letter of resignation to the kill floor manager and the human resources office, leaving a copy for each at the end of the work day. It states that I regret the abrupt nature of my resignation and lists the work equipment I have left behind in my locker: one employee identification card, one parking permit, four keys to various offices, two hard hats, one pair of leather boots, two pairs of rubber boots, one digital thermometer, one stopwatch, one black permanent ink marker, one flashlight, two knives, one sharpening steel, one orange hook, one plastic scabbard, one pair of safety gloves, one radio, and all uniforms not currently being cleaned.¹

The prosaic list belies the complexity of observing and participating in the massive, routinized work of killing, work that remains hidden from the majority of those who literally feed off such labor. It is a complexity that highlights the unexpected sympathy between concealment and surveillance in the social strategies that distance dirty, dangerous, and de-

meaning work such as this from those it benefits directly. What I have called a politics of sight—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—must be alert to this sympathy.

As a whole, the slaughterhouse functions as Georges Bataille's cursed and quarantined boat, described in the epigraph to Chapter 1: physically, linguistically, and socially isolated in a zone of confinement that is inaccessible to most of society.² By removing the methodological distance that typically separates researchers from the social worlds they study and undertaking direct participant-observation research within the slaughterhouse, I sought in this book to provide insight into what it means, from the perspective of the participants, to carry out the work of industrialized killing. The divisions of labor and space inside the slaughterhouse walls revealed by this insider perspective exemplified not only how *distance* and concealment segregate the slaughterhouse from society as a whole but also how *surveillance* and concealment sequester the participants from the work of killing within the walls of the slaughterhouse itself.

To bring this work directly before your eyes, I mapped the slaughterhouse's uncharted interior, examining its contours and layout. Here we discovered that the slaughterhouse is not a single place at all. Its internal divisions create physical, linguistic, and phenomenological walls that often feel every bit as rigid as those marking off the exterior of the slaughterhouse from the outside world. From this internal vantage point it makes little sense to talk about "the slaughterhouse" as if it were a single entity within which responsibility for the work of killing can be pinpointed as belonging to this or that individual or department.

We first encountered the slaughterhouse as it appeared to visitors, who entered through its front office, where buttoned-down, khaki-wearing workers comfortably seated in leather chairs typed away in front of flat-screen computer monitors while discussing cattle futures on hand-free telephone mouthpieces. We saw the room into which these visitors were ushered, and where they gathered around a small shaded window cut into the only opaque wall, the wall of steel.

Framed in the window, line after line of white-frocked, white-helmeted workers stood shoulder to shoulder pulling chunks of meat off large moving conveyors, cutting it up quickly with their knives, and then throwing it back onto the conveyors. Past the fabrication department lay a vast, sepulchral cooler filled with row after row of silent, still carcasses. Down a steep flight of steps more shaking, swinging carcasses rattled by on their way to the cooler.

After passing through the fabrication department and cooler, we arrived at a hot, humid place whose straightforward name, “kill floor,” belied an astonishing intricacy of divisions in labor and space. Workers in white, gray, green, yellow, red, and purple hard hats dotted the floor, most performing a single, repetitive task. Bung cappers and belly rippers, backers and bungee-cord attachers, cattle drivers and codders, heart trimmers and head chislers, prestickers and pregutters, paunch pullers and pizzle removers, supply-room staff and spinal cord extractors, toenail clippers and tendon cutters, tripe packers and tail baggers, Whizard knife wielders and weasand removers—121 distinct jobs in all make up the entity known as the kill floor.

Next, I described my own entry into the slaughterhouse. After an anxiety-ridden application process, I gained employment on the kill floor, where I was issued the white hat and

rubber steel-toed boots of an entry-level worker. From here I moved through three jobs, each with a radically different relation to the work of killing. My white-hat cooler work introduced me to the daily rhythms of killing from a distance, killing mediated by the monotony of hanging liver after liver descending from on high via an unending line of moving hooks. It was a work of killing in which the most vivid experiences were throwing fat at friends and strategizing against those cocky fiends, the liver packers. Here the struggle was against monotony rather than the live animal whose steaming liver I now held between green-gloved hands, poised to thrust it onto a hook to be chilled, packed, and exported to distant places.

Next I donned the gray hat of the chute worker. My stint in the chute was short but critical: it was here that I joined ranks with the mere 8 or so workers—out of a total workforce of more than 800—who confront the cattle as living beings. And it was here that I experienced the work of the knocker, that 1 of the 120 + 1, who delivered the blow that knocked each creature unconscious. I listened in as the knocker was mythologized, even by hardened chute workers who themselves indiscriminately prodded cattle with electric shocks, as *the* killer among the 800, his job *the* work of killing, among the 121 jobs on the kill floor. Yet even here, at the one point in the long chain of industrialized killing where the animals are at once sensible and insensible, conscious and not conscious, it was impossible to state categorically that there was a moment when the cattle were alive and a separate, distinct moment when they were dead.

Finally, I entered the world of the green-hat quality-control worker, moving up in authority within the plant hierarchy and winning with that increased elevation the freedom

to venture through divisions of space and labor that had once proved impenetrable. In a single day, I traversed wide swaths of the slaughterhouse, now down in the basement measuring lactic-acid concentrations, now out in the chutes listening for the vocalizations of the cattle, now at the Critical Control Point looking for fecal material, now standing at the down puller watching the hides ripped from the soft white carcasses. I gained vertical mobility as well, tiptoeing across the catwalk high above the kill floor, watching for workers who failed to sanitize their knives.

But this visibility did not necessarily translate into a deeper appreciation for the totality of the work of killing. Yes, it allowed me to map the kill floor with a level of detail unfathomable from the vantage point of any single line worker. Yes, it allowed me to listen in on the kill floor managers talking to red-hat supervisors over the radio. And yes, it offered me access to managers in the front office and to USDA inspectors with whom I would not have otherwise exchanged even a wordless nod. But all these things were measured out, acronym by acronym, in a steady drip of technical requirements and bureaucratic categories until I was straining on my toes, barely able to keep my nose above a rising tide of HACCPs, NRs, CCP-1s, CCP-2s, CCP-3s, pre-operational inspections, lactic-acid concentrations, sterile-carcass swabs, yellow tagging cards, gauge readings, dentition verifications, and vocalization, slip-and-fall, sensibility-on-the-bleed-rail, and successful-stunning-with-one-shot audits. Occupying the lofty vantage point of the catwalk above the kill floor, I discovered the sympathy between surveillance and sequestration as mechanisms of power, actively participating in Foucault's "apparatus of total and circulating mistrust," discussed in Chapter 1, which relied centrally on an ideal of total visibility for its effectiveness. This ideal

worked in close symbiosis with the continued segregation of the work of killing itself, demonstrating the capacity for surveillance and sight to reinforce, rather than subvert, distance and concealment.³

The zones of confinement that characterize contemporary practices of industrialized killing replicate one another, beginning with the division between the slaughterhouse and society at large, followed by the divisions of labor and space between different departments within the slaughterhouse, and reproduced yet again in minute intradepartmental divisions. These zones segregate the work of killing not only from the ordinary members of society but also at what might be expected to be the most explicitly violent site of all: the kill floor.

Let us now imagine, as an alternative, a world in which distance and concealment failed to operate, in which walls and checkpoints did not block sight, in which those who benefited from dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work had a visceral engagement with it, a world in which words explained rather than hid and in which those with legal, medical, scientific, and academic expertise immersed themselves in the lived experiences of those they claimed authority over. Imagine, that is, a world organized around the *removal*, rather than the creation, of physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distances.

In this world, each time the state put someone to death, there would be a national lottery. Five people, perhaps including you, would be randomly selected to carry out the killing. The first would deliver the news to the prisoner's family, driving down back roads of hot asphalt or walking up steep stairs to a cramped tenement apartment, where the messenger would explain to the prisoner's family that in the name of the citizens of the state, their daughter or son, sister or brother would be injected, electrocuted, hanged, or shot in a month's time. The

second person selected would prepare the prisoner's last meal, the third the chemicals, electric cords, rope, or bullets. A fourth would unlock the cell and accompany the condemned prisoner to the killing room. Once the fifth had strapped the prisoner into place, all five would gather and perform the killing.

In this world, each time a citizen relied on his or her citizenship to provide a privilege denied to a noncitizen, whether evacuation in the last days before a genocide or preference in college admissions, that citizen would need to experience directly the life of a noncitizen. Perhaps the citizen would lose his or her place on the helicopter to the noncitizen, driving home the arbitrariness of decisions made on the basis of birth-place. Perhaps the citizen would have to leave the seminar-room discussions of immigration and spend the day laboring beside undocumented workers planting flowers on the manicured campus lawn, paid under the table by the landscaping subcontractor who picked them up in front of Home Depot.

In this world there would be no "all-volunteer" armies, only a compulsory draft: first a selection of the sons and daughters of the decision makers and weapons manufacturers and then one organized by tax bracket, from highest to lowest. No dedicated spaces of "extraordinary rendition" would exist; the "enhanced interrogation techniques" performed on our behalf would be conducted before our eyes in our living rooms and public squares. No garbage truck would come in the dark morning hours of our dreams to take our waste out of sight and consciousness; the sick, the old, and the mad would not be shut away behind impenetrable walls of jargon and concrete; birth and death would not be locked up in institutionalized hallways. Sites of production would not be divorced from sites of consumption, and buying a pair of jeans would require the purchaser to touch the hands that sewed the seams. Every

zone of privilege would exist in full contact with the zone of confinement that was its counterpart. In this world, the imperative that maps, proscriptively and prescriptively, the landscape of contemporary industrialized slaughter is reversed: to eat meat would be to know the killers, the killing, and the animals themselves.

The impulse to link sight and political transformation is strong. Returning to the earlier discussion of Foucault's articulation of the link between surveillance and power, a politics of sight that seeks to subvert physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distance in order to produce social and political change might be understood as a generalized Panopticon in which the prisoners have replaced the guards in the central tower that enables them to see without limits. The overseer's view, aimed at control and discipline, would be replaced with a view, accessible to all, aimed at transparency and transformation. Contrasting Jean-Jacques Rousseau's egalitarian vision with Bentham's disciplinary one, Foucault sketches the contours of this politics of sight:

What in fact was the Rousseauist dream that motivated many of the revolutionaries? It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles. . . . This reign of 'opinion,' so often invoked at this time, represents a

mode of operation through which power is exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in some sort of immediate, collective, and anonymous gaze. A form of power whose main instance is that of opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness. If Bentham's project aroused interest, this was because it provided a formula applicable to many domains, the formula of "power through transparency," subjection by "illumination."

If the disciplinary project of control underlying Bentham's Panopticon might be summed up as "each comrade becomes an overseer," the generalization of the Panopticon based on a society-wide dismantling of distance and concealment as mechanisms of power might be "each overseer becomes a comrade."⁴ Take the same power of sight that serves the purposes of the dominating overseer in Bentham's Panopticon and use it as a counterforce: this is the strategy characterizing diverse movements across the political spectrum that seek to make visible what is hidden in zones of confinement as a catalyst for political and social transformation. It is a strategy that seeks to invert the "power through transparency" formula in the service of transformation rather than control and domination.

In her "ambiguous Utopia" *The Dispossessed* (1974), the science fiction novelist Ursula Le Guin juxtaposes a world that works through distancing with one in which the operating motive is transparency, offering a vision of the shape that such an inversion of "power through transparency" might take. Le Guin's protagonist, Shevek, is a brilliant physicist from the anarchist colony Anarres who is visiting Urras, the planet from which the Anarres anarchists seceded generations ago. Walk-

ing through a shopping district on Urras, Shevek is shocked and perplexed: “The strangest thing about the nightmare street was that none of the millions of things for sale were made there. They were only sold there. Where were the workshops, the factories, where were the farmers, the craftsmen, the miners, the weavers, the chemists, the carvers, the dyers, the designers, the machinists, where were the hands, the people who made? Out of sight, somewhere else. Behind walls. All the people in all the shops were either buyers or sellers. They had no relation to the things but that of possession.”⁵

This relation of possession, characterized by concealment and distance of production from consumption, is reversed in the arrangement of space on Shevek’s home planet, Anarres, where “nothing was hidden”:

The squares, the austere streets, the low buildings, the unwallled workyards, were charged with vitality and activity. As Shevek walked he was constantly aware of other people walking, working, talking, faces passing, voices calling, gossiping, singing, people alive, people doing things, people afoot. Workshops and factories fronted on squares or on their open yards, and their doors were open. He passed a glassworks, the workman dipping up a great molten blob as casually as a cook serves soup. Next to it was a busy yard where the foamstone was cast for construction. The gang foreman, a big woman in a smock white with dust, was supervising the pouring of a cast with a loud and splendid flow of language. After that came a small wire factory, a district laundry, a luthier’s where musical instruments were made and repaired, the district

small-goods distributory, a theater, a tile works. The activity going on in each place was fascinating, and mostly out in full view. Children were around, some involved in the work with the adults, some underfoot making mudpies, some busy with games in the street, one sitting perched up on the roof of the learning center with her nose deep in a book. The wiremaker had decorated the shopfront with patterns of vines worked in painted wire, cheerful and ornate. The blast of steam and conversation from the wide open doors of the laundry was overwhelming. No doors were locked, few shut. There were no disguises and no advertisements. It was all there, all the work, all the life of the city, open to the eye and to the hand.⁶

The contrast between Urras and Anarres captures perfectly the distinctions between visible/invisible, plain/hidden, and open/confined that, in theory, keep repugnant activities hidden and therefore make them tolerable. Breaching the zones of confinement and rendering the repugnant visible thus appears as an available tactic of social and political transformation. Le Guin's portrait of Anarres, a place where "it was all there, all the work, all the life of the city, open to the eye and to the hand," is powerful in its appeal. Le Guin is, in effect, inviting us to imagine a world in which physical, social, and linguistic mechanisms of distance and concealment are subverted; growing up on Anarres, Shevek is shocked by the way those mechanisms separate consumption and production on Urras.

But how might the work of killing fit into this society "where all is open to the eye and to the hand"? Would children be permitted to wander the kill floor, to work with, say, the

lower belly ripper or make mud pies out of eviscerated livers? As part of this impulse for transparency, the food writer Michael Pollan advances the powerful idea of the glass abattoir, which he developed after visiting an open-air chicken slaughterhouse in Virginia:

This is going to sound quixotic, but maybe all we need to do to redeem industrial animal agriculture in this country is to pass a law requiring that the steel and concrete walls of the CAFO's [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] and slaughterhouses be replaced with . . . glass. If there's any new "right" we need to establish, maybe it's this one: the right to look. No other country raises and slaughters its food animals quite as intensively or brutally as we [in the United States] do. Were the walls of our meat industry to become transparent, literally or even figuratively, we would not long continue to do it this way. Tail-docking and sow crates and beak-clipping would disappear overnight, and the days of slaughtering 400 head of cattle an hour would come to an end. For who could stand the sight?

Like the open shop fronts and factories of Le Guin's Anarres, Pollan's glass-walled slaughterhouse is an attempt to counter distance and concealment as mechanisms of power by making all "open to the eye." The repugnant practices of the slaughterhouse (no other country slaughters its animals as brutally) continue only because they take place in a zone of confinement (the walls of the slaughterhouse), and these practices would come to a halt (disappear overnight) if there were a breach in the zone of confinement that made the repugnant visible (were the walls of

the slaughterhouse to become transparent, literally or even figuratively). Reworded in this way, Pollan's glass-abattoir argument relies centrally on the assumption that simply making the repugnant visible is sufficient to generate a transformational politics: for who could stand the sight?

The rhetorical force of this question presumes a more or less standardized response, a generalized opinion, to industrialized slaughter made visible. Disgust, shock, pity, horror: the precise emotive label is less important than the assumption, the unarticulated expectation, of a reaction that would engender political action to end or transform the practices of industrialized killing. Pollan's glass abattoir is a powerful and concrete expression of the relations between "power through transparency" and "the reign of opinion" we encountered in Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon. These practices continue, Pollan implies, because they are hidden, shrouded in darkness, and confined to remote places. Under the light of everyone's gaze, under *our* gaze, they will wither and shrivel up, scorched by the heat of our disgust, our horror, our pity, and the political action these reactions engender.

Paradoxically, an assumption of "power through transparency" also motivates those who fight to keep the slaughterhouse and related repugnant practices quarantined and sequestered from sight. The recently proposed Iowa legislation (also under consideration in Florida) that seeks to criminalize those who make visible the hidden work of industrialized slaughter and other contemporary animal-production practices is also based on the assumption, shared by Le Guin and Pollan, that the act of making the hidden visible could generate political and social transformation. This legislation counteracts a politics of sight by seeking to create and maintain zones of concealment and areas of darkness around contem-

porary practices of food production. By criminalizing the production, possession, and distribution of records of such hidden work—where records are defined expansively to include “any printed, inscribed, visual, or audio information that is placed or stored on a tangible medium, and that may be accessed in a perceivable form, including but not limited to any paper or electronic format” (defined expansively enough, in other words, to include the book you are now reading)⁸—proponents of such legislation ironically underscore a key assumption of any politics of sight: the transformational potential inherent in making the hidden visible.

Pity (or horror, disgust, and shock), then, is the assumed response to slaughter made visible, both by those who seek to transform contemporary slaughter practices and by those who seek to maintain the status quo. In a politics of sight, pity and its related emotions carry the burden of transformation. Rousseau provided the clearest statement of the role of pity in social improvement: “Men would have never been anything but monsters if Nature had not given them pity in support of reason. . . . Indeed, what are Generosity, Clemency, Humanity, if not Pity applied to the weak, the guilty, or the species in general? It is pity which carries us without reflection to the assistance of those we see suffer; it is pity which, in the state of Nature, takes the place of Laws, morals, and virtue, with the advantage that no one is tempted to disobey its gentle voice. . . . It is, in a word, in this Natural sentiment rather than in subtle arguments that one has to seek the cause of the repugnance to evil-doing which every human being would feel even independent of his education.”⁹

Against Rousseau’s timeless universalization of pity and “repugnance to evil-doing” in the face of the physically and morally repugnant, however, we must set one of the central

conclusions of Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*: as violence is increasingly monopolized by the state and sanitized from the sphere of everyday life, we have redefined "the repugnant," expanding its frontiers and refining our response to it. In Elias's account, it is the increasing segregation and concealment of violence from the sphere of everyday life that leads to this expansion, a refinement and intensification of what Rousseau terms the sentiment of pity or commiseration, what Anthony Giddens characterizes as events that arouse existential questioning, what Hannah Arendt references as "the animal pity by which all normal men are afflicted in the presence of physical suffering," what Max Horkheimer terms "the solidarity of the living," and what Lev Tolstoy evokes in passages like the following: "When a man sees an animal dying, a horror comes over him. What he is himself—his essence, visibly before his eyes, perishes—ceases to exist."¹⁰

The expansion of the frontiers of repugnance as a complementary aspect of the distancing and concealment characteristic of the civilizing process is underscored if we contrast Tolstoy's universalized, timeless man, who reacts with horror at the sight of suffering, with accounts of institutionalized or socially sanctioned violence inflicted against animals in earlier times or in contemporary but more "primitive" societies. Take, for instance, the two descriptions offered below, the first separated from "civilization" by time and the second by space:

In Paris during the sixteenth century it was one of the festive pleasures of Midsummer Day to burn alive one or two dozen cats. This ceremony was very famous. The populace assembled. Solemn music was played. Under a kind of scaffold an enormous pyre

was erected. Then a sack or basket containing the cats was hung from the scaffold. The sack or basket began to smolder. The cats fell into the fire and were burned to death, while the crowd reveled in their caterwauling.

Indifference to the pain of animals has been frequently observed among [contemporary] hunter-gatherers. Consider, for instance, the Gikwe Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, a people known for their gentleness toward each other and toward outsiders. But this gentleness cannot apply, for obvious reasons, to the animals they have to kill for food. A certain callousness toward animal suffering is evident even when hunger is not a pressing question. Elizabeth Thomas, in her book *The Harmless People*, describes an event which, because it is quite ordinary, reveals a hunting people's deep, unreflexive attitude toward animal life. A man named Gai was about to roast a tortoise which belonged to his infant son Nhwakwe. Gai placed a burning stick against the tortoise's belly. The tortoise kicked, jerked its head, and urinated in profusion. The heat had the effect of parting the two hard plates on the shell of the belly, and Gai thrust his hand inside. While the tortoise struggled, Gai slit the belly with his knife and pulled out the intestines. "The tortoise by now had retreated part way into its shell, trying to hide there, gazing out from between its front knees. Gai reached the heart, which was still beating, and flipped it onto the ground, where it jerked violently." Meanwhile, the baby Nhwakwe came to sit by his father.

“A tortoise is such a slow tough creature that its body can function although its heart is gone. Nhwakwe put his wrists to his forehead to imitate in a most charming manner the way in which the tortoise was trying to hide. Nhwakwe looked just like the tortoise.”¹¹

These accounts antagonize “civilized” sensibilities. They offend against that “horror” described by Tolstoy, the commiseration evoked in Rousseau, and the “solidarity of the living” addressed by Horkheimer: in short, they provoke reactions of physical and moral disgust in those whose frontiers of repugnance have expanded as a result of the operations of distance and concealment that we have recognized as the primary mechanisms of the civilizing process. Unlike Rousseau, who naturalizes pity as a “sentiment of Nature,” Elias demonstrates that pity (like disgust, shock, and horror) is an emotive response that becomes increasingly refined and widespread as the frontiers of repugnance grow. These frontiers, in turn, expand in proportion to the advancement of a civilizing process that has as its central mechanism concealment and distance, the hiding away of what is distasteful. “Civilized” humans separated by time from the festival public killings of cats in sixteenth-century Europe or by space from the tortoise-eating Gai may react to these accounts with pity, disgust, and shock, but it is a reaction predicated on the operations that remove from sight, without actually eliminating, equally shocking practices required to sustain the orbit of their everyday lives. The work of killing detailed in this book is an account of precisely one such contemporary practice.

Here again, an unexpected sympathy between surveillance and sequestration is revealed, and seemingly contradic-

tory ideas about the relations between power and sight are shown to be intimately connected in actual practice: both, it turns out, are modes of power capable of acting in concert to reinforce relations of domination. The very question “For who could stand the sight?” becomes historically intelligible only in the context of a “reign of opinion” dependent for its existence on the *continued* operation of distance and concealment, the *continued* hiding from sight of what is classified as repugnant. In this way, the ideal of the generalized Panopticon, of a world where all is open to the eye and the hand, and of a glass-walled slaughterhouse paradoxically relies on the very distance and concealment they seek to counteract for the emotive engine that is implicitly or explicitly assumed to generate their transformational power. The politics of sight feeds off the very mechanisms of distance and concealment it seeks to overcome; sight and sequestration exist symbiotically.

The answer to distance and concealment as mechanisms of domination, however, is not more distance and concealment. In a world characterized by the operation of physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distance and concealment as techniques of power, movements and organizations that seek to subvert or shorten this distance through a politics of sight are necessary and important. WikiLeaks, Transparency International, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Operation Rescue, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, the Humane Society of the United States, the Humane Farming Association, Smile Train, the Open Society Institute—these are just a few of the vast number of movements that aim at the metaphorical equivalent of a world in which slaughterhouses are enclosed by walls of glass. Advancing dissimilar or even highly antago-

nistic political agendas, these movements nonetheless share a common politics of sight insofar as they deploy words, images, and social media to breach zones of confinement on the implicit or explicit assumption that once those breaches are created, a “reign of opinion” rooted in outrage, pity, disgust, sympathy, compassion, solidarity, shock, horror, or some other emotive response will lead to political action in the service of their desired goals. For who could stand the sight?

But as the demonstration of the potential for sequestration and sight to work in conjunction with each other suggests, it is a risky strategy and one that always yields imperfect results. “For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock,” writes Susan Sontag—to which we could add that if shock, like many other emotions, requires increasing stimuli to maintain itself, then we are not far from a strategy that demands increasing intensification of its representations of suffering, pain, and the repulsive in its effort to reduce their actual occurrences in the world. This intensification, in turn, would reduce the shock level of subsequent representations in yet another iteration of the symbiotic relation between sight and concealment.¹²

The account of the work of killing provided in this book suggests a much more nuanced relation between sight and sequestration than simple binaries between visible/invisible, plain/hidden, and open/confined can accommodate. Even when intended as a tactic of social and political transformation, the act of making the hidden visible may be equally likely to generate other, more effective ways of confining it. We have already seen, with the slaughterhouse quality-control worker, how isolation and sequestration are possible even under conditions of total visibility. A world where slaughterhouses are

built with glass walls might lead in turn to one in which enterprising slaughterhouses charged people admission to witness or participate in repetitive killing on a massive scale. A world in which a lottery is used to select citizens to kill condemned prisoners might spawn a black market for the sale of winning lottery tickets, an opportunity to witness death up close under the sanction of the state. The logic of “who can stand the sight?” is as likely to be a basis for making a profit off the *pleasure* of feeling pity for the less fortunate as it is for the transformation of their plight. Making the repugnant visible, Sontag notes, may as well result in apathy as action: “The gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look. Those with the stomach to look are playing a role authorized by many glorious depictions of suffering. Torment, a canonical subject in art, is often represented in painting as a spectacle, something being watched (or ignored) by other people. The implication is: no, it cannot be stopped—and the mingling of inattentive with attentive onlookers underscores this.”¹³

Imagine once again a world organized around the removal of physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distances. Is such a world desirable? Is such a world possible? “An Ambiguous Utopia” is the subtitle of Ursula Le Guin’s treatise on Anarres, that anarchist colony where all is “open to the eye and the hand.” Insofar as the ideal of transparency exists in intimate relation with the mechanisms of distance and concealment it seeks to overcome, it too is deeply ambiguous. Concerned with the subjecting power of a generalized gaze, some will dismiss the ideal, like vision itself, as a trap. Others, placing their faith in a weight of opinion and the immutable timelessness of pity, will energetically advance the project of bringing every dark thing to light, demolishing every distance between what is seen and what is hidden. The ambiguity in-

herent in the ideal of transparency opens up a vast empirical research agenda that might incorporate instances of the politics of sight as diverse as the political movements that employ it today. The aim of such research would include a close specification of which conditions, contexts, and types of making visible are likely to be more politically transformative and which are likely to result in renewed forms of sequestration and concealment.

The account of industrialized slaughter provided in this book itself enacts a politics of sight, seeking to subvert particular physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distances separating the reader from the slaughterhouse. At the same time, it is also an account, from the perspective of lived experience, of how concealment and visibility are at work within the slaughterhouse, demonstrating that hierarchical surveillance and control are not incompatible with the compartmentalization and hiding from view of repulsive practices, even at the very site of killing. Where distance and concealment continue to operate as mechanisms of domination, a politics of sight that breaches zones of confinement may indeed be a critically important catalyst for political transformation. This politics of sight, however, must acknowledge the possibility that sequestration will continue even under conditions of total visibility. And, it must also remain alert to the ways in which distance and concealment provide the historical conditions of possibility for its effectiveness. These conclusions signal the need for a context-sensitive politics of sight that recognizes both the possibilities and pitfalls of 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. In this book I have offered footholds for such a politics through a detailed account of how sequestra-

tion and surveillance distance the work of industrialized killing from society at large as well as from the very people who perform it. By means of these footholds, we might move toward a transformation not only of how the work of industrialized killing and analogous repugnant practices are seen but also of how, if at all, they are carried out.