

# Why Seeing Is Not Believing and Why Believing Is Seeing: On the Politics of Sight

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**S**ocial movements often appeal to the politics of sight, meaning that if people knew about a given injustice, political transformation would follow. Jasmine English and Bernardo Zacka articulate two central premises of the politics of sight: “(1) exposing morally repugnant practices will make us see them, (2) seeing such practices will stop us from acquiescing to them.” Considering the case of slaughterhouse workers, Timothy Pachirat and English and Zacka challenge the previous premises. This article complements their contributions by theorizing what I call Western conceptual/language and the role this plays in forming our subjectivities not to recognize violence on the one hand, and to be sovereign masters over animals on the other. I conclude by discussing the political implications of these arguments for the politics of sight, including the role of concealment and exposure, and the conditions needed for humans to see animals in their full ethical weight.


## INTRODUCTION

**I**n their recent article, English and Zacka (2022) draw attention to a piece by the Editorial Board of the New York Times whose headline reads “Don’t look away” (Editorial Board 2019). Underneath the piece’s title, the reader’s gaze is immediately directed to a drawing made by a prisoner of Guantánamo Bay, Abu Zubaydah. The illustration depicts a torture technique called waterboarding and seeks to exemplify, “in raw and agonizing detail, the methods that Americans—soldiers, psychologists, spies, women and men—have devised to break down prisoners through pain, panic, brainwashing and other barbaric and illegal tools.” The editorial emphasizes that this sketch, and others like this one, “must be seen” because they will uncover the lies and euphemisms used by the C.I.A. in their program of “enhanced interrogation,”<sup>1</sup> which is in itself “one of the more devious euphemisms ever devised.” There are many other instances in which social movements allude to the idea that seeing violence will lead to political change. From people working to make smartphones in appalling conditions, to commercial fishing, and wars.

Similarly, in animal rights circles, authors like Michael Pollan have argued that if the walls of factory farms were made of glass, we would put an end to

intensive animal farming; “for who could stand the sight?” (Pollan 2006, 233).<sup>2</sup> Janneke Vink has also said that “transparency ... [is] a potential hidden gem waiting to be discovered by animal welfare groups” (Vink 2020, 97). Even industrial farming lobbies believe that transparency is an immediate threat to their interests, as the passing of recent anti-whistle-blower legislation attests.<sup>3</sup> In short, the Platonic idea that “seeing is believing” (McArthur and Wilson 2020, 25) is at the very heart of animal rights theory and animal advocacy.<sup>4</sup> With a certain sense of wonder and shock, I have often heard those animal rights advocates and vegans who uphold the belief that “seeing is believing” asking: “Why is it that when people know that farmed animals suffer, they continue to eat them? How can it be?!”

In *Every Twelve Seconds*, an outstanding ethnography of factory farming, Timothy Pachirat challenges what he calls the “politics of sight.” This term captures those political interventions that aim at uncovering what remains hidden behind the walls of factory farms “in order to bring about social and political transformation” (Pachirat 2011, 15). English and Zacka have recently engaged with Pachirat’s work on the politics of sight, and provide a nuanced analysis of its premises. In English and Zacka’s words, the three central premises underpinning the politics of sight are

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<sup>1</sup> That is, a program of systematic torture devised to extract information from prisoners through techniques like sleep deprivation to the point of hallucination, confinement, and waterboarding (see Laughland 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from Pollan, O’Sullivan (2011) is perhaps the author who has advocated for this position in a more explicit manner.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most important strategies of animal rights activists has been to do undercover filming and photography in order to expose the violence inflicted on animals in spaces like factory farms and laboratories. Ag-gag legislation seeks to prevent activists from exposing such violence so that what happens in factory farms remains concealed, unseen (Lazare 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Empirical evidence suggests, however, that this strategy has failed. The number of vegetarians has decreased by 1% in the period 1999–2018, while the number of reported vegans only increased 1% from 2012 to 2018 (Reinhart 2018).

(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. (2022, 1025)

One of the central purposes of Pachirat's book is to study in what ways the premises of the politics of sight fail in one of the contexts where violence is more visible: factory farms. His ethnography focuses on workers' experiences, their narratives, and how they act when they witness and actualize violence. English and Zacka's recent article focuses on providing different reasons and evidence to support, supplement, and on some occasions challenge Pachirat's analysis. In this article, I undertake a similar exercise to that of English and Zacka. I will, however, show that the first two premises of the politics of sight are mistaken for reasons that are absent in Pachirat's and English and Zacka's analysis.

To this end, in the first section, I introduce Pachirat's work and English and Zacka's response to Pachirat. In the second section, I argue that seeing morally repugnant practices might not suffice to recognize them as violent practices because our gaze and subjectivities are composed by a certain Western language/conceptuality that does not enable us to recognize violence as such—language is not a mere label. Next, I contend that sometimes witnessing or participating in the killing of animals may lead people to discover that they find pleasure, as sovereign subjects, in harming those who are beneath them. Finally, in the third section, I provide reasons to support English and Zacka's proposal of "selective concealment," that is, political change will happen if certain repugnant practices remain concealed while others are selectively exposed. However, I argue, by drawing on ethnographic and ethological studies that center animals, that a politics of sight is not sufficient to achieve political transformation; a politics of animals is also necessary. Political change might depend on creating the epistemic and subjective pre-conditions for humans to see animals in their full ethical weight.

## SITUATING

I focus on *Every Twelve Seconds* and English and Zacka's close analysis of the book because the former provides illuminating answers to crucial questions in contemporary politics regarding the relationship between sight, violence, and political transformation. Further, Pachirat's book, as English and Zacka (2022) note, has been cited hundreds of times, received outstanding reviews, and has even been regarded as the best academic book of the 2010s by one of the most important historians of our times, Samuel Moyn (2020).

The debate between Pachirat and English and Zacka reflects different disciplinary approaches. Pachirat draws on the literature of ethnography to give a rich sense of lived experience of slaughterhouse workers. English and Zacka argue that literature of social psychology, particularly theories of cognitive dissonance, can help reveal some underlying patterns or dynamics

to these experiences. I by and large agree with Pachirat and English and Zacka's work, and the way both ethnographic experiences and social psychological dynamics illuminate why witnessing and actualizing violence may not lead to political transformation. However, the idea that seeing may not lead to political transformation can be illuminated by a further literature, that is, continental philosophy and critical theory which explores the relationship between language, subjectivity, and violence. My argument is that these three perspectives are complementary, and taken together provide a more adequate account of the relationship between knowing and political transformation.

Pachirat gives two reasons to challenge the first premise of the politics of sight. First, he argues that the space of a slaughterhouse is designed so that most workers do not get to see the animals alive, which leads to, for example, compartmentalization. Second, when Pachirat analyses the job of those workers who move the line of cows into the knocking box by using electric prods, he finds that the working conditions of those workers are so stressful and demand such speed that they do not even have a second to see the animals in front of them for who they are (Pachirat 2011, 149). As Pachirat puts it:

It is not just a matter of keeping the line tight, of making sure that there is little or no space between the animals, but also of keeping the line moving as quickly as possible so that the knocker and shackler can build up a surplus of stunned and shackled animals ... Without the electric prods, the momentum of the line of animals is sufficient to move the cattle through the opening in the slaughterhouse wall into the knocking box, but not at the pace that the chute workers want. When shocked, the animals jump into the box, moving the line more quickly and reducing the probability of an animal's balking and holding up the line behind it. (2011, 147–8)

English and Zacka agree with Pachirat in thinking that the first premises are wrong, but they find that Pachirat's reasoning is incomplete. By drawing on the theory of cognitive dissonance, English and Zacka propose that workers brutalize cows as a coping mechanism (English and Zacka 2022, 1033). The idea is that, as many workers in slaughterhouses are socioeconomically vulnerable, they are pressed by their circumstances to remain in their workplaces in order to keep their income. In this context, English and Zacka argue that workers need to find strategies to cope with the violence they are witnessing and actualising. The way to do this is by morally brutalizing the cows, that is, by degrading the moral value of cows when slaughterhouse workers violate and kill them. Once one is situated in this new reality, that is, a reality in which there has been "a negative reappraisal of their [cows] worth" that leads workers to see cows as "mere thing [s]," then inflicting violence on cows and killing them does not trouble workers' psyche as much, if at all (English and Zacka 2022, 1033).

This has an important consequence for how we understand the politics of sight in a more structural

sense. Pachirat's analysis would lead us to think that if the pace in slaughterhouses was more relaxed, workers would be able to see morally repugnant practices as such when they face them and lead them to stop such practices. Insofar as pace is the problem, if the working conditions were more relaxed, workers would recognize that repugnant practices are morally wrong. English and Zacka think that even if the pace was slowed, insofar as workers lack real alternatives, they would be subject to cognitive dissonance, and are likely to respond to that dissonance by degrading the cows to feel better about their actions. (English and Zacka 2022, 1033). In what follows I supplement and on some occasions challenge Pachirat and English and Zacka's insights.

## WESTERN LANGUAGE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND VIOLENCE

First, my contention is that what determines whether one recognizes violence as violence is not what is in front of us but the eyes of those who are looking. Heidegger (1927; 1947; 1971) showed that we come into being in language and that language structures our subjectivities in a fundamental way. He (2014, 37) gives an illuminating example to explain this in *Introduction to Metaphysics*. In it, he dwells on how we come to see a school as a school—the as-structure implies that our gaze is not merely sensory but conceptual, too. Heidegger says that when we look at a school we see bricks, doors, windows, boards, pencils, a gym, a basketball court, students, and so forth. However, none of these things is a school. Where is the school? His answer is that we come to recognize a school as a school because the concept of school enables us to see it as the kind of entity that a school is, namely, a space where we learn, where we get trained to go to university, where we make friends, and so on. The concept of school precedes recognizing the school for the kind of entity that it is, and this allows us to recognize it as such. What is crucial to understand for the case that concerns us is that language constitutes what we see; one could even say that language sees.

Relatedly, and importantly for the purposes of this article, language itself “bring[s] various dispersed things together into a unity [(read: concept)]” (Heidegger 1939, 213).<sup>5</sup> The previous case of the school exemplifies this well, there are various entities that are gathered into a unity and seen in their togetherness as a school. This gathering ability of language might appear as neutral at first, or even good, but it can have morally perverse effects.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Jacques Derrida argues that this gathering ability of language turns “an irreducible

living multiplicity of mortals [animals]” (Derrida 2008a, 41) into the concept of the animal. For Derrida, this process is epistemically violent because different individual animals, who have their own personalities, wills, desires, biographies, ways of being and living, and their own forms of social organization, are homogenized. The gathering ability of language erases animals' specificity and plurality into the single concept of the animal. The argument is that as animals' individualities and particularities are erased by the gathering ability of language, the epistemic and ontological conditions to recognize animals in their full complexity and to recognize the violence that we might inflict on them are simply not there. I will discuss this in more detail below but the concern here is that the eyes of factory farm workers will often see specific cows not as unique individuals with their own desires, preferences, and biographies but as *the* homogenous cow, as *the* homogenous animal.

Crucially, one should not be misled and think that the terms “human” and “animal” are the true problem. Instead, animals are often seen as morally inferior beings because we humans are constituted by a Western conceptuality that leads us to believe, see, and sense animals as mere bodies devoid of minds; as primitive beings that belong to nature—as opposed to culture and civil society; as them, not us; and as whats, not whos.<sup>7</sup> The point is that what matters is not the terms “human” and “animal,” what matters is the whole of Western conceptuality, that is, the concepts of body, reason, civility, primitive, nature, culture, what, who, and so on. This is the conceptual order that maintains oppression. It is important to understand that we see through the eyes of a Western conceptuality that always already sees animals as “less than,” as moral and political subordinates.

While I cannot do a genealogy here to show why this is the case, I assume, in line with many critical theorists, that due to the Abrahamic religions (Derrida 2008a), colonialism (Fanon 1961; Mbembe 2001; Said 1978), the enlightenment (Foucault 1984), globalization, and technologies such as the internet, the concepts mentioned in the latter paragraphs have come to structure Western conceptuality in many countries worldwide. The idea is that reality is, as it were, enfolded into a certain conceptuality that presents a world to our gaze in which animals appear as subhuman, as beings who are not as worthy of moral recognition as “full” humans are.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Adams (1990), Bailey (2005, 353), Derrida (2008a), de la Cadena (2019, 477–8), Fanon (1961, 32–46), Foucault (1961; 1982), Haraway (1985), Kim (2015), Ko and Ko (2017), Plumwood (1993), and Taylor (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the term “conceptuality,” a clarification is in order. One may think that a term such as “culture” serves the same function as “conceptuality,” but there are several substantive differences. For one thing, conceptuality, as opposed to culture, does not focus on, for example, how certain sets of practices, festivities, architecture, imagery and so on structure our subjectivities (Adams 1990). Instead, the focus of analysis is on how the “togetherness” of certain concepts structures ourselves, and how this then leads us to undertake certain violent practices, organize violent festivities, and produce epistemically violent imagery. For another, an analysis that centres “conceptuality” puts special emphasis on ontological and epistemic issues, and how these have political and normative bearing.

<sup>5</sup> See also Heidegger (1927, 32–3; 1939, 213; 1975, 70–1). For a detailed discussion of what the gathering ability of language entails, see Backman (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Note that this gathering ability of language has an ontological impulse absent in other frameworks (e.g., Foucault 1980). Further, Heidegger's understanding of how the gathering ability of language shapes our everyday life existence is particularly helpful for the purposes of this article.



This is not to say that it is only Western cultures that are anthropocentric. A wide range of authors have argued that some Indigenous peoples' views of animals are also based on "human worldviews and resulting understandings of animals' experiences rather than animals' own understandings" (Deckha 2020a, 87).<sup>9</sup> I agree with this. In fact, it is my contention that the gathering ability of language also plays a decisive role in shaping the subjectivities of some Indigenous people to see, for example, specific whales as *the* whale, as happens in the case of the Makah people (Kim 2015, 244–5). Language turns many specific individuals into the ideal of a whale that gives herself to humans so that we kill her. Nonetheless, the way in which the gathering ability of language has contributed to homogenize and subordinate animals' moral worth has taken a specific shape in the so-called West due to religion, colonialism, the Enlightenment, and so on. My focus in this paper is on the distinctly Western form of anthropocentrism.<sup>10</sup>

We will see that the features of language explained above, on their own, are important to understand why workers in factory farms do not recognize violence as violence when they see or actualize it. Language, however, also contributes to masking and producing violence in another way. I am referring to sovereignty, that is, assuming a subjective right to decide over others' lives (Derrida 2008b; Wadiwel 2015). Consider first that Western conceptuality puts some humans in a position of superiority in relation to animals. "We," as opposed to "them," are the ones who exist within reason (Foucault 1961), the ones who presumably have the cognitive capacities to rule and govern. By contrast, most animals, and those humans who deviate from

cognitively normative standards, appear, under the gaze of Western conceptuality, as unable to follow norms and govern themselves due to the "fact" that they do not have reason.<sup>11</sup>

At any rate, and to be more concrete, language founds sovereignty in a two-fold manner. First, it elevates humans above animals so that humans appear as the only ones capable of governing, that is, as beings who have culture, can respond, reason, and are civil—the concept of the animal, by contrast, does not have any of the previous features and cannot, therefore, govern itself. Second, the gathering ability of language plays a decisive role in producing the sovereign-subject dichotomy. This dichotomy could not exist without language's ability to create homogenous poles that separate those who govern from those who are subordinate subjects. As I show more extensively below, sovereignty helps explain why making violent practices visible may not lead to political change because as Nietzsche (1887) argues, the sovereign experiences pleasure when they vent their power on those who are below them. Hence, my analysis below will not only show that language can sometimes lead workers not to recognize violence as such, but it will also show that we can, as sovereign, desire violence.

### Western Language as a Sensory and Morally Depriving Force

In this and the following subsection, and by drawing on the theory of language discussed above, I will engage with Pachirat and English and Zacka's position in relation to the politics of sight as well as analyze some critical aspects of Pachirat's ethnography.

In *Every Twelve Seconds*, Pachirat (2011, 82) explains that twenty-five hundred cows were killed every day in the slaughterhouse where he worked and conducted his ethnographic study. In order to kill the cows, the workers: used electric prods, inserted the prods into the cows' anuses, knocked the cows with a gun, and cut their throats (Pachirat 2011, 145). Considering the idea of Western conceptuality discussed above, it is likely that on some occasions factory farm workers did not recognize their violent actions as violence. When a worker looks at a cow, they do not merely see in a sensory manner that is separated from their conceptual existence. Instead, having been thrown into Western conceptuality, what they see is bare nature as opposed to a civilized and rational human who lives in a culture (Foucault 1961; Plumwood 1993), they see "them" as opposed to "us" (del la Cadena 2019). In other words, they see an animal, not a human subject (Derrida 2008a). It is because the subjectivities of most humans are constituted by this Western conceptuality that we can then regard the deliberate killing of certain beings as "putting to death" instead of "murder."

Derrida brings this point to the fore eloquently when he says: "putting to death" should be understood "as

<sup>9</sup> On this, see also Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015), Gaard (2001, 7), Gillespie (1997, 375), Kim (2015, 244–5), and Robinson (2013, 192). However, as the previous authors have also highlighted, it is important not to invisibilize "Indigenous vegetarians and vegans" (Deckha 2020b, 248), which has helped to "engender the misperception within Indigenous and settler communities that veganism ... is a 'white' or inherently culturally imperialist or racist position" (248). Further, "dominant white discourse portrays ... [Aboriginal] cultures as embedded in the pre-colonial past" (Robinson 2013, 194). As Margaret Robinson, a vegan Mi'kmaq author, argues, this is a mistake because "Aboriginal cultures are living traditions, responsive to changing social and environmental circumstances ... our [Aboriginal] oral culture ... is adaptable to ... the needs of our animal siblings, and to the needs of the land itself" (194). The point of these remarks is to make explicit that Indigenous peoples' cultures, philosophies, and personal dietary preferences are heterogeneous (Deckha 2020b, 248).

<sup>10</sup> Yet, of course, this does not mean that everyone in any geography is completely subjugated to Western language/conceptuality. As I will explain in more detail below, there are other than Western conceptuality's forces that can subvert its dominance. Some minoritized people are particularly attuned to oppression and easily recognize the oppression experienced by animals with their own oppression (e.g., Taylor 2017), others experience life-changing encounters with animals, and a myriad of biographical stories explain why this analysis does not apply to everyone in the same way in any geography. Nonetheless, my argument is that there is still a hegemonic Western conceptuality that differentially subjectivizes many humans in almost all, if not all, geographies. When I use the terms "we," and "our," I refer to all those humans whose subjectivities have been in one way or another shaped by Western conceptuality.

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the term "normate" from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson 1996.

denegation of murder. The putting to death of the animal, says this denegation, is not a murder. I would link this denegation to the violent institution of the “who” as subject” (Derrida 1991, 115). Under the gaze of Western conceptuality, murder is recognized as such when the one who is killed is ontologically and ethico-politically seen as a subject. This means that insofar as nonhuman animals such as cows are not conceptually seen as subjects (they ontologically and ethico-politically belong to nature, the body, unreason, and so on), workers in factory farms might not recognize their deaths and the violence directed against them as such. This is one of the reasons why physically seeing and enacting violence does not necessarily entail recognition.

Another aspect that explains why workers might not recognize the violence they inflict as such is sovereignty. Importantly, this sovereignty, as Dinesh Wadiwel explains, is

minutely ... disseminated through the populace ... This is an individualized power, a personal prerogative exercised with respect to animals across diverse fields, including animals that meet the knife in the slaughterhouse, animals tormented in experimental facilities, or animals at the end of a leash in suburban backyards. (Wadiwel 2015, 191)

It is because we assume an illegitimate right to decide over others' lives that we naturalize violent actions against our subordinates, and do not identify our actions in slaughterhouses as illegitimate and violent. To illustrate the point in reverse: imagine that our subjectivities were not structured by sovereignty since birth. Imagine that we had not been brought up to assume that we can decide when our dogs can relieve themselves, or with whom they can relate, or when we can “put them to death.” If our subjectivities had not been shaped in that manner, it seems that it would be much easier to recognize violent actions against animals when we witness such actions or actualize them. Instead, however, our subjectivities have been constructed to think that the “limits [of] ethical possibility” (Wadiwel 2015, 55) are circumscribed by our subjective sovereign right to decide over nonhuman animals' lives. Hence, exposing morally repugnant practices might not lead us to see them as such because our subjectivities have been shaped to think of ourselves as having the natural right to decide who can be “put to death,” who can be harmed, and who cannot even be murdered by virtue of being a non-subject.

### “For Who Could Stand the Sight?” The Sovereign Desire for Violence

Sovereignty can not only make violence invisible, it can also lead us to desire violence. Let me illustrate this point through an example provided by Pachirat with which English and Zacka engage.

Pachirat discusses Pollan's famous proposal for how to end factory farming: namely, replace factory farms' concrete walls with glass walls (Pollan 2006, 226–38). Pachirat explains that the strength of Pollan's argument lies in the thought that “simply making the

repugnant visible is sufficient to generate a transformational politics: for who could stand the sight?” (Pachirat 2011, 247).<sup>12</sup> Such an idea assumes that “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” (247, Pachirat's emphasis). Pachirat emphasizes that a crucial premise in Pollan's argument is that “*our*” civilized gaze is the one that will see repugnant practices for what they are. We, civilized citizens, Pollan thinks, will experience sentiments of pity and horror that will unavoidably lead to political transformation and the abolition of abhorrent practices.

Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process*, Pachirat finds that the civil and moral sentiment of pity, contrary to advocates of the politics of sight, may produce, rather than repudiate, violence. As the feeling of pity produces pleasure, one may simply enjoy the feeling of pity. Pachirat illustrates this well through the following thought experiment:

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 ... 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 the plight. (Pachirat 2011, 254)

These lines suggest that seeing repugnant practices is as likely to produce pleasure as to produce transformation. However, English and Zacka note that Pachirat's position is “not substantiated by the ethnographic material Pachirat presents. Nowhere in the slaughterhouse do we encounter characters magnetically drawn to the spectacle” (English and Zacka 2022, 1032). I disagree with their assertion. Let us look at Pachirat's ethnographic material.

Those workers in charge of moving the line of cows are in charge of ensuring that the cows move quickly into the knocking box by using electric prods. Pachirat explains that the workers would sometimes insert the prods into the cows' anuses. In this way, they kept the line tight and ensured production (Pachirat 2011, 144–7). Pachirat observes that the workers used the prods “extensively” and that one of his coworkers used 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 defecating on the cows behind her (Pachirat 2011, 145 in English and Zacka 2022, 1032).

Pachirat (2011, 148) finds this behavior wrong and refuses to use the electric prod. Instead, he decides to use the plastic paddle—a much less aggressive way to move the line. However, while the plastic paddle does keep moving the line, it also slows it down. As this

<sup>12</sup> The question “for who could stand the sight?” appears in Pollan (2006, 333).

happens, one of his coworkers, Fernando, goes where Pachirat is, takes the plastic paddle from Pachirat's hand, shoves the electric prod, and yells at him: "You motherfucking pussy!" "Do your job and use the fucking hotshot!" (Pachirat 2011, 148). Pachirat yells back and says: "Why?" "What's the point of shocking them?" "They're all moving through the line anyway" (148). To this, the coworker retorts, laughing: "The point is pain and torture." "Now do your motherfucking job and keep this line tight!" (148). The worker could not be more explicit: "the point is pain and torture." How to read his words at face value?

While Pachirat suggests that workers or members of a potential audience may be drawn to the pleasure that the feeling of pity produces for the less fortunate, I want to open another possibility that can explain this phenomenon. What follows should contribute to explaining why enacting violent practices and making such practices visible may not lead to political change. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche studies the master-slave relationship. He argues that the master experiences pleasure when they vent their power on those who are below them, "the enjoyment 'de faire le mal pour le plaisir de la faire'" (Nietzsche 1887, 46), that is, "of doing evil for the pleasure of it."<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche describes this experience as "the privilege of the masters," which refers to the master's "opportunity to experience the uplifting feeling of being entitled to despise and mistreat someone as 'beneath him'" (Nietzsche 1887, 46).<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche's insights can illuminate and explain the thought experiment designed by Pachirat about a world in which slaughterhouses' walls are made of glass and the worker's words ("the point is pain and torture").

We may one day live in a world in which slaughterhouses charge admission fees so that people can witness violence, shock cows with electric prods, and kill farmed animals. As their masters, or sovereigns, people might discover that they experience pleasure when they despise and mistreat those (farmed animals) who are beneath them, and that harming others in itself produces pleasure—the pleasure "of doing evil for the pleasure of it." Hence, I agree with English and Zacka when they argue that the premises of the politics of sight may fail because "the effects of sight are underdetermined" (1032). Seeing repugnant practices may lead workers, or potential clients of slaughterhouses, to experience "the pleasure of feeling pity," as Pachirat contends (Pachirat 2011, 254), and may also lead them, as sovereign subjects, to experience the pleasure of violating their subordinates.

Importantly, as Fernando (the worker who said that the point was pain and torture) walked away, Pachirat looked at another of his colleagues, Gilberto, who "shrug[ed] before shoving his electric prod into the anus of one of the animals" (148). Pachirat yelled again:

"Why do you have to do that?" [Gilberto] shrug[ed] again, smile[d], and kep[t] working. [Pachirat, in response to this silence and] furious, repeat[ed] the question. "Okay," [Gilberto] finally shout[ed] back; "you wanna know why I use this?" He shoved the tip of the electric prod across the chute in [Pachirat's] direction. "I use this because I like to have my work. And if we don't keep these cows moving through, they're gonna call us up to the office and we're going to get fired. That's why." (Pachirat 2011, 148)

Despite the fact that this was a different worker to the one who said that the point was pain and torture, Pachirat contends that the true justification for using the electric prod so extensively is not "pain and torture," but, once again, pace. As he puts it: "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" (Pachirat 2011, 149 in English and Zacka 2022, 1032). English and Zacka question Pachirat's uncritical take on the workers' justification. Instead, they explain that killing at close range is much more complex than at long distance because it requires "the killer to overcome moral inhibitions and sentiments not attenuated by distance" (1032). They then ask: "How can one kill on an industrial scale at such proximity?" (1032).

Their answer is brutalization, that is, "a devaluation of that which is to be killed, which warrants a desensitization to its plight" (English and Zacka 2022, 1033). Drawing on the work of Garfinkel (1956), they explain that such negative reappraisals can take root in one's cognition through degradation ceremonies. The role of these ceremonies is to separate those beings who have to be degraded from "the legitimate order.. [they] must be made 'strange'" (Garfinkel 1956, 423 in English and Zacka 2022, 1033). In this way, the former identity of the degraded being appears accidental while "the new identity is the 'basic reality.' What [it] is now is what, 'after all,' was all along" (Garfinkel 1956 in English and Zacka 2022, 1033).

For the reasons exposed above, English and Zacka challenge Pachirat's contention that the workers shocked cows with electric prods for pragmatic reasons (to keep the line tight and moving fast). Instead, they argue that using the electric prods may be a strategy the workers use to ease the potential discomfort over the harming and killing of the cows. English and Zacka read the use of electric prods as degrading ceremonies that reveal the cow as "what it was all along—not a 'magnificent, aweinspiring' creature, but just meat" (English and Zacka 2022, 1033). Their point is that the violent behavior of the workers requires "a negative reappraisal of their [cows] worth," that is, the reduction of the cows "to a mere thing" (1033).

This leads English and Zacka to propose that forced visibility might not be merely compatible with degrading animals, it might, "in fact, be an enabling condition for it" (1033). A consequence of this is that concealment may not be so bad after all since it avoids degradation. Those who do not see do not need to degrade nonhuman animals. For this reason, English and Zacka conclude that we should read the premises of the

<sup>13</sup> Translator's (Douglas Smith) note in Nietzsche (1887, 146).

<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning here, in the context of Nietzsche's discussion about the master-subject relationship, that animals are humans' property under the law. See Celermajer et al. (2023, 44–6) and Francione (1995).



politics of sight differently. Their interpretation suggests that whether “visibility can be transformative in a positive sense depends on the adaptive responses available to those who must face up to repugnant practices” (1033).

I agree with English and Zacka that slaughterhouse workers are likely to demean the worth of cows when they repeatedly harm and kill them. Some kind of process of brutalization aligns with how Western conceptualization subjectivizes most humans. Animals certainly appear as brutes devoid of reason and civility under our Western gaze. However, I think English and Zacka’s account of what causes this brutalization is incomplete and in some respects misdiagnosed. For English and Zacka brutalization is the result of participating in degrading practices like inserting electric prods in cows’ anuses in contexts where leaving might appear impossible (e.g., very low socioeconomic resources). It is this kind of action that leads workers to see cows as *what* they were “all along—not a ‘magnificent, aweinspiring’ creature, but just meat” (1033).

A Heideggerian reading tells us that we humans are always already subjectivized to see animals as “less than”—whether “just as meat,” or something else is a different issue with which I engage below. English and Zacka, following Pachirat, seem to suggest that the opposite of seeing cows as just meat is seeing them as “‘magnificent, aweinspiring’ creature[s]” (1033), but this is unclear. Consider the case of bullfighting in Spain. Bulls are seen as magnificent creatures who are worth killing precisely because they are majestic. Consider the case of whaling and stories such as *Moby Dick* that represent whales as extraordinary beings whose worth is so high as to risk one’s life to kill them. The point is that the magnificent brute force ascribed to certain animals need not be a reason to stop killing and harming them. On the contrary, it might be the very reason that leads sovereign humans to desire violence and to see them as being “less than” we are—they are, after all, magnificent *brute* beasts.

English and Zacka speak of cows being “just meat” (1033), but it seems doubtful that cows are seen only in this light. Several reasons justify this. The first reason stems from the very structure of sovereignty—and we are doubtlessly their sovereign: we govern animals, we have the power to use, harm, and kill them, we legally own them, we have been brought to *be* their sovereign within the established order (Derrida 2008b). But sovereignty requires governing over subjects. The sovereign cannot rule over “just meat.” Second, and to go back to Nietzsche, one of the reasons why the sovereign experiences pleasure when they are violent against their slaves is precisely to be positioned above their subjects (and not merely above objects such as stones or meat). This also explains, as Wadiwel (2016; 2018; 2023) points out, that it is precisely the recognition that animals are subjects who resist that leads slaughterhouses and aquaculture facilities to develop new technologies of power to face animals’ resistance.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Consider, for example, the work of Temple Grandin.

Third, English and Zacka speak of cows not merely being “just meat” (1033) but *becoming* “just meat.” The idea is that a new “basic reality” emerges *after* certain degrading practices are performed. I do not wish to challenge this insight since it seems partly right to me. However, the picture they present appears incomplete. Judith Butler argues that “a life can register as a life only within a[n epistemological] schema that presents it as such” (Butler 2020, 112). Yet, we are born into and constituted by a Western conceptualization that already presents a “basic reality” in which cows are not full subjects on equal footing to humans. It is from this vantage point that we lead “ethical” lives and that workers see cows as degraded subjects to be turned into meat. This is why Wadiwel claims that sovereignty circumscribes the “limits of ethical possibility” (Wadiwel 2015, 55), and why he argues that “sovereignty *precedes* ethics” (my emphasis) (Wadiwel 2015, 36). For this reason, and to at least some extent, cows do not need to “be made ‘strange,’” they do not need to be “separated from a place in the legitimate order,” as the literature on wars amongst humans suggests (Garfinkel 1956, 423 in English and Zacka 2022, 1033). Cows are always already outside the legitimate order. They are, after all, our objects of property rights, our *beasts* of burden who exist to fulfill our purposes. They are no more and no less than our uncivil subordinates. Beings without reason, without culture, outside civil society. It is difficult to think of beings who are more degraded and separated from the legitimate order from birth.

It might well be the case that the literature on cognitive dissonance in the context of human wars, which is the scholarship English and Zacka draw on, might be correct. In the case of human wars, participation in degrading practices leads people to set aside default assumptions of human worth and human equality, and to degrade other humans. But in the case of cows, there was no default assumption of worth and equality, so participation in repugnant practices is not needed to lead people to degrade cows. To be clear, it seems reasonable to think that repeatedly electrocuting, knocking, and killing cows might lead humans to make cows more strange. Perhaps these repugnant and degrading practices separate cows even more from the legitimate order. My contribution has been, however, that cows are, all along, already separated from the legitimate order. They are our subjects, degraded to permanently being our property and to be seen and treated as such. That is why “seeing [repugnant] practices will [often *not*] stop us from acquiescing to them” (English and Zacka 2022, 1025).

## ON SELECTIVE CONCEALMENT AND BEYOND: TOWARDS A POLITICS OF ANIMALS

In this last section, I face the question of what to do in order to achieve political change. If the central premises of the politics of sight are flawed, what are we to do? Should information remain concealed? Should we pursue the politics of sight?

Despite his critique of the politics of sight, Pachirat says that the “answer to distance and concealment as mechanisms of domination ... is not more distance and concealment ... Movements and organizations that seek to subvert or shorten this distance through a politics of sight are necessary and important” (Pachirat 2011, 252). Pachirat’s position seems, however, contradictory for he also argues that “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” (253). So, on the one hand, Pachirat is adamant that we should eliminate distance and concealment but, on the other, he also argues that making the hidden visible may generate “more effective ways of confining it.”

English and Zacka challenge Pachirat by arguing that it is *not* the case that “making the hidden visible may be *equally likely* to generate other, more effective ways of confining [that which is hidden]” (my emphasis) (Pachirat 2011, 253). In certain cases, it is *more* likely that making the hidden visible will “generate more effective ways of confining it.” English and Zacka propose that in certain circumstances “some forms of concealment may ... be desirable” (1027). The reasoning is as follows: humans are motivated to see themselves as good persons, however, when we see and participate in the killing of farmed animals in industrial settings, we often create coping mechanisms to bridge the gap between the image we have of ourselves and our actions. This then leads workers to brutalize animals, to see them as non-subjects—“just meat,” as English and Zacka put it. In this way, workers can continue to see themselves as good persons (1035).<sup>16</sup>

The picture that English and Zacka present suggests that seeing repugnant practices and participating in the killing of farmed animals may lead workers to develop strategies to brutalize animals so that they can cope with the cognitive dissonance between the image they have of themselves and what they actually do. Hence, if slaughterhouse workers and members of the public did not have to do that because we did not see repugnant practices and/or did not participate in the killing of animals, then the chances that we would brutalize animals would lessen. However, it would be important that we all get to see certain repugnant practices, or at least know about them. How could things change if we did not know about them at all? This is what leads English and Zacka to propose “selective concealment” (1035).

The reading provided here would support English and Zacka’s thesis but for different reasons than the ones they give. A Nietzschean reading would suggest that participating in the harming and killing of nonhuman animals may lead some to find out that they, as sovereign, enjoy the uplifting feeling of harming those who are beneath them. Arguably, and as a matter of fact, we can read our present in this light. Consider the profound dominion that some dog owners exercise

over their dogs, the way in which some horses are trained and ridden, maltreatment of companion animals, hunting and fishing for recreational purposes, or entertainment activities such as bullfighting. In this reading, not participating in the harming of animals might prevent some from discovering the pleasure that inflicting pain on subordinate others can produce.

These insights, however, do not explain some of the ethnographic material provided by Pachirat, which could, at first sight, seem to challenge the reading offered in this article. At the beginning of *Every Twelve Seconds*, Pachirat describes an event in which a cow who had escaped from a slaughterhouse is shot in plain sight by the police. The workers are shocked by this situation and, according to Pachirat (2011, 2), facially express indignation. Pachirat explains that the workers discussed the “injustice of the shooting and the ineptitude of the police” (2). Even though Pachirat does not provide the exact terms in which the discussion occurred, a charitable reading would suggest that the workers did see that cow as a kind of subject who was unjustly killed. If so, a question would remain unaddressed: How can it be that Western conceptuality structures our subjectivities not to see the full ethical weight of nonhuman animals and at the same time workers did see, at least to some extent, that one cow as being worthy of moral considerability? Would the theory presented here lead the meat industry to think that they should not make an effort to conceal the violence they inflict on animals in factory farms?

Throughout this article, my argument has not been that Western conceptuality is all there is to consider. I have, for instance, concurred with some of the insights that English and Zacka have brought into the conversation by drawing on social psychology. In the same way that social psychology, critical theory, and continental philosophy can help us explain certain experiences and phenomena, there is obviously much more to consider. Feminist scholars have, for example, emphasized that we humans are vulnerable and embodied beings who can empathize with other vulnerable animals (Deckha 2015; Gruen 2015). In certain circumstances, we, as vulnerable subjects, may see other animals suffering and recognize that that suffering is wrong. Our subjectivities are not exclusively composed of a single all-encompassing rationality. However, I do think that Western conceptuality is a sensory and morally depriving force that will more often than not lead us not to sense violence as such. The asphyxia of a fish in the hand of a fisherman, the repetitive sound of cows being knocked, or the smell of feces that some animals may excrete due to fear will often not be seen, heard, and smelt as violent because all those beings appear, within Western conceptuality, as irrational subordinates, beings without culture, civility, and humanity. Animals remain, after all, subhuman.

Why then does the meat industry make such an effort to conceal what happens in factory farms? It is worth remembering that much of the public outrage at slaughterhouses triggered by Upton Sinclair’s (1906) expose focused not on the suffering of animals, but on the unsafe and unsanitary conditions of the human workers, and its health risks to workers, neighbors,

<sup>16</sup> English and Zacka draw here on the work of social psychologists. See Aronson (1969, 2–3), Sherman and Cohen (2006, 186), and Zimbardo (2007, 220).



and consumers. This suggests that if factory farms made efforts to improve the workers' conditions and presented themselves as clean, healthy, and humane spaces, public visibility and glass walls might not lead to widespread rejection. Consider the response of Spanish people to bullfighting. Bulls are presented in bull-fighting rings as clean, healthy, and strong creatures. They have been raised in "humane" conditions, and the public literally applauds the murder of the bulls when the bull-fighter inserts a sword between the bull's vertebrae on the neck to directly reach his heart. It seems reasonable to think that exposing what farmed cows experience, if the conditions are palatable to civilized people's gaze, may even be more favorable to the public than the case of bulls in Spain because, in the end, animals in factory farms are not there for entertainment purposes but to be turned into food.

I think that this reasoning leads us to the conclusion that sight and concealment are not always sufficient to achieve political change.<sup>17</sup> Throughout this article, I have argued that one of the crucial problems that blocks political change is that our eyes will often not recognize violence as such. Western concepts in their togetherness precede what we see. We have also seen that when we do recognize violence, our sovereign subjectivities can desire it because it produces pleasure. The question then is: how can we overcome this conundrum? While there is no space to answer this question comprehensively, I think that an important element to overcome this difficulty resides in creating the epistemic and subjective preconditions to see animals for who they are.

On the one hand, it seems important to deconstruct the kind of anthropocentrism that leads us not to recognize violence—this article as well as Pachirat and English and Zacka's works can be read in this light. On the other, in order to become more animal-oriented subjects, and since our subjective point of departure is anthropocentric, we animals ought to co-author a new animal conceptuality. The work of Blattner, Donaldson, and Wilcox (2020) exemplifies this perfectly. Their ethnographic study of VINE sanctuary, an LGBTQ sanctuary in Vermont, USA, has shown that animals in multispecies communities forge social norms and abide by them, that they make political decisions, voice their preferences, and have a sense of belonging to the communities of which they are a part. By undertaking this kind of study, Blattner, Donaldson, and Wilcox have already contributed to producing an animal epistemology that does not see animals as voiceless beings who are not driven by reason, but rather as political subjects with their own modes of social organization.<sup>18</sup> It is by beginning from animals and listening to them that we can then recognize that animals ought to be, as Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) have convincingly argued, the main authors of their political lives.

<sup>17</sup> This is an argument that authors like Justin Marceau have recently also advanced. See Marceau (2019) and Marceau, Hsiung, and Seitz (2024).

<sup>18</sup> On this, see also Donaldson and Kymlicka (2015) and Gillespie (2022).

The kind of study conducted by Blattner, Donaldson, and Wilcox also illuminates how our anthropocentric subjectivities may change. It is by immersing ourselves in those animal communities that might be willing to accept us, and through certain practices within those communities that our subjective constitution may change (Calarco 2018). Ethologist Hutto (2014), for example, spent seven years with a mule deer and eventually was accepted by the deer as a member of the herd. As he was socialized in the deer community and began to internalize how to behave amongst the herd, Hutto was drawn "out of himself and into new epistemological perspectives and processes of subjectification" (Calarco 2018, 55). The process of transformation that the deer led Hutto to experience, dehabituating Hutto "from his usual ways of seeing" and he was "reoriented into a new economy of subjectivity" (55). Before encountering the deer, Hutto was a hunter and saw the deer as prey, but as he became a member of the herd, he intimated the ethical weight of belonging to a deer family, of being attached to their (Hutto and the deer) territory, of what it meant to the deer to forge affective relationships and friendships. As this new epistemological schema came to constitute Hutto's subjectivity, he could no longer kill the deer as a hunter. Instead, this process of re-subjectification led him to oppose hunting and experience the agony that the rest of the herd experienced when a member of the family was killed (Calarco 2018, 57; Hutto 2014, 294). What matters about Hutto's experience is that his eyes could no longer see the deer as mere prey because a new animal conceptuality, the deer's, transformed his subjectivity. As Lori Gruen eloquently puts it, "seeing well is central to doing right" (2014, 240).

At a more structural level, this means that political transformation requires creating the epistemic and ontological conditions for a different kind of subjectivity to emerge, that is, subjectivities that can see animals for who they truly are. The previous studies showcase what is to be done, and how to do so. Scholars need to conduct ethnographies and ethological studies in sites in which animals can reveal themselves for the sorts of rich subjects that they are and can become. Methodologically, these kinds of studies require that animals lead our research, that they have the opportunity to determine the terms of our interactions, and also, of course, that they have the choice not to be studied, if they make clear through their phonetic utterances and embodied communication that researchers are not welcomed.

Assuming that animals can determine the terms of our research and interactions is not only important as a matter of justice, but it also matters because through this kind of research a new animal-authored language is emerging, that is, a language that creates the epistemic conditions to see animals as relational beings who speak, forge social norms, and are responsive political agents, amongst other things. This is crucial because, as we have seen, language plays a pivotal role in constituting our subjectivities to be ethically perceptive, or not. My contention is then that under the gaze of this new animal language, we will be able to recognize the full ethical weight of animals' rich lives.

## CONCLUSION

Before closing, I want to discuss a tension some readers might have noticed since I have claimed that Western conceptuality leads us to see animals as what, not who, and simultaneously claimed that we see animals as trainable subjects and that the pleasure of sovereignty comes precisely from the sense that one is imposing one's will on the will of another. One could argue, therefore, that there is an inconsistency insofar as it would seem impossible for the concept of the animal, which is not a subject, is uncivil, and our property, to be *subjugated* by Westerners. This would make it impossible for the sovereign to fulfill their right to violence and subjugation because the sovereign can only subjugate those beings that are a who, not a what. In other words, the exercise of sovereignty requires that the beings under the sovereigns' dominion are capable of being subjugated, that is, they need to be subjects.

The theories of subjectivity and language discussed here lead us to think that this conundrum constitutes who we are. Western language as a historical force on the one hand, and the gathering ability of language on the other, constantly act on and through us not to see real animals and see instead the concept of the animal: this has historically allowed philosophers such as René Descartes to say that animals felt nothing while vivisection was being undertaken, as animals (the animal) felt no more than clocks did. At the same time, Western conceptuality contributes decisively to ontologically forming us to be sovereigns over animals with the self-proclaimed right to violence. When the latter right is exercised we recognize animals' suffering, and can even find pleasure in that suffering, for example, the uplifting pleasure of harming those who are beneath us. Similarly, when we Westerners, for instance, exercise our self-proclaimed right to decide over horses' lives by taming them, we recognize that horses are subjects who can be tamed and subjugated. The gathering ability of language is crucial in forming this contradiction, since it homogenizes real animals by turning them into the animal, and simultaneously forms Westerners to be sovereigns and establish, by opposition, the beings over whom they can exercise their sovereignty, that is, the master–slave/sovereign–subject dichotomies.

The politics advocated for in this article recognize that physically seeing does not necessarily lead to believing and political transformation. On the contrary, Western conceptuality enables us to see animals in a certain light and closes off more animal ways of seeing. In other words, believing is seeing. Further, and while I have partially sided with English and Zacka's (2022, 1035) proposal of “selective concealment,” I have also proposed that sometimes what is needed is neither light nor darkness. My contention has been that one of the crucial tasks to see animals in their full ethical weight consists in creating the epistemic and subjective conditions for our gaze to see them for who they are. It is morally and politically necessary that our Western and sovereign eyes become animal eyes. Animals themselves are crucial in this process. We animals ought to build a new animal-authored conceptuality. We

humans need to be open to be transformed by animals. That's why we do not only need a politics of sight that selectively conceals, but a politics of animals that centres animals, illuminates who they are in their full complexity, and takes seriously their wills and desires.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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