

## ***Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, by Timothy Pachirat**

Susan Grelock | Pacifica graduate institute

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When I was in college, I was employed by a natural foods grocer. I worked in the administrative office, but at Thanksgiving everyone was expected to help in the stores. Knowing that it was some of the hardest work (and that I had been a vegetarian since childhood), my boss assigned me to help the butchers. I accepted her challenge—and, ultimately, volunteered for the role for the next three holidays. The meat counter was the border between a picture-perfect Thanksgiving feast and the grimness of slaughter. The counter represented an unspoken arrangement for invisibility, and my position behind it gave me a perspective I had not imagined. Shoppers stood on one side calling out orders for their ideal rib roast or free-range turkey. Behind the counter, our shoes were covered in blood and our hair was splattered with flesh from multiple species. Timothy Pachirat's auto-ethnography *Every Twelve Seconds* brought me back to that meat counter and quite beyond—deep into the heart of our slaughterhouse system, where this invisibility originates. Pachirat offers his own, embodied witnessing of slaughterhouse work and, in so doing, explores the sociology of industrialized killing. *Every Twelve Seconds* reveals how institutionalized blinders and surveillance enables an industrialized approach to killing other sentient beings.

Pachirat moved with his family to Nebraska so that he could discover, as an undisclosed

field worker-researcher, what happens inside a slaughterhouse. *Every Twelve Seconds* documents his five months as an insider, from being a kill floor worker to a quality-control inspector. What he found, and reveals in the detail enabled by the auto-ethnographic format, is a tightly orchestrated world of concealment and invisibility. Through the use of space, rigidity of processes, segregation of tasks, and linguistic devices, the facility is able to kill a living being every twelve seconds without anyone feeling responsible or accountable for the work being done.

Pachirat's detailed diagrams of the floor-plan of the slaughterhouse show how the workspace for killing is carefully laid out to isolate tasks and individuals so that no one person or act seems directly connected to killing. Office tasks are separated from the slaughter work. Killing ("dirty") work is isolated from trimming ("clean") work. Dirty workers even use a different bathroom than clean workers. All the tasks involved in making a living cow into pieces of beef are isolated out into 121 individual tasks, each with minimized connection to the preceding tasks. (The insightful appendices give detailed descriptions of these 121 steps and their by-products.) A poignant example of this separation is exemplified by the "tail ripper." He may be cutting off the tail of a cow that has not yet been killed, but his position prevents him from seeing the cow's face and the expression of the pain that he is causing. This planned invisibility, what Pachirat terms the "politics of sight," is the way of the slaughterhouse.

While Pachirat's detailed descriptions of the slaughterhouse organization reveal the fundamental invisibility of the design, Pachirat's descriptions of his own personal experience as a worker reveal the emotional tolls of this work. The ethical dilemmas and the frustration with the absurdity of the impossible procedures erode the humanity of the workers. The rationalization for the abusive use of the electric cattle prods, the expectation to falsify documents, and the constant scapegoating are painful examples that Pachirat observes and struggles to understand while trapped in the crazed logic of the slaughterhouse.

The shock value in Pachirat's book lies precisely in the fact that this is not the story of an outlier – it is a story of the normalization of violence. Every twelve seconds, all day long, in a nondescript building in Nebraska, a sentient being is being slaughtered, step by step, using the same industrialized setting used to can tomatoes or assemble plastic toys. Unlike tomatoes and toys, however, cows are alive. Invisibility enables this disregard. Perhaps the most stunning example of this is when a cow goes into labor right as she was about to be pushed into the chutes to be slaughtered. As workers discuss the issue over their radios, a linguistic defense mechanism kicks in and the cow is referred to as "beef." This struggle for life to exist, just a few feet from the killing floor, is almost unbearable, but Pachirat witnessed the disturbing human response that enabled the "beef" to be dealt with and the work to proceed.

This up-close description of an example of humankind's cunning ability to normalize violence adds to the existing work about violence and torture by showing the extent to which human culture can categorically industrialize killing. Depth psychologists and animal studies scholars

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will be interested in how Pachirat exposes the shadow side of America's relationship with animals, a normalized violence that ironically co-exists in a culture with a booming pet industry. This work can be applied not only to our relationships with other animals but to examinations of many forms of violence within our society. Pachirat's nuanced observations can offer a new lens through which to look at recent episodes of torture, our treatment of incarcerated humans, and widespread acceptance of drones and mechanized warfare.

Pachirat pushes current thinking about transparency. Is visibility the simple answer to invisibility? His own observations as a quality control manager suggest that it might not be. In that role he had full visibility and, yet, he noticed how the regulations and procedures of the QC work formed a protective shield that allowed the visible to be concealed from the very person who, by design, is supposed to be the witness. If there was no meat counter – if the shoppers saw their heirloom Thanksgiving turkey being slaughtered before their eyes, would they be appalled? Pachirat considers Michael Pollan's recent suggestion that they would be, "For who could stand the sight?" (Pachirat 2011, 246). Or, perhaps we would just create a new form of invisibility to bear the sight? This work raises these questions. *Every Twelve Seconds* not only tells the story of killing work in a slaughterhouse; it offers essential insights into the psychology of human violence.

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**Susan Grelock** is a doctoral candidate at Pacifica Graduate Institute, where she is pursuing a PhD in depth psychology with an emphasis on community, liberation, and eco-psychology. Her interest is in trans-species psychology and the borderlands between human and nonhuman species. She hopes that depth psychology can be enriched by increasing its understanding of non-human psyche and that it can, in turn, offer new insights into ecological and cultural concerns. Susan lives in northern California and can be reached at [susangrelock@gmail.com](mailto:susangrelock@gmail.com).