

SENSIBLE POLITICS

THE VISUAL CULTURE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ACTIVISM

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Holocaust in Your Face

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In the spring of 2000, I was teaching an undergraduate lecture course at the University of California on the connections between people and other animals. I asked each of the forty-odd students to make an individual or group presentation of their choosing. One group wrote and performed a play, a couple of students made short videos, most gave talks, and one explained the ecological effects of European colonialism using finger puppets.

If the course had an argument, it was the unsurprising one that the boundary between human and nonhuman animals is variable, historical, and largely indeterminate; that despite the self-evident differences between beings, every universal line of demarcation—whether consciousness, cognition, language, affect, morality, pain, whatever—crumbles in the face of animal capacity; and that rather than looking to establish more reliable criteria, we might think instead about the motivation and effects of the line itself. At times, the course was simply an argument for difference without hierarchy, for the ethical equivalence of ontologically distinct forms of life, a counterclaim to Martin Heidegger's famous order of being (a stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming; humans and nonhumans, he wrote, are separated not merely by capacity, but "by an abyss of essence").¹

One student used her fifteen minutes to take the class through a slide show. With little introduction or commentary, she projected a series of images, alternating scenes of industrial animal slaughter with views of the Nazi death camps. The class sat in silence as she switched between black-and-white photographs of heaped animal bodies—massed corpses whose arrangement could have been achieved only by forklifts and bulldozers—and eerily similar, but more familiar photographs that showed piles of naked human bodies.

The student was on topic with her presentation. She understood the logic of the course and assumed a sympathetic audience. But something wasn't right. The

room was full of discomfort and hostility. After a lengthy silence, I spoke up. My comments took me by surprise: something human kicked in, and I found myself pushing back against the equivalences she was proposing and that she had every reason to suppose I shared. And it wasn't just me who was surprised. Had she identified the limit case for liberal animal love?

When the class was over, I told myself that it was the superficiality of the student's presentation that had upset me. I told myself that the problem wasn't so much the cross-species equivalences she had drawn as the historical ones. And I also told myself that I was reacting to her methodological claim that the images spoke for themselves and would do the work of arguing, that what bothered me was the way she had allowed the visual analogy to substitute for speech.

But none of this was very convincing. It was true that she didn't say much. But her images had spoken. In the world of words, they said, even in the densely factual world of Holocaust words, there is a gap, a violent gap, between the rationality of liberal speech and the excess facticity of the image. Through the flesh of these photographs and by their crude juxtaposition, she had raised some of the most difficult questions about death, its commensurabilities, and its representations.

Two years later, in February 2002, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) launched a traveling exhibition called *Holocaust on Your Plate*. The campaign consisted of a series of giant square panels in high-contrast black and white. Each panel was equally divided between an image from a Nazi death camp and an image from an industrial animal farm or slaughterhouse. It was the student's presentation scaled up: a starving man next to a starving cow; children gazing blankly through barbed wire fencing alongside pigs staring emptily through metal bars; prisoners packed onto camp bunks crammed up against chickens squeezed into factory pens. Predictably, the campaign had a polarizing effect. But three years later, when Ingrid Newkirk, the founder and president of PETA, announced the exhibit's abrupt cancellation, she chose Holocaust Remembrance Day to issue a somewhat bewildered apology in which she managed to make everything worse with her simple-minded stress on the prominence of the organization's Jewish staffers in the campaign's development.²

Neither PETA nor my student invented this dreaded comparison. In her apology, Newkirk suggested that the connection between the killing of Jews and the killing

of animals was a natural one, pointing out that Jewish intellectuals, acutely sensitive to mass hygienics, had secured the link long before she did. At a climactic moment in his story "The Letter Writer," Isaac Bashevis Singer's deathly sick central character has time to pity the fate of those even weaker than himself: "In relation to [the animals]," Herman Gombiner says, "all people are Nazis; for the animals, it is an eternal Treblinka," thus providing Charles Patterson with the title for his widely circulated book, the one sustained treatment of this parallel and the source that animal rights campaigners routinely use to bolster the comparison's scholarly legitimacy.³

Patterson's book is a bit scattershot. The Nazis themselves are the more authoritative and complicated source. Not only did they—like Henry Ford—closely study the assembly-line mass killing of the early twentieth-century Chicago stockyards, not only did they transport Jews in cattle trucks and kill them with pesticide, not only did they, as J. M. Coetzee put it in an op-ed piece in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2007, "treat human beings like units in an industrial process," but, dedicated taxonomic engineers that they were, one of their first actions following Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933 was to introduce new animal-cruelty laws to outlaw kosher slaughter.⁴

Is there anybody—even in the meatpacking industry—who is comfortable with what we do to food animals these days? Maybe it's not everyone who feels, as Coetzee does, that there is "something deeply, cosmically wrong" here, but Timothy Pachirat and others have shown the vast amount of design, management, and linguistic work that goes into hiding what happens inside a slaughterhouse (even from the people working there) and into more generally disguising the animality and multiple exploitations that are prime ingredients of our food.⁵ Pachirat doesn't share journalist Michael Pollan's confidence that making publically visible the treatment of animals (and people) in slaughterhouses would turn everyone into ethical reformers.⁶ It might equally—as another of my students recently suggested—create a whole new class of popular spectacle.

Animal rights people are right to argue along with Coetzee that it's a crime "to treat *any living being* like a unit in an industrial process," to point out that the industrialization of animal killing is related to the extermination of people not simply by analogy, but by rationality, by aesthetics, and by the direct transfer of technology and practice. They are right to worry that the ethical morass that enables mass brutality against animals also makes other ethical catastrophes, including those against people, more possible. And they're right to insist that the dehumanizations that underwrite human genocide (Jews are vermin, Tutsis are cockroaches)

are possible only because the nonhuman avatars are not only nonhuman, but sub-human and killable.⁷

Some of the people who opposed PETA's campaign argued that unlike the Jews, Roma, Poles, sexual nonconformists, political activists, and others dragged from their everyday lives to the fascist camps, the animals in the photographs are raised to die, are likely incapable of independent existence, are dead even before they are born. They were right to insist that this difference matters, that the differences between the many forms of "lives not worth living" are real, that the culture, history, and transgenerational kinships that perish (or somehow persist) along with people are profoundly human. They are right to insist that human dead live on in a different way from animal dead. And they are right that the offense they feel as custodians of the human dead is far from trivial.

Why should anyone be forced to, claim to, or feel the need to arbitrate the unspeakable? Why should horrors be made to compete? Depending on your commitments, making these impossibilities apparent is either the fullness or the emptiness of the comparison, its depth or its shallowness.

I'm far from alone in believing that images of the dead and of the soon to die, both human and animal, have a sacredness, albeit an uncertain sacredness that speaks to us in a language we barely understand. It's too obvious and too European to call it an "uncanniness." The images speak of the thing that has happened and that will happen. They speak of the loss of something unknowable and the doubtful status of the lifeless substance that remains, like us, but not like us, like we will be when we lose the vital thing that is temporarily ours, when we become the thing we can never imagine or understand, the thing we are always becoming. If nothing else, the dead and dying body demands dignity. Yet what is less dignified than the anonymous photograph of anonymous death? Maybe only the anonymous photograph of collective anonymous death, the heaped corpses, awkward, exposed, spilled every which way.

As a form of reason, analogy can be too easy—visual analogy even more so. In this case, it misunderstands both of the stories it hopes to bring together as one. During the Holocaust, Jews and cokilled were not only butchered like domesticated animals, they were turned into those animals. As much as the fact of killing, it is this fact of ontological destruction—the fact that made killing possible—that remains so raw and incalculable. During our present age of industrialized animal slaughter, cows, sheep, pigs, chickens, and their cokilled are born, raised, and killed as the animals they currently are. In the world in which we live, to be able to be killed (in this and other more casual ways) is what it means to be an animal.

As in Auschwitz, there is no confusion here, either ethical or ontological. In this respect, the two stories are both identical and fundamentally distinct.

There is no controlling these images. They reveal a truth invisible to the campaign. The campaign says: Look, the killing of these animals is the same as the murder of these people. The destruction of the Jews was an unconscionable evil and so, therefore, is the killing of the animals. The images say: Look, the killing of these animals is the same as the murder of these people. The Jews died as animals, and so do the animals.

NOTES

- Many thanks to Clive Dalton, Meg McLagan, and Sharon Simpson for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.
1. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 177; and *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. John Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 16.
 2. Ingrid Newkirk, "Apology for a Tasteless Campaign," May 5, 2005, <http://web.israelinsider.com/Views/5475.htm>.
 3. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Letter Writer," trans. Alisha Sherwin and Elizabeth Shrub, *The New Yorker*, January 13, 1968, pp. 26–54; Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002).
 4. J. M. Coetzee, "Exposing the Beast: Factory Farming Must Be Called to the Slaughterhouse," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 22, 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/exposing-the-beast-factory-farming-must-be-called-to-the-slaughterhouse/2007/02/21/1171733846249.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>. On this, see also my "Jews, Lice, and History," *Public Culture* 19.3 (2007), pp. 521–66.
 5. Timothy Pachirat, *Killing Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming); Noëlie Vialles, *Animal to Edible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
 6. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
 7. "Perhaps the commandment should read 'Thou shalt not make killable,'" says Donna Haraway in *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2007), p. 80.