

# Transparency and the Factory Farm: Agritourism and Counter-Activism at Fair Oaks Farms

**Abstract:** The American meat industry has a fraught relationship with the visibility of its operations and the public narrative about its treatment of animals. As activists have used photographs and videos to reveal the industry's normally hidden practices, those in the meat business have historically pushed back by increasing the secrecy of their operations. However, the last decade has seen the industry turn to a new strategy: aggressive public relations outreach rooted in the paradigm of transparency. Generally, these are highly mediated public relations exercises, but at Indiana's Fair Oaks Farms, tourists are physically invited onto a fully functional hog

breeding farm, which doubles as an agritourism destination and a microcosm of the industry's public relations strategy. Fair Oaks relies on both the tropes of alternative farming tourism and on strategic revelation—including literal glass walls—to craft a publicly palatable narrative about factory farming and factory-farmed animals.

**Keywords:** factory farming, transparency, politics of sight, agritourism, pigs, public relations

THERE IS A STORY THOSE who criticize factory farming tell about the mass-scale making and taking of life on concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and at industrialized slaughterhouses. Farms and abattoirs, this story goes, operate out of sight and out of mind, churning out cheap, shrink-wrapped products that belie the cruel treatment of animals that makes them possible.

This is not a new story. Writing in 1906 of the then-novel, industrial-scale kill floors in Chicago's Packingtown, Upton Sinclair equated high-speed animal slaughter to a "horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory" ([1906] 1974: 45) and called for more public and government scrutiny of the meatpacking industry. A century later, Michael Pollan (2002) would repeat this critique, making his oft-quoted suggestion that "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 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." Transparency, however, has not been forthcoming.

For the better part of the past century, the American meat industry has done its best to hide its operations from the public. Ever-larger operations are sited away from urban centers, far removed from the public's consciousness and conscience. Advertising for meat fills this cognitive gap with promises of

enticing flavors and cheap prices even as meat itself comes to us bloodless and pre-packaged. Meanwhile, the industry is engaged in vast legislative opposition to whistleblowing and unwanted visual scrutiny, made most apparent in its support for legislation like the 2006 federal Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA)<sup>1</sup> and a series of state bills that have come to be termed "ag-gag" laws,<sup>2</sup> which Garrett Broad (2016: 50) identifies as "part of a larger initiative by major players in the food production industry to maintain discursive and structural dominance." Such efforts are aimed at neutralizing one of the most powerful and commonly used strategies available to the industry's critics: the recording and dissemination of images of meat production. Anchoring what Timothy Pachirat (2011: 15) has dubbed a "politics of sight," such imagery seeks to confront the public with tangible proof of the provenance of its pound of flesh.

Up to this point, the standard narrative holds: the battle over what Pollan terms the "right to see" is a tug-of-war between the forces of light, who want to illuminate hidden and repulsive practices (for the social good), and the forces of darkness, who seek to conceal them (for profit). There are, however, two major assumptions undergirding this narrative. The first is that there is indeed some general standard of abhorrence: that if the public did have access to animal production facilities, they would be duly horrified. The second is that the industry will continue to

hide behind draconian legislation and the opaque walls of mega-farms. These assumptions, however, do not always hold. Sometimes they are flouted outright.

At Indiana's Fair Oaks Farms, tourists are welcomed onto a fully operational hog breeding farm to learn about large-scale agriculture and observe the life of factory-farmed pigs through actual glass walls. While much contemporary agri-tourism revolves around promoting "alternative" and small-scale agriculture, Fair Oaks deploys petting-zoo, buy-local tropes in an attempt to normalize conventional, industrial farming. It does so by embracing transparency, seemingly flipping the script on the standard story by taking the power of revelation out of the hands of activists.

On the one hand, Fair Oaks is an outlier, a unique farm tourism destination in rural Indiana. On the other hand, it provides a privileged vantage point onto the corporate meat industry's new strategy of taking on its critics on their own terms. This article begins with a visit to Fair Oaks, focusing on how transparency is (selectively) deployed in the representation of both large-scale agriculture itself and the animals it produces. It then situates this show-farm in the history of the development of the American meat industry, its relationship with visibility and the public, and the public's relationship to farm animals. Finally, returning to Fair Oaks, and engaging more closely with the notion of the "politics of sight," it analyzes how a selective transparency that seems to perform radical revelation—even as it hides overt and structural forms of violence against animals—can be used as a tool to counter critique and normalize a problematic status quo.

## A Tourist on the Factory Farm

I first heard about Fair Oaks in the winter of 2015, when I attended the Iowa Pork Congress—a trade show and discussion forum for the pig industry—in Des Moines. As part of a project about corporate responses to criticism, I was studying how the American meat industry was crafting a public relations front against a tide of critique from NGOs, activists, and the press for its impacts on the environment, labor, public health, and the well-being of animals. I had interviewed lobbyists and PR professionals, advertisers and corporate lawyers, farmers and slaughterhouse managers, and was attending trade shows and corporate events to get a feel for how the industry talked about threats to its image when the mainstream media and public were not around.

At the Pork Congress, almost an entire day of seminars and keynote presentations was dedicated to selling not hogs, but perceptions of hog producers and their treatment of animals. Tracking the new normal in industry discourse and advertising, the focus was on promoting animal welfare *within*

conventional agriculture in opposition to many activist groups' strong normative positions in favor of animal rights, which usually entail calls for the outright abolition of "factory farming."<sup>3</sup> Fittingly, in an issue of the agribusiness newspaper *Feedstuffs* released that same week and distributed at the Congress, public relations consultant Chuck Jolley (2015: 8) opined that "animal rights groups always get it wrong, while animal welfare groups occasionally get it right."

In plenary sessions, speakers like the outspoken lobbyist Steve Kopperud argued that "We need to take back the messaging."<sup>4</sup> Most consumer perceptions of what takes place on American farms, argued Kopperud, come either from sheer ignorance or from activists' messages, which "play on [that] ignorance." What was needed was a public relations "war" against the industry's critics. His fiery pronouncements drew nods from the crowd, as much from well-coiffed corporate heads as from those wearing feed-company promotional baseball hats.

Another speaker that day took a slightly more high-minded tone. Jon Hoek, an executive at Belstra Milling and a leading advocate for transparency in the industry's public relations, had written an article for *National Hog Farmer* in 2013 in which he improbably reached to Aristotle to consider where pig producers have gone wrong in their rhetorical contest with activists. He argued that *logos* is on the side of farmers, who generally tend to employ "'scientific' reasoning" in the face of argument. *Pathos*, "based on evoking sympathy, anger, revulsion and other feelings that even farmers experience when watching undercover animal-abuse videos," goes to the activists. *Ethos* remains the "unclaimed territory of argument" and the space wherein farmers can "make an ethical appeal due to the strength of [their] sound moral character."

Hoek told the Iowa audience that one of the best ways to make such an appeal, in terms of the Aristotelian taxonomy of modes of persuasion, is rooted in the authority and personal integrity of the speaker in the eyes of the public. Farmers, he argued, should figuratively invite the public onto the farm through visual images of production processes and open communication about animal production, thereby showing they have nothing to hide. Or, as Hoek and the Belstra team had done, one could literally invite the public onto the farm by actually designing a transparent, accessible concentrated feeding operation that could act as a pro-farming, anti-activist, agricultural educational center—cum—theme park. I decided I had to visit.

I got to Fair Oaks from Chicago on a sunny Saturday that September, passing first through the Windy City's erstwhile Packingtown, which had once hosted popular slaughter tours (more on that later). Then I headed southeast, cutting through the gray industrial hub of Gary, Indiana, before turning south and away from Lake Michigan, taking a similar route to that

which some hog drivers in the nineteenth century would have taken on their way home from the stockyards, their pockets fattened off the animals they had led to slaughter.

On the drive down I-65, massive billboards of the sort that line every interstate sprout from the seemingly endless fields that stretch from the side of the road to the horizon. Most feature photos of clean-cut, suit-and-tie-clad white men: local big-shot accident and personal injury lawyers, car dealers, or insurance agents. Some hawk Chick Fil-A or Subway sandwiches. Others scream that “HELL IS REAL,” with little guidance on what one should do with such grim tidings. And then there are two sets that recur, dotting both sides of the road with ever greater frequency the closer one gets to exit 220 for Winamac. One, a simple design with a cow, a pig, and a sprig of corn sprouting from a small mound of earth, urges the driver to “Start Your Adventure” at Fair Oaks Farms. The other comes in a number of iterations, alternating between fancy dishes and burgers-and-fries, and bearing the cursive logo of Farmhouse Restaurant. It is up to the driver to impute correlation to these ads and then to take the exit and find out for sure.

Pulling into the Fair Oaks parking lot one is faced with the sorts of red-roofed barns that are synonymous with bucolic farm life in the American cultural imaginary. These buildings house most of Fair Oaks’s amenities, including the Farmhouse Restaurant, café, bakery, and admissions office, but no animals. The “Dairy Adventure” and “Pig Adventure” are off-site, accessible by bus from the corresponding, animal-specific information buildings. Given the context in which I had learned of Fair Oaks’s existence, I opted for the pigs.

The Pork building, a brand-new, glass-and-steel warehouse, greets the entering visitor with a massive image of a single pink pig standing atop a hill under a beaming sun. This is accompanied by a short “Ode to the Pig”:

*Pigs are  
Magnificent  
Yes, it is true  
Friends to the farm, to me and to you*  
—  
*The things they  
Provide  
We use every day  
Noble & strong,  
They are heroes, some people may say*  
—  
*From their head to their tail, their feet to their snout,  
They give of themselves  
To help  
The World out.*

The rest of the space acts as a waiting room for the bus that takes visitors to the site of the Adventure. For visitors to pass the time, the building houses a children’s obstacle course and, for the less rambunctious, its walls are adorned with jokey, bumper-sticker-esque references to bacon like “Do pig farts smell like bacon?”, “Death By Bacon” (accompanied by a take on the Jolly Roger combining a human skull and crossed bacon slices), and, stuck onto a men’s bathroom mirror, “Make Bacon Not War.”

Interspersed among these are placards replete with factoids about pig production. One informs visitors that “Indiana pork farms contribute more than \$3 billion each year to the state’s economy.” Another that “U.S. Pig Farmers are determined to lead in carbon-footprint knowledge by identifying areas where they can continue the trend of producing more food with fewer resources.” Others, keeping with the noble pig narrative, inform visitors that pigs “play a vital role in improving life” given that byproducts of meat production are used for biomedical purposes. A final set primes guests for their encounter with actual pigs, drawing attention to the fact that “Today, most pigs are raised in barns instead of outdoors. Regardless of the housing system, pig farmers have adopted modern practices out of concern for animal well-being, food safety, and the environment.”

The ride on the air-conditioned bus from the information center to the farm takes five minutes, winding back through the main parking lot, past a BP gas station, down a short road away from the main campus to a large white building, its entrances marked by signs stressing the private and biosecure nature of the place. This is, after all, a working farm filled with real pigs. The bus, however, does not proceed down any access lanes, but stops inside a garage that opens into an atrium reminiscent of the information center. Here visitors wait for the tour to begin and mill among the interactive displays, holographic projections, and placards filled with yet more factoids, most of these pertaining to the pigs themselves. One in particular drew quite a few surprised exclamations from the other members of my tour group, informing readers that “A pig is as intelligent as a 3 year old child.”

After passing through a virtual shower that marks out a pretend biosecurity cordon, our tour group and I passed onto the main attraction. While the outside walls of the site are as opaque as those of any other breeding farm, the inside of the Fair Oaks facility is outfitted with glass walls. This transparent factory farm is divided into three sections, representing the three phases of sow life: gestation, farrowing, and grow-out. Each of these lies about fifteen feet below the raised, carpeted, glass-walled catwalks from which one can look down at the pigs.

The tour starts in grow-out, where tourists, above the piglets’ sightlines, can gaze down at the open pens where the

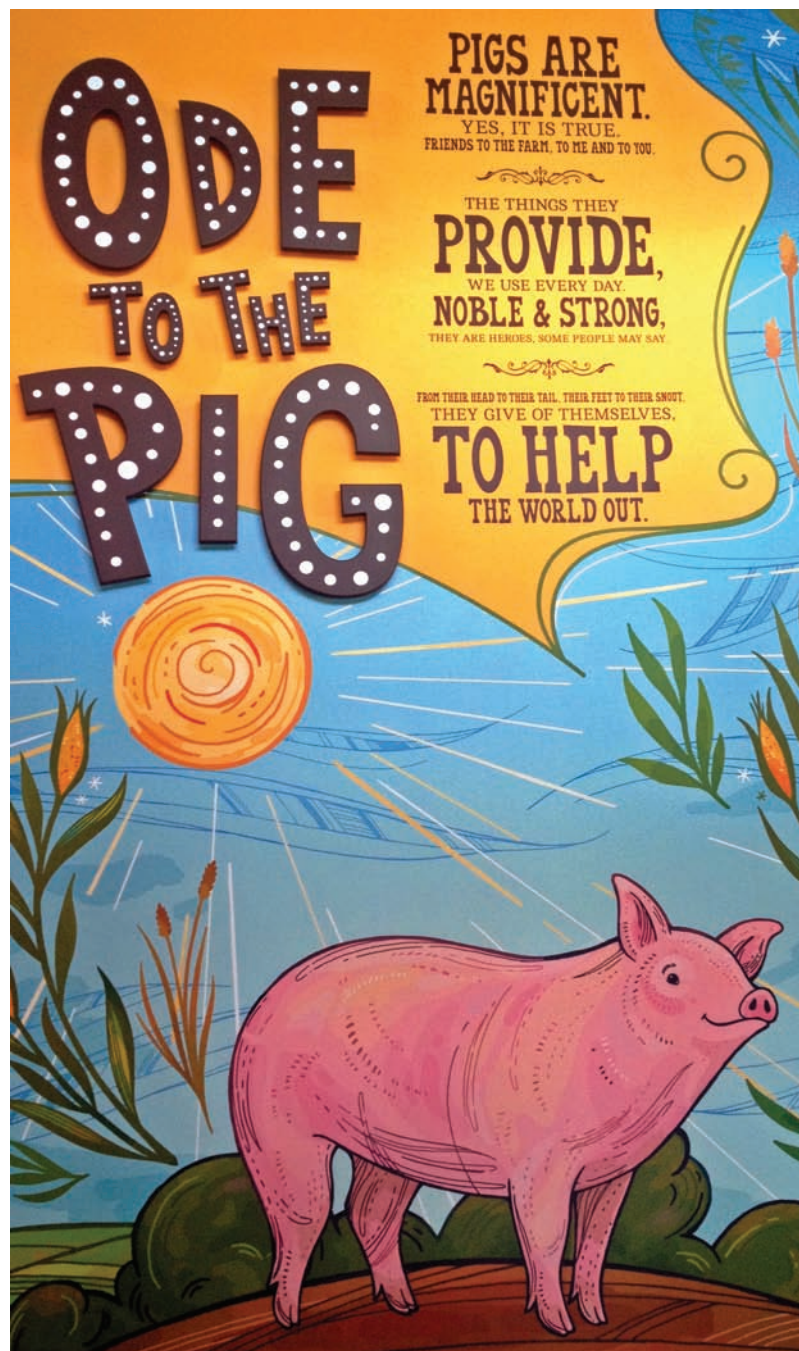


FIGURE 1: This “Ode to the Pig” greets visitors as they enter the Pork Building at Fair Oaks, where they wait for the shuttle that will take them to the glass-walled breeding farm.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN DUTKIEWICZ © 2018

piglets sleep, eat, and interact with one another, grooming or fighting or snuggling up to their companions. The pens themselves, while relatively clean and certainly exceeding standards I had seen when I had visited larger Midwestern operations, are nonetheless small and illuminated by harsh electric light. There is no privacy for the animals, neither

from prying eyes nor from each other. Most tourists do not linger in this section, especially as, in consecutive enclosures, the pigs are older, larger, and less obviously cute.

The efficiency hinted at earlier is on full display in the gestation section, where yet another set of displays labeled GESTATION 101 welcomes visitors to perch above the group





FIGURE 2: *In the Pork Building, pig-related jokes are interspersed with media representations of pigs and hog- and farming-related scientific and economic factoids.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN DUTKIEWICZ © 2018

and individual pens where pregnant sows sleep, pace, and feed. The space, lit by bright electric lights, is more cavernous than the grow-out pens. It is also staffed by tour guides ready to answer questions and contextualize the maze of gates, crates, open and closed passages, and mechanized feeding equipment that greets the viewer. Access to food, for instance, is controlled by electronic readers that identify pigs and their nutritional intake based on the RFID chips pierced through their ears. “That way,” a guide explained, “they get exactly as much food as they need.”

The same guide went on to clarify that not all pigs at Fair Oaks are females. A small group of boars housed in one of the rooms in the grow-out section, she told us, were being used to sync up the females’ estrus cycles, priming them for artificial insemination. When females are inseminated by workers, these boars or others like them will be paraded around their stalls, “exciting the ladies through smell,” without actually being allowed physical sexual access to them. This system is also explained by a placard which reads: “When they’re not strutting their stuff for the ladies, they just hang out in a stall eating, sleeping and eating again. We call it living the dream.”

The tour culminates in the farrowing room. Here, five-hundred-pound sows, having just given birth, lie pinned down on their sides in farrowing crates while their tiny piglets suckle and scamper. Despite the odd exclamation of “Cute!” or “Wow!” a number of people on my tour inquired about the welfare of the virtually immobilized sows. The guides’ explanations that they are held down so as not to accidentally crush their piglets seemed to placate most people.

The highlight of the tour followed. Everyone was called to assemble on bleacher-type seating. After some build-up by a

guide who explained that we were witness to the making of real animal life, a farmworker appeared on the other side of a floor-to-ceiling pane of glass, a tiny whitish-pink piglet wrapped in a maroon towel cradled in her arms. The newborn squinted against the bright lights as the guide gave a brief monologue about pig birth, explaining that this piglet would grow up right there at Fair Oaks. Then everyone was invited to snap pictures of the newborn, creating a minor stampede as children and parents crowded at the glass wall. Selfies and laughter and cries of “Cute!” ensued. After this subsided, the worker and the piglet disappeared down a hallway and out of sight. We were then shepherd back onto the bus and returned to the main campus, concluding our firsthand encounter with real, industrially raised pigs.

## A Short History of Invisibility

Fair Oaks is unique in that it collapses the contemporary, socially taken-for-granted distance between the public and factory-farmed animals. The fact the production of meat happens far away from most meat consumers is, however, the result of a historical trajectory that cannot be attributed solely to the nefarious intentions of the meat industry. Rather, changes in geographies of commodity production and consumption, business logistics, and social norms about physical and moral hygiene led to the separation of society at large from the raising and killing of animals.

There is of course no single, simple history of social interaction with livestock that universally spans geographies and social groups, but there is a rough trajectory we can trace in the United States. Traditionally, even in urban centers, animals and animal slaughter were a physical reality (Young Lee 2008). This included the experience of animals themselves as they were raised or brought to slaughter and of the biological products of butchery such as offal, blood, carcasses, and so on. For instance, Catherine McNeur writes about an early nineteenth-century New York City whose streets teemed with the free-roaming pigs that supplemented lower-class incomes and nutrition and fed the lower-town upper crust. When discussions emerged about the desirability of removing or keeping hogs in the urban space, these tracked broader schisms in class, race, and attendant urban(e) sensibilities. “Anti-hogites,” writes McNeur (2011: 640), “contended that the animals impeded the progress, refinement, and modernity of New York.” The hogs and their owners were conflated as a “swinish multitude” (641).

These pressures for urban sanitization—as much physical as moral—also included wide-ranging pressures to remove the practice of slaughter from public space. In the case of



FIGURE 3: Growing piglets are housed in group pens, into which visitors look down from raised, glass-walled catwalks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN DUTKIEWICZ © 2018

New York City, city officials and the newly established Metropolitan Board of Health worked to move animal processing facilities away from the general populace, pushing them geographically out of the city or into centralized “institutions” (Day 2008: 192–93). Slaughterhouses were to be centrally regulated and subjected to inspection and surveillance, bringing them into the domain of government control and supervision while food animals were removed from the public gaze. It was not animal welfare that was a major concern, but rather the affective welfare of the emergent urban consumer class, as reformers were wont to stress in their utopic visions. Tellingly, even Thomas More’s *Utopia*, imagined at the very beginning of this broader Enlightenment trajectory, excluded farming and slaughter. The pure, ideal city did not shun the eating of flesh, but it did shun animals and their killing, counting on all farming and slaughtering to be performed outside the town by slaves so that the citizens would not jeopardize their “compassion, the finest feeling of human nature” (More [1516] 2014: 155).

These changes were themselves buoyed by major developments in the capacity for large-scale, proto-Fordist animal slaughter on the “disassembly lines” of cities like Cincinnati and Chicago, which themselves were facilitated by improvements in rail transport, refrigeration, and communications technologies (Cronon 1991). This “marketing revolution” (Fields 2004: 67)

allowed for centralized production and long-distance delivery of goods, turning meat production into commodity-good production, and allowed New Yorkers to feast on bacon from hogs raised in Indiana and butchered in Chicago.

A complete invisibility of animals did not, however, directly follow from these transformations. In the sprawling Chicago stockyards, there emerged at first a period of highly curated hypervisibility where animal slaughter could itself be “consumed as spectacle” (Shukin 2009: 62). Indeed, the city’s packinghouses were designed with viewership in mind, as meat producers sought both to titillate and to “allay public fears about the safety of foods processed and packaged far from the home and local community” (Marchand 1998: 258).

Slaughter, as Nicole Shukin (2009: 102) argues, not only released the value stored in live animals into circulation as meat, but also generated an “aesthetic surplus” on which, for a few decades, meatpackers like Armour and Swift could capitalize. Visitors to Packingtown could watch as hogs were hoisted into the air by their hind legs and follow them on their inescapable journey down the line. Guided tours of the work of killing were sold as an immersive experience and attracted mass audiences. In 1893, benefiting from the influx of tourists brought to Chicago by the World’s Columbian Exposition, the stockyards attracted over a million visitors, and continued drawing crowds until the dawn of World War I.



FIGURE 4: *The tour of the glass-walled breeding farm culminates in a photo opportunity (through a pane of glass) with a newborn piglet, seen here swathed in a towel and cradled in the arms of a Fair Oaks employee.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN DUTKIEWICZ © 2018

This is not to say, however, that cruelty was inherently pleasurable or attractive for the nineteenth-century audience. The attraction to the packinghouses, rather, was that of facing something at the same time modern and anachronistic: the factory as a setting for routinized killing. The experience had different effects depending on the audience. The Russian writer Vladimir Mayakovsky called his visit to Packingtown “one of the most hideous spectacles of my life” (cited in LeBlanc 2017: 9). The British novelist Rudyard Kipling was disgusted by the process of mechanized slaughter he witnessed, but was even more taken aback by the reaction of other visitors. He singles out a young woman who, despite “the red blood under her shoes, the vivid carcasses tacked around her, a bullock bleeding its life away not six feet away from her, and the death factory roaring all around her [nonetheless] looked curiously with hard, bold eyes, and was not ashamed” (Cronon 1991: 208).

The packers, as Shukin explains, were aware of this tension in viewers’ responses and were wary that the experience of the tours might cross the boundary between titillation and

revulsion. As such, they balanced the experience with explanatory pamphlets that provided a narrative accompaniment to the tours. These pamphlets’ central character was “a little white girl no older than six or seven years of age” who acted as an “affect meter,” enacting desired behavior in the face of mass slaughter, including curiosity, self-mastery, and a strategic aiming or averting of the gaze (Shukin 2009: 96–97).

Since then, times have changed. The publication of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* in 1906 drew attention to the hellish working conditions of the packing plants’ laborers and—albeit less so—to the plight of the countless animals killed in the Union Stockyards, and soon thereafter accusations of price-fixing and oligopolistic practices turned public opinion against the meat barons. Growing regulation and federal scrutiny, coupled with the economic benefits of siting slaughterhouses closer to ever-more-concentrated farms, pushed slaughterhouses to close their doors to public tours before leaving most urban spaces altogether.

In this context, Noëlie Vialles ([1987] 1994: 22) argues that even as meat consumption increased historically, a society



not entirely comfortable with mass slaughter began to make two demands of it: “it must be non-violent (ideally: painless); and it must be invisible (ideally: non-existent).”

Behind this cloak of invisibility, a number of even more dramatic structural changes have reshaped American agriculture. The economies-of-scale production model that began with centralized slaughter spread to animal farming, with the size of farms growing even as the number of farms (and farmers) diminished (Thu and Durrenberger 1998). As major processors and producers grew throughout the twentieth century, animal agriculture came increasingly to resemble any other kind of commodity production. American farms, once diversified operations, moved toward single-crop or single-species specialization (Pew Commission 2009) and farmers increasingly became locked into direct production contract relationships with specific producers (as is also the case in other industries, including tobacco; see Benson 2011), thereby losing bargaining and economic power. The popularization of concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), commonly referred to as factory farms, for chickens and pigs in the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated these trends (Watts 2004). Requiring massive capital outlay, factory farming vastly increased the role of feed and pharmaceutical companies, as well as that of the financial sector, in agricultural production. A combination of contracting arrangements on the one hand and, on the other, vertical integration of operations by some large processors has de facto reshaped agriculture in the image of corporate capitalism.

Among the effects of these changes are the splintering of rural communities (Page 1997; Coppin 2003; Leonard 2014), wide-ranging environmental and public health impacts (Pew Commission 2009; Emel and Neo 2011), and exploitation of vulnerable populations for labor (Genoways 2014; Ribas 2015). These changes have also involved the creation of a very specific type of pigs, which is now vastly different from those that once roamed the streets of New York and were slaughtered in Chicago. Driven by an obsession with genetics aimed at creating a leaner, faster-growing, more muscular animal better suited to indoor confinement and designed around a high yield of low-fat, low-cost meat, the modern pig is a product and symptom of corporate agribusiness (Johnson 2007; Andersen 2009). In the case of female animals, these shifts have meant the design of sows capable of producing ever-larger litters, who are frequently confined to individual gestation stalls throughout their pregnancies, and then to equally restricting farrowing crates while feeding their young. In many senses, the factory farming of pigs is a project predicated on investing labor and capital into maximizing the economic efficiency of reproduction (Blanchette 2015). All of these dramatic changes to the nature of agriculture have taken place outside—or at the periphery of—public scrutiny.

## Exposés, Revelations, and the Politics of Sight

In the face of the meat industry’s seclusion, the most frequently employed tactic of its critics has been to bring to light the processes of animal production through the use of exposés. Videos and images of animal production facilities taken and disseminated by activists and NGOs seek to collapse the distance between consumers and animals.

The forms and formats of such revelatory imagery vary widely. They include full-length films, like 2005’s seminal documentary *Earthlings*, which relies on undercover footage to document animal abuse in the pet and meat industries; short undercover clips released online and to the media by groups like the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Mercy for Animals (MFA), and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), among others; as well as videos shown directly to the public, including visits by the Farm Animal Rights Movement (FARM) to colleges with “viewing stations” that invite passersby to watch videos about meat production, or impromptu interventions by Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) wherein members display slaughterhouse footage on tablets and laptops in public places.

These initiatives aim to reach a vast audience and “inject their oppositional stories into the media ecologies of the eating public” (Broad 2016: 66), imploring consumers to recognize the animals behind their meat and the discursive package and social imaginaries in which it is wrapped. Helena Pedersen (2010: 38) argues that such actions “bring into view the industrial, genetic, and biological histories by which an individual animal has been constructed for human consumption and profit.”

Timothy Pachirat (2011: 236) refers to such strategies as enacting a “politics of sight,” or the “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.” However, central not only to activist strategies, but also to both mainstream and academic commentary about animal agriculture, is the assumption that seeing the reality of animal treatment will provoke a response and, by extension, change consumer behavior.

By stimulating immediate, visceral, affective reactions from viewers, visual messages have historically been animal rights activists’ most successful strategy to generate broad public awareness (Armstrong 2007: 106). Viewers have converted to vegetarianism and joined pro-animal groups and initiatives (McDonald 2000; Wrenn 2003). And, most importantly from the industry’s perspective, visual messages generate negative media attention, having been shown to reduce, at least in the short term, demand for meat (Tonsor and Olynk 2010).



On the other hand, such causality is not as direct as its proponents might hope. As noted by Brett Mizelle (2015: 66), “there is no single or clear relation between the politics of sight and the status of animals in modern America.” Rather, as Pachirat (2011) concedes, revelation begets a politics, which can stimulate the development of new forms of confinement. This is most clear in the passage of ag-gag laws, which criminalize undercover recording at farms and slaughterhouse, nipping the potential for revelation in the bud.

More insidious yet is the meat industry’s embrace of revelation as a strategy to counter activist initiatives. Peter Benson (2011: 43), in his study of the relationship between tobacco companies and public perception, argues that corporate actors, faced with revelations of their nefarious activities, will engage in public relations strategies marked by “the appropriation of the discourse and strategies of oppositional movements.” Following this exact pattern, the meat industry has launched a series of initiatives rooted in the notion of transparency to virtually invite the public onto farms and meat processing facilities to quell affective responses to seeing animal (mis) treatment.

The North American Meat Institute (NAMI), a major meat processor trade group, has launched the print and online “Meat Mythbusters” campaign aimed at providing a counternarrative to popularly circulating claims about meat production, including issues such as the use of antibiotics in animal diets and the confinement of pigs to gestation stalls. So too has the group embarked on an audacious online video project that directly answers Pollan’s challenge. The “Glass Walls Project” series, conceptualized in conjunction with Temple Grandin, who narrates some of its webisodes, guides viewers on tours of farms and slaughterhouses, showing and explaining industry best-practice in a direct challenge to activist claims. NAMI is not alone in its efforts. The Center for Food Integrity, a think tank and policy group funded by most of the major food corporations operating in the United States, including Monsanto, Smithfield, Nestle, and McDonald’s, has specifically put together a group of “farm animal care specialists” to examine and respond to activist videos. The U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance, a public relations front group funded by major agricultural interest groups including the National Pork Producers Council, bankrolled the 2014 documentary *Farmland*, which couched a defense of large-scale agricultural production in individual farmers’ human interest stories.

This version of the politics of sight is one about contesting feeling and interpretation in the face of revelation. It is a pushback from the industry aimed at injecting a *counter-oppositional* narrative into the public conversation that seeks

to challenge activists’ monopoly on the epistemic power of revelation. Indeed, much of the power of revelatory activist narratives lies in their explanations and framing of the images of animal treatment and abuse. In a culture that is distant from physical animals and from both scientific and intuitive understandings of animal behavior, notions of what constitutes “humane” treatment or animal comfort or discomfort are not necessarily coherent. As Philip Armstrong (2007: 121–23) notes in his study of animal activists’ visual campaigns, people react viscerally to images of battery-farmed, caged, egg-laying chickens, but have little reaction to seeing broiler chickens raised for meat, as the latter look feathered, plump, and seem to be socializing with other animals, even though in the latter picture many may be too heavy for their own legs to carry them, never see natural light, and may very well be afflicted with a number of diseases.

The politics of sight is not only about seeing and not seeing, but about understanding and interpreting, about a rhetoric that narrates what is seen. Given a generally prevailing aversion to violence, activist videos do shock, and violence against animals does register as violence, but the industry’s pushback seeks to legitimate and normalize on-farm activities, suggesting that when the industry does allow the public in, the reality is far more palatable than suggested by activists. All of these strategies, however, remain as mediated as the activist videos they oppose.

This is where Fair Oaks is ostensibly so innovative. It promises the complete collapse of distance and mediation, bringing tourists face to face—in both the literal and Levinasian sense—with factory-farmed animals.<sup>5</sup> To do so, however, Fair Oaks draws not only on the anti-activist public relations strategies of groups like NAMI and the Center for Food Integrity, but also on the representational practices of small-scale agritourism and “happy meat” producers.

In the face of the expansion of industrial agriculture, a countermovement based not around animal interests per se but around “alternative” production and consumption has relied on the notion of collapsing distance between agriculture and the public in the interest of promoting nonindustrial foodways. A renewed interest in and “revalorization” of eating local and supporting small-scale agriculture and short food supply chains (SFSCs) has spurred wide-ranging projects, including farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, that frame themselves in contradistinction to conventional agriculture and corporate food supply chains (Watts et al 2005: 32). Emergent “geographies of responsibility and ...ethics of care” (Jackson et al. 2009: 19; see also Bryant and Goodman 2004) have allowed consumers to enact what they view as moral responsibility vis-à-vis food at both individual and collective levels

by engaging in what Doreen Massey (2004: 17) terms a “politics of connectivity.” Animal agriculture plays a major role in this world, including the promotion of heritage breeds (Weiss 2016) and of meat from “happy” animals through “techniques of visibility” like animal welfare labels (Miele 2011: 2077; see also Johnston 2008; Parker 2013). This movement—which is too wide-ranging to do justice to here—has also involved an active promotion of agritourism on small-scale farms to generate a nonfood income stream for farmers and promote “alternative” production (Spurlock 2009).

Alternative production and consumption has enjoyed a measure of success, but has also proven ripe for subsumption into the marketing strategies of large agricultural businesses and food retailers (Jackson et al. 2008: 19; Buller and Roe 2012: 32). In crafting a palatable, and even attractive, form of revelation of conventional agriculture, Fair Oaks also draws upon and subsumes these tropes. Starting from its red-roofed barns, children’s play areas, and invitations for visitors to “reconnect with nature, animals and our planet” through to its glass-walled breeding barn, it paints a picture of factory farming as reconcilable with concerns about animal welfare, rural communities, and the collapse of distance between producer and consumer.<sup>6</sup> In other words, it uses transparency to present conventional, industrial agriculture as a good in and of itself.

It achieves this end through a combination of curation and omission. Fair Oaks is remarkable in how consciously it tows the line between acknowledging the undeniable—such as the nature of confinement agriculture—and completely ignoring criticism. There is neither dialogue nor dialectic nor context; what is telling about the deployment of facts at Fair Oaks is that the criticisms being addressed are neither directly presented nor even necessarily implied.

Why, for instance, would hog farmers be looking into reducing their carbon footprint? In the wake of the 2006 publication of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization’s (FAO) controversial *Livestock’s Long Shadow* report, concerns with the environmental effects of factory farming have become a mainstream concern, spanning academic research and media reporting. But while such concerns are being refuted at Fair Oaks, they are not actually mentioned. It is a de-contextualized transparency where facts are disembedded from the arguments that presuppose them, thereby preempting the arguments themselves if they were to come. Similarly, why might it matter that a pig is as intelligent as a three-year-old child? In an activist’s narrative, it is a call to compassion; at Fair Oaks, it is merely a fact about pigs.

Such absences also permeate the physical experience at Fair Oaks. Most notably, there is no slaughterhouse and no death. Pachirat (2011: 240, 242), in his discussion of the

politics of sight, urges his readers to “[i]magine ... a world organized around the removal, rather than the creation, of physical, social, linguistic, and methodological distances” where “to eat meat would be to know the killers, the killing, and the animals themselves.” But behind the glass walls of the Pig Adventure, the life of livestock is suspended in time under the viewer’s gaze, never actually aging or progressing through the value chain, and never being cut short. By doing away with the overt violence of slaughter and without explicitly discussing it, the tour can focus attention on life itself—to the biopolitics rather than the thanatopolitics of agriculture—and generate goodwill through claims of animal welfare and through the deployment of the affect of newborn piglets.

This presentation of animal life amidst what Hoek referred to in Iowa as “very scripted” guided tours also masks the structural violence of industrialized pig rearing. Absent here are clear statements of the facts that animals are not allowed to copulate, that they are not allowed access to pasture or sunlight or fresh air, that they are confined to farrowing crates and not allowed to nest or burrow, and that sows will be sent to slaughter as soon as they no longer bear large litters. Rather, these are replaced by claims that “most pigs are raised in barns instead of outdoors ... out of concern for animal well-being” and that animals are willing participants in the entire process who “give of themselves to help the world out.” Throughout these efforts, there occurs what Stanley Cohen (2001: 60) terms “denial of injury,” whereby violence is either not described at all or states of being that might otherwise be construed as violent are recast as part of a mechanistic, scientifically sound, and therefore humane process.

For visitors for whom pigs might as well be as exotic as any creature in a zoo, raw, short-term exposure to their living conditions sheds little light on their life histories. If, as Armstrong (2007) finds in the case of chickens, lay observers have little innate understanding of what constitutes good animal treatment when overt violence is absent, explanatory narratives are necessary. Hence the carefully crafted factoids and tour guides who act as “affect meters” at Fair Oaks. These scripts can, however, prove fragile under scrutiny.

For instance, another tour member inquired about the pigs’ tails, or more precisely the lack thereof. “It’s because they can get bored and start biting at each other’s tails,” the guide replied.

The woman hesitated. “So they get bored?”

“Well, no, not really bored,” replied the guide. “They just sleep, poo, and eat. They’re happy.”

Shrugging her shoulders, the woman who had asked the question moved on.



FIGURE 5: While Fair Oaks uses group housing for its sows, females in the last stage of pregnancy are confined to individual gestation crates, albeit in the same space. While some producers are moving away from gestation crates, their use remains the predominant mode of sow housing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAN DUTKIEWICZ © 2018

My own question concerned the row of gestation stalls that line the entire left wall of the gestation room, where pigs are visibly individually confined and unable to turn around. “Those,” explained a different guide, “are used for only seven days when they’re pregnant.”

“So is this the normal industry standard?” I asked. “I mean, don’t a lot of other farms just use those?”

“No,” replied the guide. “I think the industry used to use individual crates but not anymore. Now most farms are like this one.”

Neither of these responses is correct: tail biting is common on confinement operations where animals are overcrowded and understimulated, and individual gestation stalls, while increasingly contentious, remain the predominant mode of sow confinement during pregnancy. This is not to say the guides are overtly lying, but rather that they are

sticking to a script designed to normalize status quo farming practices. This is transparency both as curatorship and as a claim to authority. This authority, however, does not come from the *ethos* of farmers, as Jon Hoek suggested in his Aristotelian analysis of the contest between the industry and its critics. Indeed, farmers themselves are a glaring absence at Fair Oaks. In a sense, this is true to reality, given that large-scale farms rely on a complex division of labor, with farmers acting as managers rather than as a physical laboring presence, but it also contradicts Hoek’s claim that the “sound moral character” of farmers should be foregrounded in corporate communication strategies. Rather, the primary labor visible at Fair Oaks is the affective and pedagogical labor of the tour guides. If anything, Fair Oaks seeks to recapture *pathos* from the industry’s critics by attaching a different meaning to the viewing of animals in factory-farmed conditions.



To do so, it reaches not to *ethos*, but rather to *mythos*, Aristotle's notion of the plot in a storyline that focuses on things as they are rather than on conflict between clashing ideas.<sup>7</sup> In this, Fair Oaks resembles not the "alternative" agritourism whose trappings it repurposes, but larger-scale visions of food tourism, like the corporate-sponsored 2015 World Fair in Milan, which Rebecca Feinberg (2016: 28) describes as a "simulacrum of global foodways, miniaturized and cleansed of its less savory elements," where revelation and obfuscation coexist in tourist-friendly narratives that serve the interests of capital.

This framing interpellates visitors into a very specific form of interaction with the animals themselves. Scholars of animal activism often construe viewing animal suffering as bearing witness, as much in cases of seeing explicit violence and privation (Dave 2014) as in seeing the mundane violence of day-to-day animal lives under conditions of industrial production (Gillespie 2016). The curated revelations at Fair Oaks, however, reframes witnessing as commodified, guided participation. The gamble is that there will be no transgression, that the context and the priming will shape reception. Judging from visitor reactions during my visit, there was not much transgression. The questions asked were polite and disquiet at the plight of the animals was easily avoided by turning away from the glass, or focusing on the piglets.

## Hiding behind Glass Walls

At Fair Oaks Farms, the nineteenth-century slaughterhouse tour, after a twentieth-century hiatus, reemerges as a breeding farm tour for the twenty-first-century affective constitution. Here, mimetic capital is squeezed from the animals not in death, but at birth, generating not only revenue but priming goodwill. If the strategic purpose of the slaughterhouse tour was to allay public fears about food safety, Fair Oaks's tours attempt to allay concerns about animal treatment itself. In an age where "animal welfare" is both an activist rallying cry and a market differentiation opportunity for the meat industry, focusing on good husbandry draws attention away from the inevitability—and offstage presence—of the slaughterhouse.

Fair Oaks traffics in revelation as normalization. It attempts to make the public comfortable with the factory farm, creating a new affective baseline through controlled acculturation. It is also a model farm, an ideal without the abuse, the defects, and crucially without the killing. In this, it is a microcosm of the industry's broader public outreach. The economies-of-scale model that drives industrial meat production can only make marginal changes to its practices. Dramatic changes, like actually giving most farm animals access to natural light or grazing space, are impossible within the current system. As such, faced

with scrutiny, the industry must seek to legitimate its practices in the public eye, even as it relies on ag-gag to restrict where that public eye can peer. From this perspective, the seemingly noble credo of embracing transparency changes very little: blending seamlessly with other types of spin, a countercritical script is injected into public discourse.

Of animal welfare labeling schemes, Miele (2011: 2078) argues that "welfare claims on food achieve only partial visibility and many important areas of animals' lives remain opaque." Fair Oaks ostensibly overcomes such mediation with a radical transparency, but its deployment of transparency remains engaged in a highly curated politics of omission, marked particularly by the effacement of the violence of large-scale pig farming and the death it necessitates. On the guided visit to the breeding barn, after the birthing show, all visitors are shunted back to the bus. Those who linger, however, might find their way back to a placard on the wall of the grow-out room, which explains the growth of baby pigs into adults. It informs the reader that at six months of age a "piglet" will weigh 280 pounds. What it leaves out is that for males and those females not destined for breeding, 280 pounds is slaughter weight. Six months from now, the tiny pig we have all just seen, slaughtered while still a *piglet*, will be bacon. Of course, this slippage is only visible—indeed, it is only a slippage—if one reads the displays in the unintended order, when the carefully curated narratives it tells start to hint at a different story. Most, however, will not backtrack. They will take the bus back to the main campus and, perhaps, dine on bacon at the Farmhouse Restaurant. 🍖

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Jessica Pisano, Tania Islas Weinstein, Tim Ridlen, Zoë Sutherland, W. Ezekiel Goggin, and the two anonymous reviewers for their generous and constructive feedback on previous versions of this piece. This article draws on research supported by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (award number 752-2013-0474) and its final draft was completed while the author was a Fellow at the Humanities and Social Change Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## NOTES

1. Government Publishing Office (2006), *Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act*, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-109publ374/html/PLAW-109publ374.htm](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-109publ374/html/PLAW-109publ374.htm). See also <https://archive.org/details/ALEC-Eco-Terrorism-Press-Release-2003> and a discussion of these laws in Potter (2011).
2. This term was coined by Mark Bittman (2011). On the legal questions and contestations surrounding ag-gag laws, see Potter (2011), Kingery (2013), Landfried (2013), and Broad (2016).



3. See Buller and Roe (2012) on the commodification of the notion of animal welfare. See also Stolle and Micheletti (2013) on the embrace of animal welfare advertising claims by major fast food brands in the face of critique.
4. Steve Kopperud, Iowa Pork Congress, January 29, 2015.
5. On the concept of “face,” see Levinas (1969); on the applications of Levinasian ethics to animals, see Atterton (2011).
6. Fair Oaks Farms, “About Us,” <http://fofarms.com/about-us>.
7. See Belfiore (2000).

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