When we saw with our own eyes the video stills of the mayor smoking crack and heard with our own ears the mayor lying about smoking crack, we finally confirmed what we already knew. The mayor smoked crack.

And the mayor lied. When we saw the leaked video of US military pilots murdering innocent journalists in Iraq (and heard the pilots’ real-time commentary as they glibly rejoiced in their kills), we finally confirmed what we already knew—that war is hell. We tend to think that such confirmation is required in order to transform speculation into fact, and lingering doubt into unshakeable confidence. Without the smoking gun we are stuck, always one clue short of closing the case. But what if it is the other way around? What if the confirmation of what we already know effectively undermines our confidence and keeps us further from the truth? What if it is the lack of assurance and the absence of any buried treasure that sharpens our critical qualities and brings us closer to understanding the logic of how things work?

What if, finally, radical politics emerges not from a righteous and committed knowing, but from a hesitant not-knowing and a creative mobilization of our critical limits?

These creeping questions are meant to remind us that the assumptions that ground the current debate over information (concerning the extent to which the state should mobilize our private data) are not as stable as we might think. Or, to go even further, we can argue that the fundamental assumption of the debate, that the terms “private” and “public” are opposites, is unstable. The opposite of privacy is not public: the opposite of private, rather, is another private in a qualitatively different historical situation. And the opposite of the public is not the private as we know it today under conditions of late capitalism, but another public—post-capitalist public that is unimaginable from the enclosure of our present. Unimaginable, but not impossible. At stake here is a rather simple critical maneuver—one by which we make sense of our current challenges not from within the very real constraints of the present situation, but from within a more expansive historiographical horizon; one in which, for instance, we incorporate into our present the possibilities of a radically different future. This is a post-capitalist public that is driven by a different logic than the present but is still connected to it, like a dream or waking life.

The incorporation of the future into the consideration of the private and the public provides a different perspective on how to examine the assumptions at the heart of the current whistleblowing debate. Centred around such iconic names such as Snowden, Manning, and Assange, this debate privileges transparency and exposure as a means to more free and democratic societies. Indeed, the lies should be deounced and the liars held accountable (and these three dissidents should be celebrated for how they have effectively challenged the black-and-white logic of our leading geopolitical institutions). However, the celebration of transparency and exposure as a critical practice (not to mention the fetishistic and ahistorical cliché-mongering of the term “democracy”) should be mistrusted, as it inevitably leads to a debilitating and moralizing post-politics—making us feel better about ourselves when the bad guys are caught red-handed, only until the good guys (ourselves included) are revealed to have red hands as well. What goes missing in this melodrama are the critical thinking skills required to understand the logic of our current social systems, as well as the radical acts required to change it.

Unlike Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden denounced and revealed himself—and did so by way of the image. So let’s turn to Laura Poitras’s remarkable video of June 6, 2013, shot in a Hong Kong hotel room and distributed via the Internet to be viewed countless times the world over. The video was shot only days before Snowden made his way to Russia and from which he is now indisputably the subject with whom the NSA is concerned. The video grants the NSA direct access to private user data held by Google, Facebook, Apple, and other major corporations.

The video begins with an establishing shot of the calm Hong Kong harbor, almost a still shot if not for the waves and boats moving in the distance. This is followed by the shot that remains for the entirety of the video—a twelve and a half minutes, although occasionally cut with slight variations of focal length (see still above). What is conspicuous from the beginning is Snowden, but the back of his shoulder is reflected in the mirror behind him. The mirror: a key metaphor of the first wave of film theory, in which the film screen serves as a mirror whereby the spectator can falsely identify him or herself as an autonomous ego. In this model the spectator also identifies with the camera that purports to be all-seeing and thus establishes a regime of visibility from which nothing escapes—everything is experienced as transparent.

But it is not, and the critical practice is to then remember that there is a camera and that we are participating in our own microrecognition of how meaning and power work.

Unlike the “hypodermic needle” model of subject formation (in which the state injects the subject with dominant ideology), the “screen theories” of the 1970s wisely reminded us that there is more at stake here than the unproblematic notion that things can be fundamentally other, from the overarching logic of the world system to the most basic habits of our individual lives. The problem with the radical act, however, is that it is almost always imagined as profound self-sacrifice, something like Antigone’s grand act of burying her brother. Or, for that matter, of the immense sacrifice of Manning and Snowden—perhaps our era’s own Antigones. And this can lead to either a pessimism of ever reaching such heroic heights or, sometimes, to a violent perversion that the act that borders on fascism or psychosis. Moreover, when the radical act is represented in the figure of an individual actor, the act itself is inevitably de-personalized, making it hard to remember the material reality that called forth the act in the first place and therefore making it difficult to recognize how the very act itself might function radically in one context while counter-productively in another. First time is a tragedy, second time is farce.

What I take from this is that at any given moment there is something that cannot be known, only sensed. And this something is a radically different present—one that exceeds transparency and instrumenality, not to mention (and for our purposes here) exceeds our current understanding of what constitutes the private and the public. By all means, let’s blow the whistle on injustice, and let’s blow the whistle on contradiction and hypocrisy (and from the other direction, let’s creatively appropriate and hack back). But let’s not confuse these critical actions with a genuinely radical act—act that itself cannot be exposed or blueprinted or even performed in any reproducible way, but nevertheless exists to remind us that our present world is not the only world, and that even if we cannot capture a radical future by our irrefutable, cultural, scientific, and political projects, this future can capture us. There is one thing that we can be confident about in this possible future: that what constitutes the private and the public will operate differently than it does today.