



Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short

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By Holly Arden

Natalie Bookchin's acclaimed videos probe the stylistic conventions of documentary and social media to present moving portrayals of individual and collective experience as shaped by the digital age. In 2012 Bookchin was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Documentary Film Grant to produce her latest work, [Long Story Short](#). The 45-minute film asked individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles to relate, through vlog-style videos, their experiences with, and views about, poverty and homelessness.

[Long Story Short](#) has its world [premiere](#) at the Museum of Modern Art on February 22, 2016 during [MoMA's Doc Fortnight 2016](#). Its international premiere will be during Cinéma du Réel 2016 at the Centre Pompidou between March 22 and 24, 2016. In March it will also screen at Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival in California.



Prior to the work's premiere in February 2016 Bookchin spoke with Melbourne-based contemporary art writer Holly Arden.

Holly Arden: How did the idea for Long Story Short come about?

Natalie Bookchin: *In 2011, I was approached by an organization called Tipping Point Community that supports non-profit groups that provide services to low-income San Francisco Bay Area residents. Someone in the organization had seen my video installation Testament and invited me to make a short film for their annual fundraising event. I had never done advocacy work before, but was intrigued by the possibility and challenge of the topic, so I accepted the invitation. We sent out a call to various organizations requesting that clients make and upload video diaries reflecting on their experiences of poverty and how they were able to overcome some of its challenges. Looking through the videos, I was struck by how powerful they were. They were frank and unapologetic and, though they used the same format, they were so different from the video diaries I had worked with in previous projects. After I completed the film, I decided I wanted to develop a larger project, to dig deeper into the topic without the constraints of an advocacy film – without having to deliver a predetermined, and necessarily uplifting, message.*

From the start, I knew I wanted to make a film where those experiencing poverty were the subjects, not the objects, of the film, where they were the experts and decided what was important. I also knew I wanted to create a large archive of video narrations. How could a large archive, taken together, change or add to current understandings of poverty? What, if anything, might it reveal and uncover? How would I structure it and make it legible on a single screen? I really didn't know, but that's where I started.

HA: Can you talk about the shift from using found vlog footage in your previous works to directly eliciting individual participation in Long Story Short?

NB: *I built my own archive because, as far as I could tell, this didn't already exist online, so I couldn't just search for and download clips as I've done for other projects. On social media people present their achievements, put versions of themselves that they want the world to see. Poverty and homelessness tend to be emotionally isolating experiences, and are often judged harshly by outsiders. My film seeks to address this by giving those on the inside an opportunity to address outside perceptions. In doing so it reveals the many creative and sometimes heroic ways people adapt and manage their lives, struggling to maintain dignity amidst incredible challenges, including a society that's often indifferent or worse to their situations.*

I wanted to build an archive of videos reproducing the format of the online vlog. I started by having participants make their videos alone. That didn't last very long. A few people said they wanted someone in the room with them to ask the questions and guide them through the topics. So that's what I decided to try, and it really worked. In the narrations where someone else is in the room, you could feel the energy and the pleasure of being listened to and being seen. Before the interviews, participants were given a list of prompts and guiding questions to review. I would ask interviewees to review and compose their image on screen and to think of the video as a portrait. During the interview, they saw a live feed of themselves on the screen, and were able to present themselves as they wanted. They could redo sections, skip over questions, and elaborate on topics not included in the prompts. They were treated as the experts, the insiders – and that's something many of them don't feel very often in the eyes of outsiders, where they may feel judged, feared, or not seen at all.

HA: *So although Long Story Short doesn't make use of existing vlogs, it nonetheless draws on the stylistic and aesthetic conventions of this amateur or DIY format.*

NB: *Yes, the vlog is associated with micro rather than large-scale media production. To use this format – and to shoot using laptops and webcams – is to reject (or sometimes, to mimic or parody) the conventional idea of the professional image that's supposed to convey authority and expertise. In the media, the topic of poverty, when it is discussed, is typically addressed by so-called experts – the pundits, politicians, and academics.*

There is of course a long history of filmmakers rejecting the codes of mainstream filmmaking, from Third Cinema and guerilla filmmaking to social histories told from the bottom up. I wanted to draw from and update these forms for the digital age.

I also wanted to avoid overused images of poverty, so-called 'poverty porn' and to

present new images conjured entirely from the language of those on the inside. In each narration, the camera is focused on the subject, who sits in an office or conference room in one of the non-profit organizations where we filmed, and whose direct gaze meets the viewers’.

I saw an article in the New York Times recently that described what it called a radical move by a Houston organization that starts from the premise that a better way to help the poor is to first ask them what they think needs to be done, rather than simply imposing policy from the outside. I found it so interesting and odd that this approach was considered radical, rather than obvious. But when the poor are chronically depicted in the media as helpless, as failures, as victims of their own bad decisions, I suppose asking for their thoughts and opinions would seem pretty radical, if not altogether pointless.

HA: You also capture the emotional directness characteristic of vlogs. As viewers, we’re witness to highly personal stories of poverty and homelessness that are confessional and frequently awkward and raw.

NB: *I don’t think of the narrations as confessional. To confess is to admit to wrong doing, to relieve guilt, and to hope for forgiveness. A confession has a religious or juridical connotation. Although they can be intimate and raw, they are explanatory, emotive, and analytical. The narrators in the film offer insight and thoughtful reflections on how it feels to be looked at by others in a society where success means wealth and poverty means failure. As viewers and listeners, we are asked to consider why we make these judgments. We have to consider our own role or position within the narrative.*



HA: Can we build on what you’ve said above about capturing the language of those on the

inside and also about drawing from Third (World) Cinema? As I understand it, Third Cinema began in Latin America and Africa as a revolutionary, anti-capitalist movement. It sought to provide starkly realist portrayals of post-colonial life and the oppression of minority and marginalized groups, as opposed to the whitewashed fantasies conjured by Hollywood film. You said at the beginning of this interview that you didn't intend for Long Story Short to be an advocacy film. Is that still the case?

NB: *Yes that hasn't changed. My film isn't advocacy, which is by necessity, instrumental, aimed at producing a direct and specific action or result. An advocacy film needs to be didactic, to provide clear answers, to explain and convince, in order to influence policy or a direct action. My film asks more questions than it answers. It takes on political questions and subjects in form and in content, aiming to push at the boundaries of documentary and interrogate its forms. Its aim is, if anything, to spark conversation and move and trouble people.*

My background and my work come out of the visual arts, and I've never felt the need to adhere closely to the conventions of mainstream filmmaking. But I have spent a lot of time thinking about narrative forms and their political and ideological effects. I am interested in how a work can resonate when it strays outside a norm, when the form calls attention to itself.

That said, my interest in the 'bad' image, to be honest, didn't consciously draw from Third Cinema, though it shares certain affinities. Instead, it came out of series of videos I made between 2005 and 2007 that documented anonymous landscapes I found by looking through online security webcams. I documented my online travels through these cameras, into back yards, alleys, street intersections, inside restaurants, front porches, ordinary private spaces around the world, private space inadvertently made public when a googlebot detected and indexed its url. In relation to that work, I wrote about the poetics of the images I collected – low resolution and highly pixelated – unmanned by a human operator and indifferent to blinding bursts of light or hours of darkness, and how they bore the marks of their travels across low bandwidths of electronic networks. Hito Steyerl later wrote a brilliant [essay](#) about itinerant images traveling across networks.

In Long Story Short I decided to shoot with webcams, to again use a low-res digital image, in part to suggest that these are images that should and could travel across networks, and become a part of our digital image streams. They look as though they

already have. I also wanted to produce images without the polish of the conventional 'professional' image, where the interviewed subject gets cleaned up – whitewashed in a sense – by three-point lighting and clean, neutral sets. I find beauty in the informal and haphazard image and its artifacts. Roland Barthes famously describes the 'punctum', the details in the image that 'prick' you, that can touch you, and produce a visceral response. These details often appear in the so-called amateur image: the edges of the frame, the background that hasn't been art directed and composed, the coughs, the fumbles the traces of human beings who once sat in front of or behind the camera.

In *Long Story Short*, I use the casual set-up of the vlog format to shorten our distance to the speaker, who could be addressing us on Skype, on Facetime, in a Google chat. Borrowing the aesthetic and tools of social media, the film makes a link between poverty and the tools of a new economy that has, many argue, produced a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Here these tools are used instead to amplify the voices of the poor.

HA: Could you elaborate on this?

NB: Well, the internet has been around for 20-odd years, and in those same 20 years, the gap between the rich and poor has gotten exponentially wider. In the US, where a select few have profited tremendously from the internet goldmine, we now have an income gap that is greater than in any other democracy in the developed world. (According to research done at the [Economic Policy Institute](#), between 1979 and 2007, the top one percent took home over half of the total increase in US income but between 2009 and 2012, one percent captured 95 percent of income growth.)

Additionally, thanks to networks, we live in a time of hyper-visibility, barraged with continuous flows of images. It can be difficult to notice what it is we are not seeing. What gets the most attention are the images that either get the most likes or that host platforms consider most valuable. Others drop out of sight, and we may never know it. We don't have access to the algorithms and the calculations used to determine what rises to the top of our feeds. And, while some of us worry about how to remain invisible in an age of over-visibility, others don't have that privilege. As I learned from the film's narrators, many worry about their invisibility, about not being seen. In a way I wanted to do a bait and switch, to put into familiar forms images and stories that don't usually rise to the top of our feeds.

That said, the poverty of images of the poor in the popular media landscape is really nothing new. Poverty has always been a blind spot in America's picture of itself. It doesn't fit into our prevailing myths where most Americans are middle class, and that if we work hard we all can achieve the American Dream. But, as the comedian George Carlin once said: 'The reason they call it the American Dream is because you have to be asleep to believe it'.

The problem is, though, when the middle class is depicted as the norm and the lower classes are pathologized as abnormal, the poor's inability to climb the ladder is seen simply as a personal failing. Moreover, their appearance in society becomes what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes as a 'state of exception' and they are only noticed during moments of crisis. It's hard to see patterns when one story is replaced by the next, each new 'state of exception' unconnected to others. Agamben argues that as this becomes 'normal' we see the effects in the legal and policy decisions that the society makes. In other words, when the poor are trapped in a 'state of exception', their situations are treated as anomalies, and societies cannot systematically respond. Only emergency steps are taken or worse – no steps at all.

*When I began the film in 2011, the US was still in the long tail of the Great Recession. We were also in the middle of a presidential campaign, and all the candidates were talking about the economy and the struggling middle class. But even though at least one in three Americans – a hundred million people – were living in poverty or just above the poverty line according to the 2011 census report, no one wanted to talk about poverty. Now, as I am finishing the film four years later, the recession is over, at least officially, but the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. The **presidential campaign is** nearly in full swing again, and this time around, no one is even speaking about the 'middle class' anymore. In its place, a bevy of euphemisms have taken over: we've got 'hard working tax payers', 'everyday Americans', 'ordinary Americans', and 'people who work for people who own businesses'. Hillary Clinton has even been using focus groups just to test out what to call people!*

HA: Can we steer back to your interest in the languages and forms of internet platforms? How optimistic are you about the so-called democratic potential of the internet? By this I'm referring to the internet as kind of digital 'public sphere', which is, ideally, by and large open to anyone and everyone regardless of wealth, education, colour, and so on. Clearly this isn't the case, and yet, social media of the sort you draw on in your work (namely vlogging) does allow for some otherwise unheard voices to be heard in public when they may not be otherwise.

NB: *No question, the internet has lowered the barriers to speaking and publishing in public. Each person can have his or her own platform – a blog, a YouTube channel, a twitter feed, or whatever. It occasionally produces dialogue, but just as often produces a mad cacophony of individual monologues competing with each other for airtime. I understand the public sphere as a space where people are not just promoting their own individual interests, so-called brands, or even political positions, but as a place where substantive exchanges take place. Read most comments sections online, and any hope about the possibility of civil exchange, at least among those who disagree, is quickly dashed.*

At the same time, there are other online forms, such as citizen journalism (including the cellphone videos that have appeared with such shocking frequency since the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a year ago, which have thrust into the headlines just how racist policing is – and has always been – for African Americans). There's a lot to be said for how black twitter and the #blacklivesmatter movements continue to propel forward a public conversation that wouldn't otherwise have happened. These videos and their subsequent spread on social media have propelled many people into the streets and touched off the national debate on racism and the police in the US today. But, that said, even with damning videos, the police usually aren't held responsible. So, there's a limit to what a video and to what social media can do. The problem, as [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) points out is much deeper and more structural in the US than a bunch of racist police.

HA: Can we turn to the structure of the film? In *Long Story Short*, you've edited the footage to create moments of vocal unison and rhythmic repetition among the speakers. You did the same in *Now he's out in public* and everyone can see and in *Testament*. You've previously said that these [works draw on the model of the Greek chorus](#), where the chorus acted as a narrator to the main event, to the actions of the Gods or the kings. This main action is in one sense out of the chorus' hands – they have limited power and can only look on and narrate what they see – yet they are also vital observers, reporting back to the audience on the machinations of those in power.

My sense is that the chorus of *Long Story Short* is on the one hand merely an observer over their situations (where the contemporary Gods and kings are arguably mega corporations, Wall Street and media conglomerates). Importantly, however, they also directly front up to the camera and vocalize their stories in their own words.

NB: *My use of overlapping voices and multiple speakers functions differently in each the various videos I have made, and to different effects. In Long Story Short narrators have a lot more screen time, and unlike the other videos, they all are responding to similar questions. In this way the project has something in common with sociology, and the visualization or analysis of a dataset, although I would never claim that I'm trying to be particularly scientific. But, by looking at all the responses and drawing links between them, I try to give a bigger picture of the effects on a group of people who all are facing certain similar material conditions.*

I tried to preserve the individuality of different narrators in part by moving between individual and collective narrations, between instances of sameness and difference. I also try to highlight complex relationships between individual and collective identities – for instance how people negotiate or reject the identity of being 'poor' (a loaded and contested term) or how living in a ghetto or being homeless can both isolate and bind people together.

However, first and foremost, my role in making the film has been to listen. My hope is that the editing performs a kind of close, subjective listening and distillation of the narrations I collected, I worked very hard to capture the intentions of the speakers, to be true to their words and meanings.

I decided that I didn't want to have one superstar, one hero. I wanted all of my subjects, to be stars. By working with such a large archive, I hope to suggest the scale of poverty.

HA: The French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes about the sans part – the 'part without a part' in the community. According to Rancière, these are the people who are manifestly outside of being 'sensed' by the rest of the community; not because they don't exist, but rather because they cannot be seen or heard within the sensory paradigm of the current social order. My sense is that Rancière's sans part refers to minority groups, but your work sheds light on the current US situation where the sans part is by no means a small minority! And you seem to be of the opinion that these people are literally inaudible or the sans part within discourse?

NB: *That is a really great observation. Not only do we have a shrinking middle class, but we also have an underclass who were poor before the recession and remain poor today, even with the so-called economic 'recovery'. Most Americans still see themselves as middle class – even when the numbers don't add up. And why wouldn't*

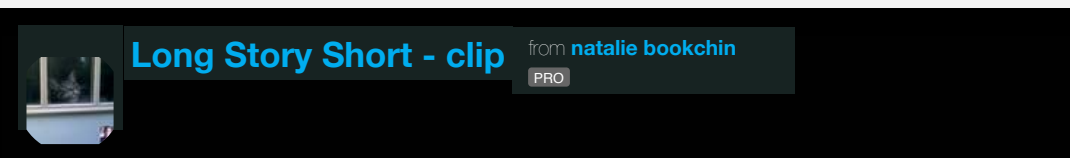
they? Surveys about perceptions of the poor in America repeatedly find that a majority of Americans view poverty as a personal failure, the result of lack of motivation and a bad work ethic. In a survey released in May 2012, "*Perceptions of Poverty: The Salvation Army's Report to America*", almost half of the more than 1,000 Americans surveyed believed that a good work ethic is all you need to escape poverty, and 43 percent agreed that if poor people want a job, they could always find one. 27 percent said that people are poor because they are lazy, and 29 percent said that poor people usually have lower moral values. A 2014 Pew Research Center Poll indicated that a majority of conservative Americans agree that 'poor people have it easy because they can get government benefits without doing anything'.

But on your point about whether the poor can be heard. I think this relates back to Agamben. When being poor is a state of exception, it can't be understood for what it actually is: the normal outcome of a free-market economy.

HA: Based on what we've been talking about above, can I ask you about the idea of social scripting? You've previously described how, in your observation of online vlogs, individuals speak about personal and political issues in ways that reflect patterns of discourse. These are words and phrases that are widely used around certain issues, often those that are popularized and propagated by various media. For example, in *Now he's out in public* and everyone can see, your work about four African American celebrities, you underscore this idea of social scripting by creating patterns of vocal repetition among the speakers, where individuals repeat similar phrases about race, or speak in unison.

How much of a part might social scripting play in *Long Story Short*, which also uses the device of vocal repetition to discuss poverty?

NB: *In Now he's out in public* narrators are retelling, reenacting and responding to a number of racially charged US media scandals that went viral. The piece addressed reoccurring media scripts interpreted by each of the vloggers. In *Long Story Short*, the stories come out of direct experiences, so the vocal repetition points to shared experiences and shared expressions of those experiences. In *Now he's out in public* the collective is closer to a mob, whereas in *Long Story Short* I try to show the other side, or the product, power and solidarity of shared experiences and a collective voice.





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Tags: [contemporary art](#) , [video](#)