

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 13 (2020)

Just art. Documentary Poetics and Justice



‘The Quarrel with Ourselves’. An Interview with Marjorie Perloff

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doi: [10.12681/syn.27565](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.27565)

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‘The Quarrel with Ourselves’.

An Interview with Marjorie Perloff

by
Naomi Toth

Naomi Toth: Documentary poetic practices are often described as shifting attention to the concrete and the particular, in reaction to idealistic conceptions of artistic autonomy or as a means of resisting ideological recuperations of art in the name of higher principles—of which justice might be one. Yet such works also seem to play a critical function vis-à-vis the social and legal documents they appropriate, cite, or seek to create, allowing them nonetheless to be mobilised in the name of justice. What do you make of this apparent paradox?

Marjorie Perloff: Your question gets to the heart of the matter. We think of *documentary* as resisting ideological recuperations, but does it do so? Think of Gillo Pontecorvo’s great 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. The brilliant concrete rendering of the day by day siege could hardly be more graphic, more immediate, more ‘real.’ And yet the perspective is far from neutral; in fact, the celebration of resistance has had an influence on actual events. At its best, documentary is hardly even-handed, the artist’s perspective is *THERE*, however buried. And thus the current forms of conceptualism, while ostensibly avoiding the subjectivity of more traditional art, are really just as ‘personal,’ however much they claim not to be. The choice of material is *ipso facto* destined to give a particular view of an event, a situation, a history.

N.T.: Pontecorvo's film is an interesting example: though it gives the impression that events are captured as they unfold in the manner of documentary, it is actually a reconstitution filmed nearly a decade after the actual battle of Algiers. Events are selected, replayed from a situated point of view by a mixture of actors and historical figures in their own roles, and then edited to construct a narrative which makes sense of this episode of the Algerian war—a narrative that was so disturbing to some that the film was long banned from French screens, proof if ever one were needed of its critical nature. The film's techniques are in many ways akin to citational or verbatim theatre, the major difference being that Pontecorvo does not overtly display the fact that his work is a reconstitution, and the witness accounts it draws on are not clearly presented as such. Aesthetic works which reconstitute historical events such as war or trials seem difficult to situate with regards to the distinction between history and tragedy we've been using since Aristotle. Would you say these categories no longer apply? Or that they are being reworked?

M.P.: Well, the Aristotelian distinction remains useful. The *Poetics* distinguishes sharply between 'what Alcibiades did' (history) and what a given person would do *possibly* or *probably* (tragedy). Now clearly, although the Pontecorvo film is a reconstruction, it does provide lots of actions that actually happened, even as others are conjectural, and, in any case, the time element is vastly reduced and intensified. But as you point out, it is by no means straight documentary either and falls between the two poles. The viewer is asked to suspend disbelief and watch 'what happened' even as she knows certain emotional relationships are invented. The fluidity of the film makes it a real work of art, to my mind not yet dated. On the other hand, I recently revisited Marcel Ophüls' famous *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1971) and found it surprisingly dated. The technique of *Chagrin* is to alternate war footage, pertaining to the little French village which is its center, to interviews with a carefully chosen variety of people who had taken an active role in the war—Resistance fighters, Nazis, Communist workers, wealthy business men attracted to the Fascist Order, and so on. When I first saw the film, I was deeply moved but in the early twenty-first century, one becomes aware of the extreme contrivance—whether of the carefully chosen documentary images or of the interviews which are chosen so as to 'represent' different points of view and make the audience understand how, say, a given Nazi villager felt. But of course, if the images and interviews were really random, you would not have

this carefully controlled variety; depending on where you are filming, you might find much more repetition than exists here. Supposedly Ophuls does not moralise and place blame, but I felt the film in the end does do so and thus is neither compelling history nor compelling tragedy: the characters, in any case, aren't tragic in the Aristotelian sense in that they are not larger than life or brought to a precipitous fall by their *hamartia* (tragic flaw). So, conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith have taken a very different route, often recording everything according to some external rule, and leaving it up to the reader to judge the situations portrayed. And even in works like Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), the author makes key choices: he may reprint the entire *New York Times* of a single day but by giving the text, say, inside ads the same weight, font, typeface etc. as that of an op-ed about presidential politics, he obviously skews the meaning of the passage and our response to it. So, there is always some skewing—it's a matter of degree—but good artists choose as carefully as possible, keeping their hands close to their chests.

But then doesn't all art do this?

N.T.: Yes, all art does skew, or at the very least organise the historical or documentary elements it draws on—and this is where the question of aesthetic license comes in. To what extent and on what grounds do we accept the skewing when it comes to works that claim the status of art *and* history? The beauty of a work and its capacity to move—Aristotle's famous pity and terror—is important, here, but rarely sufficient. Which brings us to ethical questions about a work's reception: upon what grounds do documentary works, both past and present, seek to recreate balance and reconfigure community, if only through the new equilibrium of humours that *catharsis* might establish in their viewers and/or readers? In *Unoriginal Genius*, you quote Walter Benjamin on Karl Kraus: "In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice." (2010, 5) This evocative statement seems at a far remove from the position of many contemporary conceptual artists, who shy away from judgement and want to leave it up to the constraint, or the reader. Could you comment further on how citational works might do—or undo—justice when they also attempt to do history?

M.P.: For Kraus, the 'problem' you refer to was not a problem because his politics (like Benjamin's, although Benjamin's were more complicated) were quite open and his citations always chosen with an eye to constructing a larger argument.

Today, as you point out, conceptual artists shy away from making judgments but the reason their works are often dubious is that this ‘shying away’ is hypocritical. Of course, they have a particular politics and mostly much narrower than Karl Kraus’s. Do you know a single conceptual work coming from the right? The reason I have little patience with much current conceptual work is that the judgments, though not made overtly, are implicit. The quotations are chosen to make a point. Let’s say I write a piece taking extracts from a diary by a prisoner at Guantanamo Bay. It is assumed that it is evil to keep people at Guantanamo. Suppose the citations were chosen to show that the prisoners in question were horrible people, ready for the kill and deserved to be imprisoned. The literary community would not accept it. Or suppose the author of conceptual poem X were racist and made the case for slowing down integration. You would not get it published. These ‘political’ poems are quite one-dimensional. One reason I really like Sophie Calle is that in her case one really can’t tell whether the events in question ever happened or what her own attitude is. In *The Address Book* (1998 for the French original, 2012 for the English translation), did the man in question really protest? Or is the whole thing invented? And this is also true of Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. But look what happened in the Michael Brown piece where it was assumed (falsely I think) that Kenny did not have proper respect for the victim just as Vanessa Place got into trouble for her *Gone with the Wind* piece. Then again, that was partly Vanessa’s own fault because her premise, of course, was that slavery was a terrible thing. Such a premise, to which we all agree, doesn’t lead to much complexity.

The greatest political poem I know—and I have written on it but it is not a conceptual work—is Yeats’s “Easter 1916” (1921) which at once commemorates and mourns the patriots of the Irish Easter Rising and yet asks the question “Was it needless death after all?” The reference is to the possibility that England might have granted the Irish Home Rule. One could, of course, do a conceptual piece with the same complexity but in general this is not the case. And even Kraus is limited, in *Last Days of Mankind*, by his simplifying, for instance the woman who writes to her husband at the front—a full quote of the actual letter—,but one cannot admire her, one can only have contempt for her. It’s very well done and sardonically funny—but at the expense of this ordinary working-class woman!

N.T.: From your description here, contemporary artists and poets are in a double bind: if they do right-wing work, it is ethically unacceptable; if they do

work that situates them on the left, then they run the risk of didacticism and may well lack aesthetic complexity. Isn't there a way out? Do you not see any equivalent to the qualities you identify in Yeats in any contemporary work?

M.P.: Oh yes. We can begin with Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, surely a brilliant work. The texts themselves are entirely appropriated from police reports and court transcripts detailing specific rape cases that Vanessa, as an appellate attorney, was involved with. One would think that the accounts would make guilt very clear but the fact is that the reader is often put in doubt and that we can't tell 'what really happened.' It's not that the 'victims' lie, but that memory is confusing and the women in question can't always remember the traumatic events. Who was where in the house? Was the light on? Was the window open? How did the assailant get into the house? Then there are cases of people purposely not reporting things to the police because they are afraid of getting deported and so on. Or family members who need to protect someone. In short, the 'statements of fact' begin to read like a Henry James novel! There is no certainty and the reader becomes very much involved.

When I first made the case for Vanessa, at a conference at Columbia University on "New Directions in Poetry" or some such about 10 years ago, the audience was furious and I was badmouthed by the feminist community, especially Juliana Spahr and her circle who held that rape is rape, period! Rape is evil, never mind the circumstances. And I don't believe attitudes have changed much but they should. We wouldn't say murder is always murder—period. But when it comes to rape, there are no mitigating circumstances. I don't know if it's the same in France? Anyway, Vanessa showed how subtle an appropriated text can be.

N.T.: Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts* is indeed interesting. Recycling her own depositions as an appellate defense lawyer, she draws attention to the socially constructed nature of criminality in general and rape in particular, yet the work doesn't excuse rape at all, rather it explores rape as a great and howling problem. It seems to both critique and consolidate the justice system's capacity to address this problem: critique it because it highlights uncertainty about the facts in any case as all defense lawyers do; consolidate it because it forces the reader to examine the position of the convicted party and to take seriously the adversarial structure of the system in place in which the right to defense is essential, thereby checking our reflexes to dehumanise perpetrators. For the individuals being defended are human too—all too human. Failure to recognise this runs the risk of not grasping the subtleties of

what has been dubbed “rape culture,” a crucial step in any effort to imagine a different society. Hannah Arendt’s account of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem is obviously very different in form, but the thrust of her analysis, in which she pays great attention to what it was that led such an ordinary individual, neither particularly smart nor monstrously evil, to play a key role in such atrocities, is not so different in effect.

Perhaps this is one of the ways documentary work that apparently remains at the level of the facts and doesn’t directly attack but rather exposes the functioning of justice system can actually act as a lever of change—in society and the judicial system itself. Which other documentary works do you find interesting in their relationship to the justice system?

M.P.: Your account of Place’s *Statements of Facts* is perfect: you point out many things I hadn’t really thought about like the dehumanisation of the perpetrators in the current system.

But now when it comes to Eichmann and Arendt, I must disagree. First of all, I don’t think of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a conceptual work or documentary work but rather a very specific account and one with which I wholly disagree. I think it’s a book of special pleading by a critic/philosopher who at the time had, I think, bad conscience for her own role in the Holocaust, namely her postwar total support of Heidegger which redeemed him. Without Arendt, he would surely have been in jail rather than once again being revered and listened to and if you read the Heidegger/Arendt correspondence, it’s clear she was duped by Mrs. Heidegger and that the couple planned just how to ‘play’ her.

The banality of evil is a nice idea—isn’t it pretty to think so?—but I don’t believe in it for a minute, certainly not in Eichmann’s case. The question that Arendt doesn’t address is, ‘Why didn’t everyone in Germany behave this way?’ Why were there plenty of others—‘ordinary’ non-Jews—who gave up everything and left the country and refused to engage with the Nazis? Or who worked underground to help their Jewish neighbors. Of course, any evil person is ‘ordinary’ in many ways and may love good symphonic music or opera or be good to his children! But so what? Later evidence points out that Eichmann knew exactly what he was doing and quite enjoyed it. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a work of personal historical interpretation and I think one composed in bad faith.

Read as a kind of contrast, Karl Kraus's *Dritte Walpurgisnacht*, to which I've just written an introduction (forthcoming from Yale University Press).¹ Kraus bases the whole thing on the newspaper articles of the day—it's a very carefully chosen documentary—and they speak for themselves about the justice system and what went on. As for the current situation and social justice, I wish I could cite the appropriate texts but, Naomi, I am ignorant here.

N.T.: On Arendt: of course, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is neither poetic nor conceptual, it is journalism from which a thesis emerges, and as you point out, the famous phrase 'the banality of evil' has been made to serve a number of causes, often dubious. Charlotte Lacoste has explored many of these in *Séductions du bourreau, Négation des victimes* (which would translate as *Seductions of the perpetrators, negation of the victims*), a 2011 study of the recent spate of fictional works that adopt the point of view of the perpetrator, such as Jonathan Littell's wildly successful *Les Bienveillantes* of 2006 (*The Kindly Ones* in English). She denounces a common misinterpretation of Arendt's formula: 'all perpetrators are ordinary human beings; we are all ordinary human beings; therefore we are all (potentially) perpetrators.' Such a reading not only fails to ask the essential question you mention—Why did many Germans act differently—it lets the perpetrator off the hook and suggests that anyone would act this way if the circumstances presented themselves. Which is similar to your objection here.

But Lacoste is not so harsh against Arendt herself, rather she supports Arendt's thesis. She reads it as a warning against setting perpetrators apart in a quasi-metaphysical category that exaggerates their talents, intelligence, and monstrosity—and that contributes to their fascination. Lacoste argues, convincingly I think, that Arendt remains attentive to those who did act differently and takes pains to show that Eichmann made choices, ones that he may have blinded himself to—or not, as you say—but that he is no less responsible for. In other words, if a perpetrator is 'banal' in the sense that s/he is neither particularly smart nor a born sadist, that doesn't make his/her actions any less exceptional nor any less worthy of condemnation. Something that much contemporary fiction adopting the point of view of perpetrators often ignores, to highly questionable ethical ends. My reference to Place's work in comparison with Arendt's thesis here runs along similar lines. But rather than continuing to discuss the Arendt case, I will read on Kraus—much closer to our concerns.

The last part of my previous question was not so much about social justice as the justice system—a more pragmatic and circumscribed field with less fuzzy borders. Works that, like Place's, but in different ways, pick up on or directly appropriate trial structures, testimony/witnessing, documents produced by the justice system. Last year we briefly exchanged our opinions on Anna Deavere Smith's verbatim theatre, which can be traced back to Peter Stein's work; there is also *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip which has been getting quite a bit of attention, for example.

My next question concerns Charles Reznikoff and Muriel Rukeyser. They are both often referred to as pioneers of documentary poetic works in America, both of them engaged with documents from trials, both of them were interested in the line between poetry and history, and yet their production is very different and their positions concerning what they were doing also diverges significantly. How do you see their work and its heritage?

M.P.: I have little to say about Reznikoff or Rukeyser. *Testimony* (1934) and *The Book of the Dead* (1938) are certainly pioneering docupoems and both are impressive in their assemblage of court transcripts, witness testimonies and newspaper clippings, among other items to be collaged. The difficulty is—and I brought this up last time—that we know just how to feel about these tales of exploitation, cruelty, misplaced authority. I don't think either R is a good enough poet qua poet and that's what I care about. I realise it now especially as I am completing my "infrathin" book.² Reznikoff is very earnest and the stories he relays are certainly horrific and often moving, but why in poetry?

I am sure there are better conceptual docupoems than the ones I know but, as it stands, I would rather go back and reread Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, where the objects surveyed are allowed to live a life of their own and haunt the imagination.

N.T.: Let's go back to Kraus's *Third Walpurgis Night*: his text citing from contemporary newspapers is indeed vertiginous in its effects, in its painstaking and careful exposure of how press language creates slippery slopes, reverses positions of perpetrator and victim and arrives at conclusions that are aberrant and horrific from apparently innocent and seemingly progressive starting points. A prescient dissection of Nazi discourse that—in spite of the differences you point to between today and 1930s Germany and Austria—has a worryingly familiar ring today in Europe. Although the justice system is neither Kraus' source nor his target, one cannot read this without

realising the extent to which legal decisions on acts of violence depend on the balance of power within societies, a balance of power which, according to him, the press not only reflects but also constructs. I'm particularly interested in the way Kraus simultaneously calls upon and denounces Romanticism in this documentary work that cites press and the literary tradition on an equal footing.

M.P.: May I use as an alternative example a fictional 'documentary' that I found quite brilliant? And that is the French TV serial I have been watching in utter fascination these last few weeks, namely, *Le Bureau*, about the French DGES,³ your equivalent of our CIA.⁴ It is not just a matter of brilliant acting, plotting, and cinematography. What's most remarkable is that the series is quite non-didactic. It neither makes the case for spies and intelligence workers as patriots nor does it pass judgment on them. Clearly, most are very intelligent but they all—or almost all—do astonishingly immoral things. Then, just when one thinks one can't stand Paul Lefebvre, the 'hero,' he does something positive. And Nadia is equally ambiguous and intriguing. So, you come away feeling that you have seen a real 'slice of (contemporary) life' and are absorbed into its texture. And yet it is rigidly structured unlike 'real life.' And the issue of social justice haunts every episode, given the references to the actual events in the Middle East and Russia. What price does one 'pay' for this or that decision? I found the fearless Marie-Jeanne a role model of sorts.

The poet Susan Howe, who alerted me to *Le Bureau*, and I agreed that such a TV series—and there aren't many—is really much more artful and interesting than most so-called conceptual poetry. The motives are genuinely complex; the relationships genuinely tense, the language multiplex. At the end we are even given a Lacanian analyst! I know it sounds silly, but I have begun to think that, as Shlovsky and Tinyanov taught us, genres are historically bound. Charades, just a game today, was a serious poetic genre in the eighteenth century, and so on. And I believe that this is not the moment for poetry or perhaps even the novel. Video can be very sophisticated and artistic, even if 9/10ths of what is shown on Netflix is just trash. I also learned from *Le Bureau* what it means to have every second of your life permeated by the digital. These people cannot live for 20 seconds without their phones, and the genius in the drama is the young boy, Sylvain Eisenstein (although that's not his real name) who has Asperger's syndrome and can do amazing things with algorithms. That I think is our world today—a frightening world, really, but perhaps not very much like that of the Nazis. Does this make any sense?

Yeats, whom I cited above, once said, “We make of the quarrels with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.” That sums it up for me. There must be some inner tension, some uncertainty on the artist’s part; otherwise, we get rhetoric as in the phrase ‘the banality of evil.’ Now there’s nothing wrong with rhetoric, after all, but I prefer artworks that allow for some indeterminacy, some mystery.

¹This text has subsequently been published: Karl Kraus, *Third Walpurgis Night*, translated from the German by Fred Bridgham and Edward Timms, foreword by Marjorie Perloff, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

² Marjorie Perloff, *Infrathin. An Experiment in Micropoetics*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, forthcoming.

³ DGSE: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure.

⁴ The French title is *Le Bureau des legends*, a five-season television series that has been broadcast on Canal + from April 2015-May 2020.

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