

ala's challenge to her readers and to those committed to finding levers for disrupting the dominant structures of international economic and political order. What Tzouv-ala provides is not only a striking rereading of international law over the last century. She also offers a powerful

model for how to integrate law and political economy in ways that recognise contingency while still centring the structural constraints that shape all emancipatory projects.

Aziz Rana

Subversive agency

Jill Godmilow, *Kill The Documentary: A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). 224pp., £94.00 hb., £25.00 pb., 978 0 23120 276 3 hb., 978 0 23120 277 0 pb.

Jill Godmilow's *Kill the Documentary: A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars* is a curious object. Although published by Columbia University Press, it is not quite an academic text. Unlike most of the theoretical volumes that have been written on documentary film in recent years, Godmilow's is neither concerned with retracing its history, nor in contributing to the scholarly research on the genre, developing consistent categories of its modes, methods, styles or contexts. Instead, the author declares in the first pages of her introduction that she 'intend[s] to be as provocative and subversive as [she] can' in order to 'advocat[e] for a cinema whose trustworthiness and usefulness is dependent not on documentary's pedigree nor pornography of the real, but rather on the strength and the performance of its ideas.' Far from pretending to any kind of scientific neutrality, Godmilow's text is clearly committed to a cause: that of sensitising her readers to the political element of perception and the agency of the forms that mediate reality.

Bill Nichols, who wrote the preface, reads the book accordingly as a 'bold, provocative manifesto'. Yet Godmilow's conversational, unflinching, sometimes ironic tone should not be taken as gratuitous or grandstanding. Rather, it expresses a long-time indignation about the way many official or commercial documentary formats tacitly claim to represent reality in its immediacy, as a positive given. The problem she points at is not only that such claims are spurious, as 'what we normally think of as "the real" in documentary films is a construction, made up of how well the look and sound of the film *simulates* the actual.' This crucial aspect, which has already been emphasised by many independent filmmakers and

critics before her, certainly is an important objection against hegemonic claims to neutrality. But what she considers even more problematic is that such an idea of documentary as transparently showing reality 'as it really is' conceals the moral and ideological underpinnings on which it often relies. Far from being as neutral and innocuous as they pretend to be, conventional documentaries not only oversimplify the real by obliterating the multiple frictions, ambiguities and inequalities of society, but also posit a certain reality – that of privileged white middle-class citizens of the so-called first world – as its normative core. They produce 'an egotism that eternally places the citizen/viewer at the centre of the universe, looking out into the represented world, discovering the problems of other peoples. It's a kind of cultural imperialism, as if your knowledge exempts us from having had any part of the damage we find there.'

Capitalising on the genre's general association with trustworthiness and sobriety, such documentaries are thus instruments to keep the dominant power structure of society intact: '[they] ask you to go there to that landscape and, once fascinated with what you find there, to keep watching, anxious for more, and finally find some kind of resolution of the problems presented. The doc asks you to enjoy, weep, celebrate, have pity, gasp, perhaps dread, and finally be released from care when the credits roll.' Her most telling example is the PBS documentary series *The Vietnam War* – an imposing, 18-hour television opus that, while meticulously retracing the chronology of the conflict, reflects an utterly uncritical attitude towards the hegemonic imperialist understanding of history and actual politics which it depicts.

Godmilow's harsh criticism of such conventional documentaries – she also calls them liberal documentaries, or 'dawkis' ('documentary as we know it') – resonates strongly with certain philosophical and critical writings from the early Frankfurt school, especially Adorno and Horkheimer's remarks on the culture industry. Although the two philosophers did not address the documentary specifically, their critique of the culture industry's 'inherent tendency to adopt the tone of the factual report', through which it 'makes itself the irrefutable prophet of the existing order' (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*), applies to documentary, whose peculiar relation to reality is implicit in the understanding of the genre, even more than to other entertainment formats. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the products of the culture industry resort to a certain fetishised idea of objectivity, akin to that heralded by positivism, understood as a separate sphere of cold facts dissociated from their social and subjective mediation which grants them a meaning. Such an idea of objectivity *qua* factuality is furthermore associated with standardised formal features, which make the constructedness of their mediations pass unnoticed, and sanction a normalised perception of the real. 'Each statement, each piece of news, each thought has been preformed by the centers of the culture industry', writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. 'Whatever lacks the familiar trace of such pre-formation lacks credibility, the more so because the institutions of public opinion accompany what they send forth by a thousand factual proofs and all the plausibility that total power can lay hands on.' The problem Adorno and Horkheimer raised is thus not only that cultural products under capitalism have turned into consumer goods like any other and are moulded according to the same market criteria which adapt to the fashion of the moment. The problem is also that they produce, by dint of the recurrent reiteration of the ever-same patterns and common tropes, a harmonised, all-encompassing imagery of reality in which the latter appears as a coherent, impenetrable whole. By overshadowing any trace of uniqueness through clichés associated with allegedly consensual values, they stifle the antagonisms of society under an ideological veil of coherence. The products of the culture industry are thus not only perfectly aligned with the reigning power structure in capitalist society; they also endorse its hegemonic claim for universal validity.

Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Godmilow carves out the interrelations between the recourse to conventionalised forms – the presumed direct relation with the real of documentary formats – and the political significance they take on in society. Hence, she does not consider documentary forms as isolated, interchangeable entertainment objects, but as expressions of society and interventions into its becoming. Documentary is thus for her to be regarded in its dialectical relation to society rather than through categorial filters. Like Jacques Rancière, according to whom 'the privilege of the so-called documentary film is that it is not obliged to create the *feeling* of the real, [which] allows it to treat the real as a problem', Godmilow is not so much interested in the differentiation between documentary and other audio-visual works than in the stance they all take vis-à-vis reality. She thus upholds the importance of producing documentaries able to crack open the rigid imagery and to subvert common perceptions of reality, so as to problematise its all-too-obvious or natural appearance through defamiliarisation, shifts of angles and other subversive artistic strategies.



As such, it is first and foremost necessary to see through the political agency of forms: how is reality comprehended and approached through documentary? Does the latter take on an affirmative position, or does it challenge normalised ideas about society? How do filmic configurations generate an impression of evidence and immediacy, or, contrariwise, open an access to novel perceptions that subvert our conceptions of the real and invite us to engage in social change? How can a specific truth-content be disclosed through particular framings or montage? How can documentary film problematise

reality today, a reality that is itself widely saturated by images and sounds?

As an independent filmmaker, Godmilow has been raising such questions about documentary through artistic means for over 40 years. Her experimental documentary *Far from Poland* (1984), for example, does not simply document the Solidarity movement in Poland from a seemingly neutral perspective, as many journalistic formats do. Neither is it an activist film in the usual sense of the term. Instead of informing her audience about factual events or transmitting a clear message, it drags the spectator into a sort of reflective spiral, which problematises not only the ways that diverse media formats and politicians generalise and instrumentalise highly complex situations, but also her own position as an independent filmmaker from the left. Mixing various media footage, restaged scenes of real and fictional interviews and sequences featuring the filmmaker herself with her partner or a group of friends in their private home, the film complicates its subject matter rather than explaining it. Through the montage of heterogeneous materials, critical reflections about the difficulty to grasp the imbrications of reality and the images and sounds supposed to mediate it, the complexity of reality itself during the cold war and the intertwinements of personal life, artistic practice and political action come to the fore. Rather than stabilising a meaning, *Far from Poland* multiplies the questions that arise from the very idea of documentary filmmaking and appeals to the spectators' own critical capacities. Another of her works, *What Farocki Taught* (1996), takes on a completely different form: it replicates Harun Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire* (1968), which she considers as one of the most powerful subversive non-fiction films of the twentieth century. Farocki's short film approaches the Vietnam War through a thorough Marxian deconstruction of the impact of capitalist organisation (the universalised division of labour) and values (the unquestioned pursuit of efficiency and profit) in modern warfare and politics. Godmilow not only appropriates Farocki's oeuvre by reproducing the exact script, its Brechtian tone and style, but also actualises it by adding colour, resorting to American actors instead of the original German actors playing Americans, and transposing it into a US-American context.

Both films are inherently political insofar as, through a thorough work on form, they disturb commonsensical

ideas about reality and its relation to the images and sounds that mediate it. Both address the viewer directly and appeal to her critical assessment. The same is true for her book: Godmilow addresses her reader directly as viewer of documentary formats, rational interlocutor and potential filmmaker of 'useful' (in the sense of subversive, critical, engaging) films whose aesthetic, formal and political choices will inevitably intervene in the very shaping of the perception of reality. She calls such subversive works 'post-realist' films. 'The post-realist film', she writes,

is an antispectacular form that refuses documentary transparency, evidentiary arguments, classic narrative structure, psychological explanations, and the sympathetic identification systems that posit us/them symmetries. ... Most important, postrealism always addresses an audience that does not yet exist but that could be produced through understanding provided by the film's experience. ... The postrealist film comes in many forms, but always seeks to crack the code of the status quo, to drill even small holes in our social *imaginaire*, our naturalized worldview that suggests what is understood as normal, reasonable, commonsensical, and generally accepted by all.

Godmilow's notion of postrealism, diametrically opposed to what Adorno and Horkheimer called the 'pseudo-realism of the culture industry', shares many characteristics with certain Marxist concepts of realism. Undoubtedly, it draws on Brecht's idea of realism outlined in *Popularity and Realism*, according to which

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasising the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.

Like Brecht, Godmilow emphasises that the political potential of art to address reality directly – in her case, primarily non-fiction film – lies in its ability to unravel gridlocked ideas about reality through formal constructions, to incite the viewer to reflect on their own position in society and to intervene in its course. Likewise, Alexander Kluge's claim that 'the motive for realism is never confirmation of reality but protest' and his idea of an

‘antagonistic realism’, which conceives of reality as a complex, historically-developed construction, in which the factual is constantly mediated through the society which confers it meaning and the subjective feelings, projections and attributions which actualise it, has much in common with Godmilow’s conception.

To be sure, Godmilow does not situate her critical writing on a conceptual level. Much more important for her is to grasp the intelligibility of the forms themselves. Hence, she provides an impressively wide range of examples which not only include experimental documentary films from different contexts and periods – including Luis Buñuel’s *Land of Bread* (1933), Želimir Žilnik’s *Black Film* (1971), Chick Strand’s *Fake Fruit Factory* (1986) and Camilo Restrepo’s *La Bouche* (2017) – but also feature fictions, poems and conceptual artworks. Herein lies the specificity and refreshing nonconformity of her book: it pushes the reader not only to see through the ideological premises of conventional formats, but also to delve into the multiple configurations that generate subversive

experiences. Through her readings, comments and perceptions, it becomes very clear that such configurations are not ready-made formulas to be emulated but particular formal inventions for specific situations. Hence, she insistently encourages her readers to read, watch and criticise as many works as possible and to invent their own artistic means. Significantly in this respect, Godmilow also calls her book a handbook, including a comprehensive ‘tool-kit’ full of references and practical instructions.

In a way, Godmilow’s obstinate belief in the subversive potential of artistic forms recalls the affirmative stance of militant artists in the periods of the historical avant-gardes or the crisis-laden 1960s and 1970s, which, for some, might seem dated or outworn today. Yet her persistent faith in the importance of developing critical awareness and in the agency of art to intervene into reality despite the omnipresent ‘capitalist realism’ in the global neoliberal society radiates a compelling force.

Stefanie Baumann

Governing the non-human

Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). 299pp., £80.00 hb., £25.00 pb., 978 1 47980 881 6 hb., 978 1 47982 993 4 pb.

Cars that measure and signal fuel efficiency, expanding markets for weather derivatives, and ‘vital systems security’ infrastructures, among other similar developments, indicate significant transformations in contemporary governmentality at varying scales. New materialist strands of thought have been developing novel understandings of these more-than-human operations of power for several decades by rethinking the ontological categories, epistemological enclosures, political impasses and ethical dogmas of anthropocentric modes of analysis and critique. Thomas Lemke’s *The Government of Things* is a welcome addition to the corpus. By inviting new materialist scholars to think with rather than against Michel Foucault, as has customarily been the case, this book unlocks fruitful directions for analysing how power operates in contemporary societies.

One of its biggest successes is the extensive and

clear explanation of new materialist thought, particularly its three most highly influential strands: Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO), Jane Bennett’s vital materialism and Karen Barad’s diffractive materialism. Lemke provides a helpful and detailed outline of this profuse and diverse body of scholarship representing different intellectual traditions and orientations. He explains that new materialisms are united in proposing a new valuation of matter as productive and dynamic rather than inert and passive, an agentive subject rather than simply subject to (human) agency. This ontological recasting of matter’s perceived torpidity also invites a political reorientation wherein power analysis is not restricted to human communities. Furthermore, new materialists endeavour to construct an ethical framework premised upon the Gordian entanglements of people and things, whose relations are shaped by ‘mutual depend-