



# LONG STORY SHORT

A FILM BY NATALIE BOOKCHIN

Grand Prize, Cinema du Reel Film Festival, France  
Documentary Silver Award, Athens Film and Video Festival, Greece  
Official Selection, DocBuenos Aires, Brazil  
Programmer's Award, Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival  
Official Selection, DocFortnight, The Museum of Modern Art  
Official Selection, RIDM Documentary Film Festival

45 minutes | USA | ENGLISH | 2016 | AN ICARUS FILMS RELEASE  
[HTTP://LONGSTORY.US](http://longstory.us)  
[HTTP://ICARUSFILMS.COM/NEW2016/LONG.HTML](http://icarusfilms.com/new2016/long.html)



## SHORT SYNOPSIS

In *Long Story Short*, over 100 people at homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs, and job training centers in Los Angeles and the Bay Area in Northern California discuss their experiences of poverty – why they are poor, how it feels, and what they think should be done. Numerous interviews are stitched together to form a polyphonic account of poverty in California told from the inside.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

*Long Story Short* explores the rise of poverty and income inequality in the US, using tools of the sharing economy to amplify the voices of those most displaced and dispossessed by it. While individuals filmed in separate spaces appear in isolation, trapped within their own video frames, mirroring the isolating aspects of the media forms it appropriates, words flow across the screen like a musical ensemble. This choral voice moves across a social body of common experiences and variations on shared themes, as narrators momentarily join together, and then splinter part. Through this process, shared experiences and commonalities among strangers are highlighted, instigating unexpected links, and stipulating connections between and among strangers, revealing that poverty, much like social media, is viral, iterative, part of a web of connected experiences.

It is through this modular and polyphonic compilation of short image fragments, condensed from a potentially limitless archive that *Long Story Short* aims to reveal patterns without using abstractions, establishing links within and across the many small, singular, and short stories that in their collectivity make up the 'big picture', yet without subordinating the small and the singular to the collective composition. In their conjunction, these many small frames of images and fragments of voices create something larger, and more akin to the social, than either each of the voices alone. In this way, *Long Story Short* offers a glimpse of a different notion of the social and the collective, distinct from that of social media, which appeals to the most precious of human values, that is solidarity and compassion, with all its possibilities and potential still to be realized.

## IN THE PRESS

*"An original piece of editing, which exploits the split screen principle in a way that is as pertinent as it is original."*

—Telerama

*"A hundred ways of being poor and a hundred ways of saying it close-up combine to form a polyphonic account. The hundred people in tenuous housing in California who give similar statements in LONG STORY SHORT respond to one another, directly or indirectly, in a convergence of people, whether isolated individuals or those placed in groups and aligned. They are intertwined, they resonate with one another, and it is this chorus of minimalist yet intelligent writing that was awarded."*

—En attendant Nadeau, Journal of Literature, Ideas and the Arts

*"I was hugely impressed by LONG STORY SHORT, its gripping detail and precision. It's a masterpiece of editing, very virtuosic. Great work!"*

—Yvonne Rainer

*"A surprising film, an incredible work of montage on the collective power of speech."*

—Maria Bonsanti, Artistic Director, Cinéma du Réel

*"[The film's] candid but humanizing approach interrupts the prejudice and pity commonly directed toward individuals living in poverty, revealing instead the long-term, systemic nature of economic disenfranchisement."*

—Jennifer Gonzalez, Professor, History of Art and Visual Culture, UC Santa Cruz

*"Explores poverty in the United States with a bold narrative technique.... The great value of the film is not only in the strength of its witnesses, and not only the impressive work of selecting and editing the sound and image, but that the ingenious form of its conception is tailored to its ambitions."*

—Diego Batlle, Otros Cines

*"Reveals the crushing collective reality of poverty in the United States. It sizzles with calm rage!"* —Trebor Scholz, Associate Professor of Culture & Media Studies, The New School

*"Perfectly pitched to generate lively discussion in any classroom across a range of fields and disciplines... not to be missed."*

—Caren Kaplan, Professor, American Studies, UC Davis



## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER



Natalie Bookchin is an artist and videomaker whose work explores some of the far-reaching consequences of the digital on a range of spheres including aesthetics, labor, leisure, and political speech. Her media works have received national and international acclaim and are exhibited and screened widely, including at LACMA, PS1, Mass MOCA, the Walker Art Center, the Pompidou Centre, MOCA Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum, the Tate, and Creative Time. She has received numerous awards including from Creative Capital, California Arts Council, the Guggenheim, the Durfee Foundation, the Rockefeller, California Community Foundation, Daniel Langlois Foundation, the Center for

Cultural Innovation, a MacArthur Foundation Film Grant, and most recently a NYSCA Individual Artist award among others. Bookchin was on the faculty of the Photography & Media Program at CalArts in Los Angeles from 1998 - 2015, chair and co-chair of the program for seven years. She currently lives in Brooklyn and is a professor of Media and Associate Chair in the Visual Arts Department at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2016	Long Story Short (46 minutes, film)
2016/2009	Testament (installation)
2012	Now he's out in public and everyone can see (16 minutes, installation)
2009	Mass Ornament (installation)
2008	Parking Lot (13 minutes, film)
2008	trip (63 minutes, film)
2007	Zorns Lemma2 (12 minutes, film)
2007	Round the World (installation)
2006	Location Insecure (10 minutes, film)

## PRESS ROOM

<http://icarusfilms.com/pressroom.html>

Credit: Images from "Long Story Short," a film by Natalie Bookchin. Courtesy Icarus Films.  
User: icarus Password: press

# FILMMAKER INTERVIEW

**Excerpts from an interview with contemporary art writer Holly Arden.**

**Date: December 2015**

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

**Natalie Bookchin:** 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 who presented insights derived from their life experiences. I also knew I wanted to create a large archive of video narrations, to focus on the voices and views of many rather than a select few.

Given the large number of people in poverty in the US, there is shockingly little representation in the media, and the representations that do exist are often deeply flawed. The poor are chronically depicted as helpless, as failures, as victims of their own bad decisions, whereas in conventional documentaries, one or a few charismatic individuals often stand in for whole populations and frequently, against all odds, succeed in taking themselves out of poverty. Many of these stories tend to avoid the much darker truth that in America, despite individual character, good or bad, most people have very little chance of moving outside of the class in which they were born.

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

I developed a structure for the film that moves between choruses of speakers and soloists, between instances of sameness and difference, and allows for both shared and divergent responses to and reflections on poverty. Composite sentences and conversations unfold across a body of speakers across the screen, as if across a social body, producing a collective of shared ideas and overlapping words, experiences, and phrases spoken simultaneously by multiple speakers – it's a little like jazz or an improvised musical score.

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.

**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 best as I can tell, it 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, offering 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, but not the content, of the online vlog. I started by having participants make their videos on their own. But 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 can 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:** *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 Hollywood and 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'.

While we live in a time of hyper-visibility – where we are barraged with continuous flows of images – it can be difficult to notice what is being left out and why it might matter. 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 overvisibility, others don't have that privilege. As I learned from my 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. Think about the recent uprising in Baltimore. We have momentary eruptions treated in the media as exceptions to the rules, even as 'spontaneous', and then quickly chased out of the headlines by the next news story. It's hard to see patterns when one story is replaced by the next, when each new 'state of exception' is 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 working on 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" any more. 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 to test just what to call these people!

**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. The poor in the US are no small minority. Not only do we have a shrinking middle class, 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:** Can you touch specifically on the issue of race in the film? I was staggered (naively, I think) by the fact that the majority of the participants are African American or Latin American.

**NB:** Race and poverty can't be separated in the US. My interviews took place in urban areas in LA and in the Bay Area, where, just as in other cities across the country, there are large swaths of poor areas that are heavily segregated, with large Black and Latino populations. In the US we have a long history of racist, segregationist government policies, from redlining and zoning laws, to predatory lending practices, racist policing, and a racist justice system, which have helped produce and preserve these concentrated centers of poverty.

## FILM CREDITS

Director / Producer / Editor:  
Sound Designer:  
Running Time:  
Production Year:  
Country:

Natalie Bookchin  
Michael Kowalski  
45 minutes  
2016  
USA

Production and Research Assistant:  
Additional Assistance:

Kristine Tomaro  
Shagha Ariannia  
Sarah Simon  
Marisa Williamson

Advisors:

Robert Bullock  
Alexandra Juhasz  
Michael Kowalski  
Montse Romani'

Featuring:

Vanella Alexander  
Monica Allen  
Shane Aspinall  
Doray Atkins  
Regina B  
Julien Barnett

Alfredo Garcia  
Valerie Garcia  
Janessa Gilbert  
Stefanie Gilmore  
Tashiyanna Graham  
Antionette Goodwin

Jimonté Johnson  
Lorine Johnson  
Zondee Johnson  
Yolanda Johnson  
Edward Jones  
Julie/Jewelee Kenner

Shaneke Bragg	Tammy Goolsbery	Isis Murray
Zachery Bilsky	Clark Green	Fallon O'Garro
Reed Beeman	Ford Gunther	Emmanuel Ortiz
Joycelyn Belloff	Kelly Hanna	Donald Payne
Ricardo Berti	Cherelle Knight	Alex Ponce
Shannon Bowerman	Michael Leininger	William Ramos-Ochoa
Chris Boyd	Veronica Long	Anthony Rivera
Lolita Brinson	Jason Mahoney	Michael Russell
Philandria Brown	Yunuen Maya	Ana S.
Michael Carter	Hannah Martin	Sharron Sampson-Bryant
Maria Castellon	Natasha McCloud	Suzette Shaw
Leigh Anne Clark	Melvin McCullough	Harlan Smith
David Cody	Tito McMillan	Zari Smith
Billy R. Counts	Christopher Miller	Bonnie Stillwater
Janet Counts	Kevin Miller	Michael Stone
Mary Cowles	Christina Morales	Sunshine
Robert Cruz	Josh Morris III	Cha-Shann Thomas
Neil D'Alessio	Bernice Murphy	Debra Tinsley
Demetrius Dandridge	Booker Hayes	Pamela Vaughns
John Danish	Wylene Haywood	Rosa Waitayakul
Miayako Dennis	Damien Henson	Tiffany Walker
Hugo Diaz	Laureen Hernandez	Westley Walker
Steve Diaz	Marc Hicks	Jennifer Williams
General Dogon	Sharon Ann Hickson	Leslie Williams
Lennea Downing	Nathen Holzl	Thadius Williams
Oona Edelen	Lynda West-Hutcherson	Sherrie Wilson
Melinda Emilien	Kim Jackson	Dominic Yanez
Monica Fandey	Suzanne Jastrumske	Manuel Zaragoza
Steven Fletcher	Gregory Johnson	
Nebra Flewellen		

Organizations/Locations:

Union Station Homeless Services, Pasadena, California  
 Year Up Bay Area, San Francisco  
 Social Services at Blessed Sacrament, Los Angeles  
 PATH (People Assisting the Homeless) Los Angeles  
 Next Step Learning Center, Oakland  
 Los Angeles Community Action Network  
 Downtown Women's Center, Los Angeles  
 L.A. Family Housing, North Hollywood  
 The Bread Project, Emeryville

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Icarus Films  
 32 Court Street, Floor 21  
 Brooklyn, NY 11201 USA  
 (718) 488-8900 | mail@icarusfilms.com

