

Death From Above: On Joseph Kaplan's "Kill List"

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My office sits high enough above Times Square that encroaching storms sometimes drift by my window, eye-level, their soft underbellies grazing the midtown office buildings. I am a lawyer who defends multi-national corporations against sprawling, occasionally scandalous, allegations of wrong-doing and injury. And though I have performed legal work on behalf of indigents in debtors prisons and extra-territorial prisoners of the "war on terror," the closest I came to Occupy during its New York residency was when a phalanx of protestors – having streamed out of Zuccotti Park and up 7th Ave. – suddenly swarmed the black Town Car hurrying me to a pre-concert meal at a downtown restaurant. A dozen faces pressed against the tinted glass. I tucked in my ear buds and pressed play. It was exhilarating.

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The viral success of Josef Kaplan's [Kill List](#) (Cars Are Real, 2013) left me pleasantly – pleasingly – baffled. Formally, the poem employs its simplicity as a double-edged sword. Fifty-eight pages, each confined to four lines of text. Each line is a complete sentence. And each of those sentences – 232 in total – is binary: an alphabetically-ordered, identically-phrased declarative statement that identifies a living (usually American) poet as either (i) rich or (ii) comfortable. No poet transcends and no poet dips below these two classifications. Of the 232 poets listed, somewhere in the neighborhood of 90 are labeled "rich." The result of all of this ordering is page-after-page of *nearly*-uniform blocks of text (cleanly delineated on top, bottom, and left margin, irregular on the right) centered in an abundant matting of clean white space. On Montevidayo, Joyelle McSweeney (accurately) calls attention to its "nicely serified, landscaped font." The neatness, the cleanliness, allows the poem to go down "so very easy."¹ This ease, one might surmise, is precisely the point.

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Is there a point? McSweeney praises the poem as "easily the best work of conceptual poetry [she's] seen in a long time." At HTMLGiant, on the other hand, Ben Tripp provides an "urgent critique": "the work comes off as didactic, transparently so." According to Tripp, "to argue for this transparency as a virtue in itself undermines the integrity of conceptualism as a vanguard movement worth rooting for in contemporary poetry."² I'm not fully convinced that transparent didacticism is the enemy of

¹ Joyelle McSweeney, MONTEVIDAYO, "[Some Comfortable Thoughts: Inger Christensen's Alphabet as Kill List](#)".

² Ben Tripp, HTMLGIANT, "Against Intramural Poetics, Poetry As Potpourri and Brooklyn Provincial: Josef Kaplan's *Kill List*".

conceptualism – indeed, at the bluntly literal, the meta-, the macro-, and the micro- level the desire for a consciousness-raising, “truth-telling” destructive creation (inverting neoliberal economics’ creative destruction like a pentagram) rises from conceptualism like so much steam. And, even if it didn’t, perhaps conceptual transparency should be welcomed. Either way, Tripp never explains *what* the didacticism of *Kill List* seeks to teach us. In this instance, at least, the poem’s purported “transparency” remains opaque.

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The formal restraint of *Kill List* stands in stark contrast to its thematic scale. And yet, at first blush, the axes of that scale are *also* binary. The socioeconomic message (that poetry as a culture is narrow, insular, easily-sorted) is held up against the over-arching global implications of the U.S. “war on terror.” As most readers know (but the poem does not explain), a “kill list” is a state-sanctioned, global catalog of suspected terrorists compiled to authorize and aid the government’s tracking, capturing, rendering, or killing. The Kill List is not its official name, of course; the U.S. has labeled it a “Disposition Matrix.” Potential dispositions aside, however, complex political, cultural, and physical landscapes have constructively winnowed the options acceptable to the government to one: drones. Thus – in the poem’s silence and in its vast white offspace – an audience is guided (goaded?) into imagining the elegantly lethal figure-eights of drones high above the heads of 232 actual poets. The poets identified in *Kill List* are poets the audience may have read, are poets the audience may know personally, are, as in the case of McSweeney, poets who, in fact, comprise the poem’s audience.

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In a 2012 interview in ARTTALKS, Kaplan opines that “art is in a lot of ways already meaningless.” This, he states, is “one of its strengths”:

To risk sounding redundant, the idea that art or poetry would or should have any kind of political value, that idea might be a cultural expectation that doesn’t have a lot of bearing on what art and poetry are, actually, in the world. Poetry and art are formal categories. They aren’t responsible for anything because they themselves don’t make decisions.³

To say that “decision-making” resides at the *heart* of *Kill List* is to anthropomorphize. To say it resides at the poem’s *center* betrays my own drive to fix, stabilize, objectify, and commodify. As McSweeney notes, “everything that can be brought into the order of human knowledge is also on the demolition list.” But a focus solely on demolition seems incomplete. In *Eros, the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson describes the nearly-simultaneous advent of the modern(-ish) alphabet with the introduction of the coin, of *currency*. It was the newly-created ability to discern *edges*, to identify where *this* ends and *that* begins (I *give* my account and *take* an accounting), that ushered in an era of promiscuous trade and

³ Excerpted at [HARRIET](#).

commerce and gave birth to (and let loose) the triangulating, deconstructive power of lyrical eros. Creative destruction.

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Jim Behrle: “Which is why I found being called ‘comfortable’ so puzzling. I reached out to the poet. What was his criterion for calling me ‘comfortable?’ ‘If you’re comfortable,’ he replied. I thought I’d ask his publisher. Could they comment on any efforts they made to fact check the poem? What exactly was the criterion for ‘comfortable?’ They referred me back to the poet. I expected some kind of clever dialogue, but perhaps they sensed that I could have my legal team shut down their small press with some kind of giant writ of habeus corpus. I would never do that to another poet or a small press. This is art, not something important like winning the war in Afghanistan.”⁴

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Fact-checking: *Habeas corpus* (L. “you shall have the body”) is a court-issued writ that commands an individual or official who has detained another to produce the prisoner at a specific time and place for a hearing on the legality of the detention. The writ dates to 14th century England. The United States adopted it from English common law. It was ultimately the historical inviolability of the *habeas* writ that allowed the first successful challenges to the indefinite detentions at Guantanamo Bay.

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Some readers of *Kill List* found it empirically wanting. In other words, they took the poem *literally*. This reaction suggests that, to the extent the poem *is* didactic, its didacticism exists in some rough triangulation of Kaplan, his targets, and the poem’s targeting mechanism. In other words, the method, or process, by which targets are *acquired*. This is fitting. No matter how specific or well-supported a disposition matrix becomes, its reduction into “kill/don’t kill” can’t help but fall prey to the limits of information or, inversely, to the excess and error we’re forced to ignore in pursuit of a “functional” taxonomy. How do we define “enemy combatant”? How do we measure an “imminent threat”? How much information is enough for the government to decide who lives and dies? And who does the quantifying? In *Kill List*, as in U.S. policy, the uncertainties underlying how we sort target from non-target are exacerbated by the vagueness of the categories themselves. What constitutes “rich”? What constitutes “comfortable”? The black box of government secrecy finds its reflection in the tautological black box of *Kill List*’s relentless sorting. The binary is always insufficient. Its shortcomings make clear both our epistemic failure and the inevitability of collateral damage. Internalizing this, we brush against the Kafka-esque anxiety and helplessness of the target.

⁴ Jim Behrle, P0etry Foundation, “[I’m Not Comfortable](#)”.

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Drew Kalbach: “Without the internet, conceptualism would likely never have become what it is today, or perhaps not even exist at all. In other words, conceptualism is the quintessential body-less information, existing to be spread as pure idea and not ‘consumed’ as an embodied text.”⁵

McSweeney, again: “This particular conceptualist poem works for me because it invites us to consider an idea, and invites us to turn that idea over and over for as long as the idea interests us. Then it invites us to delete the idea. This is a great poem for Face[b]ook, for conversations heatedly engaged upon and then abandoned because other pressures such as the need to sleep or shop or nuke a burrito became more compelling.”

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The history of literature is a history of literary gossip. Long before the internet, gossip circulated among writers with ineluctable, virus-like efficiency. No distance was too far. No scandal was too near. In graduate school, I was suddenly privy to sordid events thousands of miles away. Nearer to home, I once walked into the office of my MFA program and overheard an *award-winning* faculty member gossiping about my sex life. But what is an award but institutionalized gossip? And what is gossip but a kind of reward? I burned with acceptance. Nonetheless, literary gossip is double-edged: even as I desire to be important enough to be gossiped about, I seek to avoid its calcifying touch. *X* did *Y*. *Y* did *Z*. They *all* did *each other*. Gossip is vertiginous. It thrives among those who are both iconoclastic and needy.

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Who could help but scan the pages of *Kill List* looking for his/her friends? Who didn’t first scan those same pages for his/her own name? To the extent we prioritize the local – to the extent that we pluck the familiar from the “ephemeral amnesiac data flow” of too much information⁶ – we are beholden to heuristics. The response to *Kill List* as a text is bounded rationality embodied. Indeed, the internet response to the text becomes, in the end, part of the text.

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The irresistibility of gossip is a source of *Kill List*’s dark comedy. When we treat it as gossip we crowd out broader issues of political economy and spiral into self-involvement. Each time we question how “comfort” or “wealth” might be defined by Kaplan we unconsciously prioritize the trivial local (our ability to keep up with the Joneses) over the

⁵ Drew Kalbach, ACTUARY LIT, “[Conceptualism and Medial Literary Reading](#)”.

⁶ Kenny Goldsmith, NEW YORKER Blog, “[The Writer as Meme: How Has the Internet Altered Poetry?](#)”

lethal push and pull of global terror (whether imperial or reactionary). Progressive politics are fleetingly recast as one more commodity, a fetish in the form of radical chic.

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By including himself in his own *Kill List*, Kaplan is able to (i) establish himself as gossip-worthy; while (ii) simultaneously controlling the gossip's message. He sits at its center and traces its circumference. He authorizes and actualizes. He asserts an authorial power that is at once both legislative *and* executive.

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To what extent does the longing for/fear of gossip reflect the larger, barely-sublimated, death drive of a poetry culture that daydreams of being important enough to kill? This is the existential paradox evidenced each time "American poetry" rises to testify to its own vibrancy in response to media suggestions that "American poetry" might be "dead." Proponents of conceptual poetry, on the other hand, have inverted this fear of death into necrophilia. "And though hope, as we know, is a thug with feathers, it is my desire that poetry finally be put out of its misery."⁷ Conceptual poetry is terminal. It is (reflexively) "killing poetry" even as it expands. The establishment backlash against conceptual metastasis is little more than a way of saying the obvious: cancer is a terrifying *fact*.⁸

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The issues implicated (but not investigated) in *Kill List* are not new to Kaplan's work. And yet few who discussed it over the last several weeks have done so in relation to last year's *Democracy Is Not For the People* (Truck Books, 2012). Where *Kill List* is oblique or coy, *DINFTP* appears, at times, bracingly transparent. In "Poem That is Pro-Violence," Kaplan writes:

Poets and artists appear to the wealthy as the fantasy that exploited classes accept, and even value, their exploitation.

[...]

If poets and artists were willing to corner, beat and mug rich people, and take their money, then poets and artists would no longer appear to the wealthy as a worthwhile investment strategy.

[...]

This would have the more gradual effect of providing poets and artists the resources required to arm themselves and their communities with weapons – weapons like, for example, fully automatic assault rifles with armor-

⁷ Vanessa Place, "[Poetry Is Dead, I Killed It](#)", April 5, 2012.

⁸ The hand-wringing this has caused might be taken as proof that there are too few doctors in poetry's house.

piercing bullets – weapons capable of resisting the incursive power of the state, which serves the wealthy.

Is *Kill List* the logical extension and actualization of this call to arms? Has the army become the enemy?

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The penultimate poem in *DINFTP*, “Ex-Machina,” is constructed of 20 short prose sections of one to four paragraphs. Each section describes a discrete “terrorist” bombing/attack that “occurred” over a period of ten years, from April, 1993 to August, 2003. The sections are fact-intensive, linear, narrative. cursory research reveals that the attacks are real, historical. It also reveals that many of the details with which Kaplan populates the poem are plucked nearly verbatim off of Wikipedia. And yet: in each section of the poem, the historical narrative is averted, subverted, by a *deus ex machina* that thwarts the attack at the last second. The first section ends:

Just after 1:00 AM, al-Nabulsi pulled the car in between two buses and reached for the detonator switch Ayyash had connected to the driver’s controls . . . but suddenly, Athena, daughter of Zeus, who bears the aegis, shouted aloud for him to refrain. Al-Nabulsi’s hand curled in pale fear, and the switch remained untouched. And all lived.

The last section ends:

As he let his hand come to rest upon the detonator, he closed his eyes . . . but suddenly, opening his eyes, he realized he was no longer on the bus, but in bed, staring into the loving face of Suzanne Pleshette. No longer asleep. No longer dreaming. And all lived.

And so the poem begins on Mt. Olympus and ends in *Newhart’s* sitcom Vermont – a Vermont that is, itself, meta-fictionally nested within the previously unrelated Manhattan of *The Bob Newhart Show*. Here, the *machini* do not increase or decrease in absurdity or realism. Instead, they – like an alphabetized matrix that classifies but refuses to rank – reject thematic hierarchy and betray historical dialectics. There is no progress. The *machini* turn, over time and repetition, despondent: the only possible escape from the fatal loop of global terror (whether imperial or reactionary, or both) is contrived and unexpected. Narrative, to the extent it embodies linearity and logic, fails. And in this, *DINFTP* presages *Kill List’s* implied critique of even the most advanced “disposition matrix.” Global terror is intractable. Its resolution resides beyond the reach of reason.

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“Ex-Machina” evokes the exhaustion one feels watching her/his $n+1$ st romantic comedy. The conflation of contrivance and convention leaves only two interpretive options: (i) happiness is the product of an extrinsic, Rube Goldberg-ian machinery, the invisible hand of a narrative economy; or (ii) happiness is the arbitrary by-product of a

helplessness-inducing contingency and chance. True story: New Years Day, 2010. In the midst of a seriously prolonged major depressive episode, I cried watching *Love, Actually*. I went back on medication the next week.

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Is *DINFTP* “conceptual”? An early version of “Poem That is Pro-Violence” published in LANA TURNER, reveals edits:

15. If poets and artists were willing to mug and assault rich people,
and take their money, then poets and artists would no longer appear
to the wealthy as a worthwhile investment strategy.

If conceptual poetry is “un-creative,” if it refuses “intention” as we know (and struggle with) it, if it does not direct its reception, then what do we make of the change from “mug and assault” to “corner, beat, and mug”? The shift from non-linear (“mug and assault” puts the cart before the horse) to linear (“corner *then* beat *then* rob”) can only be one of intention. It reveals a material, if not heavy, authorial hand.

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Kaplan’s method is appealingly scientific. The fact that poetry exists outside of actual decision-making renders it ethically clean even when rhetorically excessive. Its failure of efficacy is precisely “why you can have things happen in poetry that would be horrifying or terrible if conceived of in spheres outside of poetry.”⁹ Here, the edges of the poetic object create a space, a world, in which poetry is permitted to pose an existential threat to the established order; reciprocally, and logically, it also becomes a world in which poets are dangerous enough to kill. In doing this, however, Kaplan’s poem(s) reveal the abject distances between progressive political ideals and the steps required to see them to their end. That this space is only partially textual – the internet’s response to the poem provides a crucial, illuminating component of the total performance – is what makes it literally experimental.

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Or not. Perhaps the joke is on me. Perhaps *Kill List* is just the to-do list of a singularly ambitious young writer. The empty objects of conceptualism are, after all, ready-made for over-interpretation. In this reading, it’s 1971 and we’re all sitting in Stanley Fish’s class at SUNY-Buffalo. If, in the end, “all objects are made and not found,” if they are “made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion,” if “interpretation is not the art of construing but the art of construction,” I can’t help but think of those Occupy faces squinting through the tinted windows of my Town Car: what, exactly, could they hope to find?¹⁰

⁹ Excerpted at [HARRIET](#)

¹⁰ Stanley Fish, “[How to Recognize a Poem When You See One](#)”.