Lydia Wilford Interviews Silvia Kolbowski

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Silvia Kolbowski's film *Who Will Save Us?* (2022) brings together different dystopias. In a mashup of two science fiction films from either side of the 20th century, the work follows the subject under capitalism from industrialisation to digitisation. As in previous works – *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008) and *That Monster: An Allegory* (2018) – Kolbowski employs the editing process to re-animate the past, analysing the role of the political agent within imbalanced power structures. *Who Will Save Us?* envisages group psychosis, shot through with slivers of the past. Lydia Wilford spoke to Kolbowski about the storming of the Capitol, psyche and politics.

Lydia Wilford *Metropolis* (1927, directed by Fritz Lang) and *THX 1138* (1971, directed by George Lucas) differ in historical background, but crucially, speak to one another across time. How was it that you came to choose these two films to collate?
Silvia Kolbowski I usually begin a project by thinking about and reading around what I surmise to be a social conundrum of critical importance. Given the disastrous political shifts of the past few years toward authoritarianism as a mass reaction to neoliberalism, not only in the US, but around the world, I had become fascinated by mass group dynamics, not to say mob mentality, especially in relation to conspiracy theories or enthrallment to destructive leaders. The strange thing is that I cannot remember how I decided to work with *Metropolis*. I'd never actually seen the film, but I must have had enough popular knowledge of it to know that it was relevant to my focus on group dynamics in a world of polarised wealth. It also had the proto-digital element of a robotic figure, and I did know from the start that I wanted to add the more contemporary register of the digital because mobs now exist in both physical and algorithmic forms. But I had never seen *THX 1138,* and I can't remember how I got to it! Maybe in both cases, I was led to the films by the algorithms of a search engine.

LW Hannah Segal wrote that group behaviour realises itself in a way that would be considered mad if conceived in the individual. Madness is, therefore, sanctioned by the group. How does this idea relate to the specific cuts you have chosen to collate within *Who Will Save Us?*
SK In leading up to making the film, I read Wilfred Bion's theory, developed in the 1940s, of

the Basic Assumption Group. This was an analysis, based on his years of clinical observation, of the psychical elements of dysfunctional group behaviour, especially regarding the ways that the group constructs or accepts leaders. I think I drew my title from his work on groups. Unless one looks through the lens of the psyche, it is hard to understand why, for example, groups might be drawn to or create unstable leaders, leaders who work against their interests. Bion was, in fact, part of the same psychoanalytic circle as Segal in the 1950s. But academic research and filmmaking are two very different endeavours, and when it came to making the film, I focused on filmic strategies. My concern with spectatorship means that I rely on the "language" of a given medium in attempting to construct a spectator. In making a short film, I dealt with excerpts and the meanings I could create through montage. Reducing the footage by 90% was not as hard as it sounds, because both *Metropolis* and *THX 1138* are films that I do not feel entirely aligned with – in other words, their stories were not ones that I wanted to retell in whole. I wanted to borrow the parts that I found useful to my allegorical approach, but through the process of selection and elimination, I was able to write a new "script". From *Metropolis*, I retained the sections that emphasised the polarisation of wealth in physical terms – below and above, the burden of physical labour, the spectre of the robot, and the rebellion that follows the breakdown. But telling the new story I wanted to tell – of the psychical motivations of mob behaviour - involved repeating footage and "misusing" footage. For example, I rewrote some of the titles I used, retaining the graphics of *Metropolis*, and used the affect of the actors for different aims. From *THX 1138*, I selected differently, using very short lengths of footage as puncta of sorts, to shift the temporal and technological registers throughout.

LW Could you elaborate on the symbolism behind "misusing" footage within your work? The concept of manipulated footage feels pertinent to our current political climate and the uncertain status of truth in media.

SK That's an interesting association. The news media has always been subjective and not simply a reporter of facts. That said, the dizzying number of contemporary internet platforms do facilitate the proliferation of egregious distortions by algorithmically supercharging formulas that monetise inchoate grievance and misfocused outrage. The question for me isn't why so many lies and distortions proliferate today, but rather why mass populations are so susceptible, at a psychical level, to these distortions. I think that the answer lies with the fact that the governments of wealthy nations refuse to rein in the sadism of the neoliberal regime, which means that precarious mass populations will continue to be susceptible to distortions that crudely aim to displace their un-named fears – fears created by the very regime that persists at the top heights of power, as if invisible.

But truth and facts have never been an ethical consideration of artmaking, and spectators should not approach art expecting them. Art is an interpretive practice – it's not a history lesson. At its best, I think it creates a lens through which to think more actively about historical context. I "misused" footage because I wanted to retain the popular associations with those films, while changing the parts of the stories that I found problematic. *THX 1138* projects a vision of mind and physical control by digital technology that is too categoric. But its narrative brings together technology and several other factors in prescient ways, such as the footage I used from it at the end of my film, which portrays the emotional detachment created by the digital image. *Metropolis* idealises capitalism as a ruthless regime that has the potential to be benevolent in the right hands. That is the happy ending of the film. This is wishful thinking. But its depiction of stratified worlds remains impactful, and I was able to utilise that while drawing out the psychical aspects that are underplayed in the original film.

LW This idea of distortion from vertical authority does not feel misplaced from Silvia Federici's writing on the use of sex as an instrument of division. Could you talk about the moment in *Who Will Save Us?* when the workers turn their anger onto the figure of the witch?

SK Yes, in her review of *Who Will Save Us?* Lara Holenweger also connected the witch in my film and the thesis of Federici's book, *Caliban and the Witch*. I would say that the mechanisms by which social division – essential to maintaining the primacy of capitalism for the few – is sown are complex, because there is a psyche involved in social relations, not just pragmatic, if cruel, material aims. So, sometimes the divisiveness can be overt – the direct demonisation, by a political group seeking power, of a large and/or marginal segment of society, as we see happening now in the U.S. and other countries with reactionary governments in their demonization of LGBTQ+ communities and the radical outlawing of abortion. But sometimes more complex mechanisms are involved because the psyche can generate its own divisive discourse and activity. For example, I pointed out in a blog post about seven years ago that I believed that Trump was a symptomatic outgrowth of mob mentality and not the other way around. This has borne out, as there have been many times that one can witness Trump having trouble managing his followers. This is because, as Bion described from his clinical experience with groups, groups don't just form around leaders, they can also, for example, designate highly flawed leaders, even in their eyes, because it accords to them the active task of healing them. Also, troubled and aggressive leaders can be attractive to a dysfunctional group because it quickens them – gives them a purpose in a context of precarity and powerlessness. In our period of

destructive capitalism, power at the top doesn't even have to play the largest role in divisive demonisation. It can spring from the precarious and anxious group.

LW You mention Trump, and the storming of the Capitol is a moment when the group could be seen to overpower their leader. It has become infamous across all corners of the internet – and carries interesting visual comparisons to scenes from Metropolis. *Who Will Save Us?* shows that psychic repression can have serious consequences. Do you feel your work is allegorical to this event?

SK I think that the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol thought it was following its leader, although you're right in that they likely took it beyond what Trump, in his wildest dreams, had in mind. By the way, we can invoke historical moments when the storming of an institutional building was undertaken with the aim of establishing democracy. But on January 6th, little ideology was present; it felt more like a display of the destructive power of disavowal as a defence. I think this moment of capitalism is all about destructiveness for reasons too complex to elaborate here. I do use an allegorical approach in *Who Will Save Us?* because I feel it is an aesthetic strategy that has the potential to bring together the past and the present, to allow the spectator to feel like the prophetic prescience of earlier cultural projects illuminates their present. ◉