

That Monster Over There: Silvia Kolbowski, Trump, and Allegory

With her 2018 video *That Monster: An Allegory*, Silvia Kolbowski reflected on ‘why 30-40 million Americans fell in thrall to such a sick person?’¹ The artist thus distinguished the video from a groundswell of work occasioned in resistance or rage at Donald J. Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential election by situating the project on a patently psychoanalytic premise. Concerned with why so many people ‘became psychically enthralled to a demagogic power that doesn’t serve their interests’, the artist observed that:

Humans are the only species that will follow an unstable leader. They are also the only species with an unconscious. Centrists and left-liberals in the U.S. point to the chaos that Trump continuously creates, and they see it as indicative of ineffectuality. But that chaos is extremely effective at a psychical level.²

With the assertion that millions of voters elected a president that doesn’t serve their interests, Kolbowski is clearly less interested in the idea that a significant section of Trump’s supporters were duped by the rhetorical promises of Make America Great Again, than in the psychical basis for a politics of chaos and disorder. Thus, the artist insinuates that the real motivating factor in Trump’s appeal derives from a certain *attractiveness* in the symptoms that he appeared to display, from the performance of a pathological character.³ As Kolbowski

¹ Silvia Kolbowski, ‘That Monster: A Conversation About Politics and the Psyche’, interview with Edwin Coomasaru, *silviakolbowskiblog*, 20 June 2019, <<https://silviakolbowskiblog.com/2019/06/20/that-monster-a-conversation-about-politics-and-the-psyche/>> [accessed 3 April 2020].

² Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

³ On this point Kolbowski is unequivocal: ‘Let’s state from the outset that Trump is a mentally ill person, whatever pop psychology or serious psychoanalytic term one uses to explain his behavior’. Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

puts it, the more familiar progressive complaint – why would so many people vote against their own interests? – connects with the observed phenomenon that there is something deeply seductive about psychological illness which the language of political analysis is hard pressed to articulate. We can only understand the dynamic compact between individual and group that distinguishes the cult of political personality, the artist infers, if we change our terms of reference to include sickness as an object of desire. For it is axiomatic in psychoanalysis that sickness is the condition which illuminates the relationship between what we want and what we are prepared to know.

Kolbowski's video is crafted out of a collection of fragments from James Whale's 1935 *The Bride of Frankenstein*, which she has re-edited. Sequences are sped up, slowed down, or glitched. At its opening, a forked streak of lightning strobos out from the top right of a black and blank ground (Fig. 1), filament crackles in a dungeon, and two hands hover above a shrouded cranium as peeled cloths expose a pair of eyes blinking into consciousness. 'This is a story about a monster / A stranger / That monster over there / Him / Her': against another black ground, these intertitles open a script, excerpted from the novel, which punctuates the flow of borrowed footage (Fig. 2). For eight minutes and forty-six seconds, word and image are overlaid by Philip Glass' *Metamorphosis I and II*. At that point, as the video appears to end, *That Monster* begins again but plays out in silence. This unusual use of a loop format encourages us to think in structural terms of positive and negative, about what is given and what is taken away, about presence and absence. In each of what have now become the two halves of the video, Kolbowski loosely follows the narrative arc of Whale's treatment of Mary Shelley's novel, but with an exclusive emphasis on the mounting desolation of the Monster, his retreat from a dream about generosity and compassion to a nightmare of pain, anguish, and destruction. The key moment appears early, at the riverbank where the Monster, on seeing his reflection in the water, is 'filled with shame' (Figs. 3-4). From here, as the Monster peers through windows, burns down houses, and staggers through graveyards toppling statuary (Figs. 5-6), his soliloquy turns from self-pity and reproaches to threats:

I worked hard and was good / but a fatal prejudice clouds your eyes / You detest and spurn me / You call me ignorant / You call me stupid / You steal my dignity / Where you ought to see a vulnerable person you see only a burden.

Shame has made me a fiend / I feel rage! I want revenge! / I haunt you. I stalk you with bitterness and anger ... You think your contempt will control me / But I am like a wild beast / I declare war! / I glut myself with your shrieks and misery / With pleasure I destroy you and your home / Even if I destroy myself.

At the end we are back at the beginning, with the camera high up in the laboratory's turret, looking down. The Monster is being unveiled on the operating slab: 'Remember – I am your creature / And it is in your power to restore me' (Fig. 8). Mirroring the opening sequence, this spectral image closes and completes the edit, which will then repeat in the second silent showing. Who is it, though, that Kolbowski's titles name here? Who or what is the 'I', the 'you', the 'that'? The answer cannot be definitive. As in the novel, the lead role is a surrogate for any number of theories: is *that* monster Trump? Is it an electorate made monstrous by

generations of dehumanizing economic injustice? Or is it instead the death drive itself, a principle of disorder tending inexorably toward inertia?⁴

The irresolution of fixed identities is a central theme in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, which nevertheless begins with the observation that 'once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind, you can predict its contents with unnerving certainty'.⁵ 'You know', she avers, 'the important features of its *mise en scène*, you know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine' and the 'tyrannical older man'.⁶ 'You know' that the form of this writing will be 'involved', accommodating 'tales within tales, changes of narrators'.⁷ 'You also know' that 'certain preoccupations will be aired', such as 'doubles', 'unnatural echoes' or 'silences', 'the poisonous effects of guilt and shame', and 'apparitions from the past'.⁸ Sedgwick's aim is to show that these conventions depend on guiding structures of mirroring and inversion. What animates Gothic literature is the line of resistance that challenges a 'symmetrical fixity' between levels of experience or between identifications, and which concentrates on the indeterminacy of their partition.⁹ Rather than the 'vertical, or authorial, imposition of symmetry', however, Gothic conventions exemplify a 'horizontal insinuating slippage' that renders arbitrary the distinction between 'dream and reality and between self-contained character and self-contained character'.¹⁰ At the level of temporality, such structures produce a levelling effect which confuses the distinction between past and present. It is thus, for Sedgwick, the uncertain dividing line between counterparts which provides the Gothic its distinctive relationship to the what-will-happen and the what-has-happened.

Almost everything that I want to argue for *That Monster* depends on Kolbowski's decision to double the video without sound. Encountered consecutively, the two halves of the video interfere, or rather overlap, with each other. For example, the silence of the mute viewing is not at all how it might have sounded had one not already listened to Glass' score, after which the absence of music is all the more present, and the memory of the soundtrack is left hanging in the mind, impressed upon the silence. Reciprocally, when the video loops around again the soundtrack is intensified. In repeating the edit, making what was once a whole into merely a part, the artist retroactively plays with how we receive what we have just seen and what we think we know about it. The repeat modifies the preceding movement from a contained sequence to a unit in another larger and more disorienting pattern; it subtracts from the video by adding to it, it familiarises by making strange. By removing the soundtrack, Kolbowski draws into focus the contingency between word, image, and sound on which the coherence of the first half of *That Monster* had been founded. Without sound, the relationships between image and text (or writing) come to seem all the more provisional, the basis of the allegory all

⁴ Exposed from the observation that 'everything living dies for internal reasons – becomes inorganic once again', Freud installs death as a constitutive agency within the nucleus of being. Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', 1920, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 38.

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 9.

⁶ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 9.

⁷ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 9.

⁸ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 9.

⁹ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 34.

¹⁰ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, pp. 31-2.

the more uncertain. In playing the video back to us, Kolbowski seems to be asking us to reconsider any definite ideas we may have been tempted to form from it. This is all to say that the repeat constitutes an order which both directs and destabilizes the interpretation of the work; every end is only a beginning, every reading a re-reading.

In the act of re-reading – of a novel, an essay, even a shopping list – one is forced to reckon perhaps less with what one already knows about it from the first reading than with what one doesn't, or what one didn't, want to know about it. We are forced to reckon with different times of reading, which impose on the act of interpretation the question of foreknowledge and foreclosure. Something may be given back to the reader that they may be unaware of having lost. Such instances might stir a dim or unsettling awareness of the unconscious editing of past and present perception. The scene where the Monster is confounded by his own reflection at the riverbank may be uncanny, according to Freud's definition of the phenomenon, because it suggests operations of self-censure or erasure. In glitching this short sequence three times, Kolbowski's handling underscores how the encounter the moment stages is not with something new or foreign but with something seen before, with the estrangement, by repression, of something familiar and old.¹¹ Instead of being seduced by his reflection the Monster appears as if a puppet on the string of an involuntary repetition. Introducing for the first time the principle of repetition-compulsion in *The Uncanny*, Freud provides a conceptual (and narrative) setting for repression which resonates with Kolbowski's interest in producing an allegory about liberal shock and horror at a political situation and what was known or should have been known about its gestation. In her comments the artist has suggested the video invites the audience to see themselves in the Monster, to 'own' their part of what they most abhor and fear.¹² Coupled with the demonstrative pronoun 'that' in the title of the work, the word 'monster' derives etymologically from the French *montrer* and the Latin *demonstrare* – to demonstrate, to show and equip with knowledge. There is a sense, then, in which we can think of Kolbowski's monster as a figure for the surfacing of knowledge which is always in some way already known, and for a perception that has, for some reason or other, been refused.

Freud differentiated repression from *verleugnung* or disavowal, a term which emerges in his work soon after the publication of *The Uncanny*, on account of the psychotic structure of the latter.¹³ Unlike repression, where knowledge is held back from consciousness, disavowal is a

¹¹ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 1919, in *SE*, vol. 17, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 241. In this paper Freud lays the ground for the introduction of his theory of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 'another work, already completed' on which he was working concurrently (p. 238).

¹² 'It's much more threatening', Kolbowski writes, 'to think that we may have been implicated in creating [this monster], even unknowingly. Now, few culturally progressive or socially empathic people want to own that monstrosity, which is understandable. But in developing the script for *That Monster* I reached a point where I realized that I had to focus on using only first and second person pronouns – I and you – and I removed the voice of the scientist. I did this so as to ... implicate the spectator of the film in the instability of the pronouns used in the titles and intertitles'. Kolbowski, 'That Monster'.

¹³ Whereas a certain amount of repression is necessary throughout life, Freud warns that disavowal is 'a process which in the mental life of children seems neither uncommon nor very dangerous but which in an adult would mean the beginning of a psychosis'. Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', 1925, in *SE*, vol. 19, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 253.

mechanism which aims at overriding the perceptual apparatus. It involves a writing over of one reality with another preferred version. The psychic description of an event may still occur – it will not have been wiped away, but rather, read differently. Both terms, however, deal in the unassimilable and the irreconcilable, categories that were also fundamental to Paul de Man’s influential theorization of allegory as a mode of reading which is always a misreading. For de Man, the definite quantum of prior knowledge on which allegory depends introduces into the act of reading an ‘interference’ between the metaphorical and the literal. Just as Kolbowski’s script destabilizes any fixed identification, allegory forestalls the possibility that a text may be ‘closed off by a final reading’ and instead remains open to alternative interpretations which ensure ‘the unreadability of the prior narration’.¹⁴ ‘Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading’.¹⁵ Thus, allegorical knowledge, de Man suggests, is something of a contradiction, a sign for the impossibility of reading or knowing conclusively.

In making us begin again, by pointing to a source that has been displaced, *That Monster* arranges the ‘juxtaposition of different temporal layers’ that characterizes the allegorical, and its interplay between the ‘prospective’ and the ‘retrospective’, which for de Man so ‘resembles that of reading, or rather that of re-reading’.¹⁶ Yet without the assurance of a sovereign intention or interpretation, the fundamentally allegorical question – ‘whether a literary text is about that which it describes, represents or states’ – can never be fully resolved.¹⁷ These destabilizing effects led Craig Owens to identify the allegorical as an impulse which runs through the deconstructive energies of much postmodernist work. ‘Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent’, he wrote in 1980, ‘but works instead to problematize the activity of reference’.¹⁸ If such frameworks are by now familiar it is worth emphasizing how the blank repeat of *That Monster* introduces an idiomatic solution to the problem of allegorical reference. The mirrored structure of the video imposes and reimposes an order upon the different times of writing and reading in which the specific arrangement of the texts yields a host of highly distinctive, if contingent, possible interpretations. Here again the presence and the absence of the soundtrack is essential. In the editing process Kolbowski was in two minds over whether to retain Glass’s music as an overlay before opting to loop both silent and soundtracked versions.¹⁹ In this sense the audio layer imposes the temporal structure of repetition in which it then participates. As a formal innovation the repeat develops strategies deployed throughout a trilogy of videos which preceded *That Monster*, wherein Kolbowski cut across certain historical moments loaded with the trauma of political violence. Ulrike Meinhoff and Rosa Luxembourg were called on, in *A Few More Howls Again* and *Like a Clap of Thunder* respectively, to occupy present crises. But as Rosalyn Deutsche has observed, in Kolbowski’s work ‘the past isn’t simply there to be recovered; past events and actions are what will have happened as history

¹⁴ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 205.

¹⁵ De Man, *Allegories*, p. 205. This passage is quoted in full by Craig Owens in the second part of his essay ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2’, *October*, vol. 13, 1980, p. 63.

¹⁶ De Man, *Allegories*, p. 57.

¹⁷ De Man, *Allegories*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Owens, ‘The Allegorical Impulse’, p. 80.

¹⁹ In correspondence with the artist.

mutates'.²⁰ To redeploy Owens' well-chosen term, past events appear as a present and ongoing *activity*, so as to make a fiction of the separateness of historical events.

In these previous videos it is through the violence visited upon the body of the artist's characters that a historical identity exceeds the bounds of self-contained personhood. But if we might locate certain dramatic effects which derive from Gothic conventions in Kolbowski's work prior to *That Monster*, the melodramatic sensibility of Whale's film and Trump's outlandishness provides an ideal combination for their intensification, even exaggeration. So given to grandiose self-narration, Trump's public image is sustained by involuted plotlines, conspiracy, and falsehoods to the extent that he might be said to exist in symmetrically opposed versions of reality. Meanwhile, an appetite to proliferate licensing deals and endorsements inflates his family name to cover a whole host of unlikely entities. Appositely, Shelley's text contains no shortage of the indeterminate partitions and quintessentially gothic attachments Kolbowski's rendering of Trump ironizes. The Monster's relationship with the doctor (Victor Frankenstein) is subsumed in the popular imagination under the single name 'Frankenstein' and they are never in this way fully apart. Elsewhere in its pages, the novel is packed with similarly indistinct and incomplete detachments. Almost every character in the plot, from the Monster to Frankenstein's friend, Henry Clerval, to his adopted sister and then bride, Elizabeth Lavenza, is always part-Frankenstein, always a shorthand for some element of his subjectivity. Consequently, there is a constant jumbling of identities, a strong theme of relation as replication. In Kolbowski's script too, the pronominal shifters resist the idea that one thing will not turn into another. Otherness within – the unconscious – destabilizes distinctions without, between 'I' and 'you', between this monster and that monster.

Joel Fineman, a key interlocutor with Owens at the time of his work on allegory, observed that psychoanalysis should be considered 'the critical response to allegory', sharing the 'same wish' and embarked 'on the same pilgrimage'.²¹ Perhaps it is therefore appropriate that Kolbowski selects for her literary source a text which invites one or two irresistible connections with the founder of psychoanalysis. To not just their contemporaries, Dr Frankenstein and Dr Freud could be found guilty to the charge of unleashing monsters. According to his detractors, Freud was an inventor of fiends and there is an inescapable sense in which both men could be said to have created their patients. In his case notes, Freud worries that his analysands resemble characters in short stories and it is undoubtedly true that Little Hans, Anna O, Dora, and the others have been given a certain pseudonymous immortality in exchange for submitting (to greater or lesser extents) to the doctor's

²⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 22. On the ways in which psychoanalysis has provided frameworks to think about temporality in Kolbowski's work see, for example, Mignon Nixon, 'On the Couch', *October*, vol. 113, 2005, pp. 71-6.

²¹ 'Psychoanalysis, especially structural psychoanalysis ... is not simply the analysis, but the extension and conclusion of the classic allegorical tradition from which it derives – which is why psychoanalysis so readily assimilates the great archetypes of allegorical imagery into its discourse: the labyrinths, the depths, the navels, the psychomachian hydraulics'. Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire', *October*, vol. 12, 1980, p. 46.

experimental methodologies.²² But if Freud the writer was anxious about displaying an overly literary temperament, he was also far more incautious in advertising the obduracy demanded by his interpretive paradigms. ‘The whole of psychoanalytic theory’, he would pronounce, ‘is in fact built up on the perception of the resistance exerted by the patient when we try to make him conscious of his unconscious’.²³ With hysteria, the pathology that Freud found most demonstrative of his early reading of psychical processes, ‘the instinctual cathexis of the repressed idea is changed into the innervation of the symptom’.²⁴ In other words, it is the resistive desire to not know that underlies the symptom which thus appears as a meaning that has been displaced or deferred. It is in its presentation, then, that an illness demands not just diagnostic attention but also to be narrated. Insofar as it displaces the referent or mystifies an idea by means of conversion or displacement, the symptom can be thought of as a figure in the text of an analysis which operates by pulling spatial and temporal dimensions inside out, the past over the present, the psychic into the somatic. I would suggest that something of this occurs through Kolbowski’s decision to claim Shelley’s novel as a text that is somehow in the present and in her use of Whale’s film as an interface, crucially, as a text which makes a previous text legible in a way it may not have been before. Indeed, instances of rewriting or overwriting form a connective thread through all these texts, from Percy Shelley’s revisions of Mary Shelley’s manuscript, through to Kolbowski’s decision to borrow from the sequel to Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein*. With each remove the re-writing gives a different voice to the story after the fact, sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine. *That Monster* thus performs a kind of mediation between a set of aesthetic and narrative surfaces, as well as the variety of characters we have available with which to re-activate and re-purpose them.

How, then, might the video’s complex engagements with textual interplay advise the way we engage its allegorical messaging? Conceiving the palimpsestic composition of *That Monster* in decidedly literal terms, as a compositing of different materials and temporalities – novel, celluloid strip, digital file, 1818, 1935, or 2018 – might encourage one to think in layers rather than lines. Such a perspective invokes a geological rather than a genealogical framework which calls to mind a conspicuously Freudian usage of allegory. With a relentless consistency, spatial metaphors drawn from geological imagery provided Freud with a way of organising the relationship between past and present, the unconscious and consciousness. Thinking in layers, he would explain the aetiology of the neuroses as processes of sedimentation and describe his own task as that of being able to ‘probe’ and ‘penetrate’ through to the ‘underlying bedrock’ of repressed material.²⁵ Such was Freud’s enthusiasm for geological and mineralogical analogies that Josef Breuer would worry about the reification of these metaphors, fretting that over time it might not be possible to think psychoanalytically

²² In a much-referenced passage, Freud writes: ‘It still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science’. Freud, ‘Fräulein Elisabeth von R, Case Histories from Studies on Hysteria’, 1893, in *SE*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 160.

²³ Freud, ‘New Introductory Lectures On Psycho-Analysis’, 1933, in *SE*, vol. 22, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 74.

²⁴ Freud, ‘The Unconscious’, 1915, in *SE*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Press, 1957), p. 184.

²⁵ Ernest S. Wolf and Sue S. Nebel, ‘Psychoanalytic Excavations: The Structure of Freud’s Cosmography’, *American Imago*, vol. 35, 1978, p. 187.

outside the language of stratification. While psychoanalysis remains a practice of alternative descriptions, Breuer's concerns miss the extent to which such images were already embedded in Freud's world-view prior to the advances into psychoanalytic method achieved with the *Studies in Hysteria* of 1895. An affinity for thinking in layers and a preoccupation with images drawn from geology, as Ernest Wolf and Sue Nebel have shown, can be tracked back to Freud's teenage aspirations to become a natural scientist.²⁶ These origins might make it possible to suggest that metaphors of stratification can be thought of almost as a register of self-analysis for Freud, not merely because they would seem to link present to past intellectual ambitions but because they provided conceptual vehicles for organising and reorganising his curiosity about the relationship between wanting and knowing.

A geoaesthetic imaginary also underlies a resurgent scholarly interest in Owens' first groundbreaking essay on allegory. *Earthwords*, published in 1979, has been a crucial point of reference for recent attempts to model practices of interdisciplinary and intertextual art making and art writing that harness the metaphorical potential of the Anthropocene for galvanising environmentally engaged cultural practice.²⁷ In these accounts, it is through the interhuman imperatives that mark our present geological moment that the aesthetic, temporal, and ethical agencies of an allegorical impulse can be realized. By this view, certain intertextual and polyphonic modes distinctive of postmodern art and criticism offer templates for bringing into contact human and natural histories and dependencies. The decentering of the human subject involved in these strategies seems to cue from the reciprocal connection that Owens identifies in his text between the removal of the art object from the gallery to the remote landscape, as inaugurated by works such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, and the conceptual displacement 'of art from the visual to the verbal field' enacted by the same artist's writings.²⁸ This correspondence between textual and geological fields is pinpointed by Owens in a then recently published collection of Smithson's writings. Declaring that what these "'earthwords" disclose is the disjunctive atomizing principle which, according to Walter Benjamin, defines allegory', Owens establishes the texts not as adjunct to Smithson's sculptural practice but at its core.²⁹ Nevertheless if Smithson reads the written word in visual terms, it is in a resolutely geological register:

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits

²⁶ Wolf and Nebel, 'Psychoanalytic Excavations', pp. 178-202.

²⁷ For Liz Linden and Susan Ballard, artists such as Smithson, Nancy Holt, Ana Mendieta, Daisy Leura Nakamarra and others provide a marker for realising the creative possibilities of human entanglement and environmental transformation: 'Postmodernism and art writing – meaning works that creatively engage in interdisciplinary, intertextual, or polyphonic modes – are therefore, by our definition, Anthropocenic'. Linden and Ballard, 'Art Writing and Allegory in the Anthropocene', *October*, vol. 175, 2021, p. 96. See also, 'Spiral Jetty, Geoaesthetics, and Art: Writing in the Anthropocene', *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 6, 2019, pp. 142-61.

²⁸ Owens, 'Earthwords', *October*, vol. 10, 1979, pp. 120-30.

²⁹ Owens, 'Earthwords', p. 124.

and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.³⁰

I have dwelled on the peculiar connection geological allusions illuminate between the discourse of psychoanalysis and the reconceptualization of allegory within postmodernist art theory for two reasons. The first is to underline the way that a shared critical imperative – Fineman’s ‘pilgrimage’ – can be illustrated by methodological investments in ideas of layers and layering. The significance of which for *That Monster* can be attributed not just to the formal means by which Kolbowski constructs the video as a compositing of different textual artefacts but through the artist’s comment that: ‘my motivation in *That Monster* was to situate Trump as a symptom of decades of economic injustice and look through an allegorical lens at one effect of those decades’.³¹ Thus, Kolbowski suggests that the Monster finds its allegorical form, its shape, through the increments of decades-long economic inequality and debasement caused by the ‘the obscenely uneven effects of globalized neoliberalism’.³² In her script, the artist is clear about the psychic imprint of these effects: it is ‘shame’ that has animated this monster, ‘shame’ which has consumed him. This internalised violence marks the casualties of systemic economic privation, an affliction which stalks ‘the poor and precarious’, those who ‘don’t deserve attention or mediation, [who] are not entitled to the basic necessities of daily life’.³³ Thus for Kolbowski, as for Judith Butler, shame is elemental to Trump’s psychic field. Indeed, Butler has written of how:

There is no need to speculate about Trump’s childhood, or to subscribe to a biological notion of the death drive, to recognise in his public display a compulsion to do himself in, or to do in the world that will not let him have his way. Shamelessness is the vector through which the death drive works. If he is not shamed by the accusations against him, they do not ‘work’ and the accusations become fainter and weaker, less and less audible in the public sphere. At the same time, on display for the world to see is that Trump’s repeated and compulsive defiance of shame and rejection shows just how imperilling those spectres are for him.³⁴

One can’t miss, in Butler’s telling, what is at stake psychically in the dynamic link between Trump’s narcissism and the scripting of his public image. Shame is depicted in a negative aspect, the apparent absence of shame manifesting as a kind of haunting shadow. Perversely, by such performances, Kolbowski has argued, shame ignites ‘a vicarious pleasure in identifying with Trump’s self-victimization and his lashing out against all his perceived enemies’.³⁵ In this sense Trump externalises the yearning to triumph over one’s debasement,

³⁰ Quoted in Owens, ‘Earthwords’, p. 124.

³¹ Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

³² Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

³³ Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’. In a further comment, Kolbowski extends her analysis to include the essential animus of Trumpian identity politics – the exertion of a ‘natural right’ over ‘women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, nonhumans’. Such perspectives are also essential in recognizing the white nationalism at the centre of Trump’s economic pitch; that grievance be understood in racial terms and restituted at the expense of the further disempowerment of other non-white Americans.

³⁴ Judith Butler, ‘Genius or Suicide: Trump’s Death Drive’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, 24 October 2019, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n20/judith-butler/genius-or-suicide>> [accessed 5 December 2019].

³⁵ Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

to summon pride in the face of incapacity, to demonstrate, as Butler writes, that ‘the law will have no power over him’.³⁶ It is in this context that we might consider the contentious implication of Kolbowski’s claim about the psychological effectiveness of a pathological character; that it is via an identification with Trump’s chaotic internal situation that a dynamic compact with his supporters is secured.³⁷

In the mood invited by Whale’s visual rhetoric, one might want to imagine that the shards of lightning at the video’s opening can be read as the spark of connection between Trump’s grandiloquent calamitousness and an inchoate sense of self amongst his base, the candescence of the charge portending the affirmation such a binding would muster. Identifications are often thought about in this way, as ameliorative or fortifying processes crucial to the development and uplift of social beings. Yet what if, as Adam Phillips has recently suggested, rather than thinking about identification as a process aimed at a solution for governing our multiplicity and the competing demands and desires which constitute us as individuals and groups – what could be considered the political aspect of identification, we asked: ‘what are our identifications a self-cure for? When I identify with someone else, or when I recognize myself in a fictional character – what am I not wanting to know about myself?’³⁸ Here, the notion of identification-as-cure is turned on its head. Instead of a demand for development, identification evinces a resistance to change, a means of getting ‘stuck’, of fixing ourselves in forms, ‘in preferred pictures’.³⁹ Identification, in this avowedly political aspect, Phillips warns, is a privileged means by which we conceal our desires from ourselves and thus a way of securing ourselves ever more firmly in sickness. From this perspective one can think of Frankenstein’s monster, one of popular culture’s most enduring profiles, as an analogue for Kolbowski’s suggestion that Trump represents not a break with the brutalising policies that laid the ground for his electoral appeal but their entrenchment.

Yet in allegorizing the emergence of Trump as a charismatic leader, Kolbowski suggests that to account *for* the destructiveness which he wreaks, we need an account *of* not only the external factors – the decades of economic inequality – but also the psychological dynamics which produced Trump as a symptom. For the artist, this necessitates a political and historical analysis that accommodates clinical and theoretical knowledge of the unconscious.⁴⁰ This draws me toward the other purpose I find in foregrounding a geological imaginary in the context of an allegory about psychoanalysis and Trump. In a coruscating analysis, Jonathan Crary has identified our present moment as capitalism’s terminal phase, a profoundly distinguishing feature of which, he argues, ‘is the absence of any substantive or credible

³⁶ Butler, ‘Genius or Suicide’.

³⁷ ‘One thing that makes Trump so resilient is that there is so much for his base to identify with. He’s a shamefully bad businessman? Well, he’s one of us. He traffics in conspiracy theories? Well, there’s something out there that’s rendering me unstable, even if I can’t pinpoint it’. Kolbowski, ‘That Monster’.

³⁸ Adam Phillips, *On Getting Better* (London: Penguin; Random House, 2021), p. 11.

³⁹ Phillips, *On Getting Better*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Thus, a key aim of the video, Kolbowski has stated, was to ‘insert into the Left a conversation about the psyche’. Quoted in Sasha Archibald, ‘Silvia Kolbowski: That Monster: An Allegory’, *The White Review*, January 2020, <<https://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/silvia-kolbowski-monster-allegory/>> [accessed 17 February 2020].

promises of a better future'.⁴¹ As 'the current unravelling of the earth system' continues apace, gone even is the 'pretence that scientific and technical development is aligned with purposiveness or needs'.⁴² Thinking in layers, Crary highlights how neoliberal infrastructures have accelerated 'the flaying of the earth's life giving and protective layerings ... the burning of the Amazon forests, the bleaching of coral reefs, the strangling of great rivers with hydro-electric dams, and the massive loss of temperate grasslands'.⁴³ In place of a liveable future, he argues, there has emerged a widespread 'nihilistic willingness to let the world lapse'.⁴⁴ It is notable that, in this phrasing, inertia is carried on the back of desire; nihilism is driven by a form of 'will', as though, in our 'numbing conformity' to systems that we know to be malign, we are fixed between two wants, or two wills.⁴⁵ To be helpless in the face of the desire not to help ourselves, a desire which we cannot avoid being driven by, is just the kind of helplessness that Freud intended by the concept of repression: that which you cannot help but do even, or especially, if you don't want to do it. Helplessness is thereby configured in dynamic terms, as a negative desire not to know which leads to a misreading of our past, to the covering up of our own stories, to retaining ourselves in preferred pictures.

Crary's impassioned polemic foregrounds the way that sociocidal and ecocidal policies are often the same side of the same coin. This insight is essential for expanding the dimensions and implications of the question Butler asks: 'How are suicide and survival linked in the psychic field we call "Trump?"'⁴⁶ Reminding us that 'the death drive, in Freud, is manifested in actions characterised by compulsive repetition and destructiveness', Butler highlights some of its distinctive and fugitive forms: 'the deterioration of the human organism in its effort to return to a time before individuated life; the nightmarish repetition of traumatic material without resolution; the externalisation of destructiveness through potentially murderous behaviour'.⁴⁷ To my mind, the death drive is indispensable for grasping the inner and outer destructiveness *That Monster* dramatizes within the terms of reference the artist prescribes. Much of the dramatic force of the video seems to issue from the way a principle of destruction is figured as a dynamic and transitional value which structures and restructures relationships between people and things. Yet it is a measure of the work's suggestiveness for thinking critically and reflectively about our present crises that it opens questions which exceed the political analysis from which it emerged.

As I have already suggested, it is with certain characteristics ascribed to the death drive, in silence and repetition, that the order of the video is asserted. Yet far from enclosing a definitive interpretation, I want to suggest that these guiding structures recommend we remain in a subjunctive rather than declarative mood. One can take, for example, the instruction of the repeat as to read again and therefore, perhaps, to read differently. The artist gives no settled identity to the 'I', the 'you', and the 'that'. In the provisional reading offered

⁴¹ Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World* (London: Verso, 2022), p. 53.

⁴² Crary, *Scorched Earth*, p. 58.

⁴³ Crary, *Scorched Earth*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Crary, *Scorched Earth*, pp. 118-19.

⁴⁵ Crary, *Scorched Earth*, p. 118.

⁴⁶ Butler, 'Genius or Suicide'.

⁴⁷ Butler, 'Genius or Suicide'.

here I prefer to take *That Monster* as a tool for speculation about the diverse vectors through which the death drive operates and the social forms, processes, and rhythms in which it manifests. In this way, the ambivalence and ambiguities which animate *That Monster* seem less to do with determining a fixed identity than with staging an enquiry into the pathological structure of repetition, into mechanisms of refusal and erasure in the narration of self and world. In present culture the specific forms these take are manifold, ranging, as Crary observes, from ‘the ongoing reconceptualization of human life into a computational model for data processing and capital accumulation’, to the anomic disarray which opportunes the electoral retail of accelerated inequality, division, and immiseration.⁴⁸ As Kolbowski remarks of those horrified at the emergence of Trump and his enduring appeal of Trump to millions of Americans, recognizing our numbing conformity to these systems is a story not many of us want to own.

⁴⁸ Crary, *Scorched Earth*, p. 67.