

005 ON THE OCCASION OF
SILVIA KOLBOWSKI
WHO WILL SAVE US?
KUNSTHAUS GLARUS
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Interview with Silvia Kolbowski by Melanie Ohnemus
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MO Can you briefly summarize what your new video work *Who will save us?* is about?

SK What I have been telling people who ask is that it's a video about the intersection of neoliberalism and the psychical formation of groups—not to say mobs—in allegorical form.

MO You chose two films to work with: *Metropolis* (1927) directed by Fritz Lang and THX 1138 (1971) directed by George Lucas. In which way did the combining of content and visual language in the two films seem productive to you? How would you describe the relevance they still hold when analyzing contemporary political events, power structures, and popular reactions toward them?

SK I chose the two films because they represent problematic social and economic regimes in two different temporal registers that in my mind imply a third register—the present. There is something in that temporal distance from the present that appeals to me because it allows me to be direct with the historical material and yet produce a more haunting and less didactic resonance for the present-day spectator.

I have in the past re-utilized films or historic figures from earlier decades to tell stories about the present. But with this project I did not set out to do that. I spent over a year doing research into group dynamics from a psychoanalytic perspective because I felt that the role played by groups was a very troubling aspect of current political phenomena in the context of mass populations exploited by decades of unregulated capitalism. These are mass populations that are clearly unaware of how they are formed by this economic regime and are prone to project blame based on popular rhetoric. In the US, and elsewhere, some of these group dynamics have reached a dangerous, often violent pitch. Even most of those who feel themselves outside of these dynamics—by virtue of economic, educational, and other advantages—tend to be in the dark about how they are being positioned by neoliberal regimes in relation to other groups.

I was having trouble thinking visually about the story I wanted to tell, and I cannot remember how I decided on *Metropolis*, but I suspect that I was googling something relevant to the project and was led to it. I was somewhat astonished at how much *Metropolis* resonated with the present—the story of consolidated wealth at the very top, and mass drudgery and precarity—and nascent explosiveness—at the bottom, literally below ground. But most importantly, *Metropolis* is also a story of psychical disavowal. And

for me, disavowal is the most dangerous component of reactionary populism. I knew from the research phase that I wanted the register of the digital to be present in the film, because the story that *Metropolis* tells needs to be updated by the neoliberal regime of the algorithm. Regarding *THX1138*, I was not so much taken with its story of top-down control of human intimacy, but rather with its very early emphasis on the pervasiveness and ills of the digital, and the repeated references to the repression of psychical suffering and the medicating of anxiety through drugs and consumption. *THX1138* is not a brilliant film, by any means, but it has rather amazing components—particularly the way it registers the trauma imposed by a digital regime. And it is a prophetic film, given that the 1971 film was a full-length remake of a student film Lucas made in 1967, and the actual computer chip was not invented until the early 1970s, although the digital realm existed long before that. As you pointed out to me, both films belong to the science fiction genre. And it's interesting to note that they both use a spatial metaphor regarding what takes place below ground. One thing I must point out is that I don't agree with the moral that *Metropolis* arrives at to "resolve" the conflicts and suffering produced by capitalism. Nor do I align myself with everything implied in *THX1138*. I convey my disagreements through my re-editing.

MO Could you please elaborate a bit more on the problematic narratives you see in both films, and how these may contribute, possibly in a contradictory way, to a repetition of specific normative narratives about the organization of societies?

SK *Metropolis* is a moral tale, and it offers the heart as an antidote to capitalism's sadism toward workers—as stated outright in the film, the heart should be the mediator between the brain and the hand. Aside from the fact that one would have to view that possibility with a jaundiced eye, given the extreme degree of class polarization in the film, what's missing from this equation is the psyche, because all human beings have a sadistic drive that, untempered, produces suffering, for the self and others. I edited out what I found naïve about *Metropolis*, and I formed a new narrative arc that highlighted the displays of psychical disavowal in the film. What I mean by psychical disavowal in the film is the resistance—by both the wealthy overlord and his near-indentured workers—to doing the work of understanding the complex ways in which they have been made to assume their normative social roles, the ways in which suffering has been normalized for the workers. As Slavoj Žižek has written about regressive populism, a refusal to do the work of understanding the complexity of an exploitative situation results in a fetishistic and paranoid projection, and the projection of culpability onto a figure or group *out there*, who must be destroyed for the suffering to stop.

THX1138 casts technology as having a categoric capacity to suppress human emotion and contact. I don't disagree with this too much! But the film is not capable, once it takes this totalizing position, of locating or even insinuating the deeper sources of exploitation. On the one hand, it emphasizes totalizing digital power and mass compliance. And yet, it also offers the possibility of love and physical touch as a redemptive force. Rather than employ *THX1138* in a narrative arc, I inserted fragments from it into *Metropolis* to try to episodically jolt the spectator into a more contemporary register regarding work, the body, and the psyche.

MO Would you say these films are allegories? Is this a term that could be made productive when talking about your formal approach?

SK Both films are allegorical in that they tell overt stories that uncover greater narratives. In my work, an allegorical approach has the virtue of avoiding a direct pedagogical approach, which can easily generate resistance in the spectator—often in didactic work, the spectator feels castigated—while at the same time allowing me to implicate the present-day spectator in the stories being told. That’s because allegory never tells only one story. It can cross temporalities as well as other representational categories. Regarding allegory (in word or image), even the most resistant spectator, or reader, is left with a suspicion that there’s more to the story than is superficially apparent. That is the haunting that I’m after.

MO What are your thoughts in general about the ways that societies repeat problematic sequences in history? Why does it seem so hard for us to learn from them? Is it because we are not clear about our objectives?

SK I believe it comes back to the psyche’s capacity for disavowal, denial, and other unconscious processes, such as the distancing produced by psychical projection and problematic identifications. And it is also due to how even today societies are unwilling to acknowledge the role of the psyche in the political realm. It is astounding that even in the age of Trump, when the unconscious operations in the relations of demagogues and mobs are screaming to be understood, no one in the so-called “serious” political or media realms will even allude to it. For another example of this psychical dynamic, what distinguishes globalized neoliberal capitalism from earlier modern forms of capitalism is neoliberalism’s deep reliance on the shaming and humiliating of its very victims. Once populations are caught in this psychical web, there is little clarity possible on a mass level regarding culprits, especially in a society that denies the unconscious.

MO What sort of process went into the making of your film, *Who will save us?*

SK Every time I start a new project, I spend a lot of time thinking about the current moment in the culture, and what feels most urgent to address through the work, especially in this dire moment of history. I do research, which can involve reading all kinds of texts—theoretical, popular, fictional—and I also observe media and shifts in social behavior and thinking. It’s a process of situating the work, but without an initial intention. I let the work grow out of the research, observation, and thinking. And I also consider how various types of existing cultural production, which I cannot control, would inevitably frame my work. And, integrally, I think about the spectator that I would like the work to create.

For this work, I concluded that I wanted to address group psychical processes in relation to demagogic leaders because both have played such a role in political shifts toward autocracy in many countries in the last years. That led me to read the work of, among others, Wilfred Bion (1897–1979), a psychoanalyst who developed an influential approach to group dynamics. He theorized three “basic assumptions” made by dysfunctional groups—and groups can be as large as, for example, massive blocks of voters in a country. These basic

assumptions are played out through psychical dynamics in the group, and result in members creating or following leaders that reinforce the dysfunction of the group. The basic assumptions Bion identified involve the acting out of fantasies in three ways: through dependency, fight-flight, and pairing. This acting out occurs because members of the group resist the understanding of their own psychical behavior. It's too subtle a thesis to elaborate succinctly, but it helped me to understand more about how groups can organize themselves in ways that undercut their own interests and allow them to follow unstable leaders. Such group dynamics, of course, never operate in isolation from the rest of the culture.

My research involves a lot of theory for artwork that has a non-theoretical life! But once I start to make the artwork, I set theory aside and work with the languages of the mediums I've chosen.

MO In that regard, you have said that sometimes in public discussions about your work there is a tendency to focus on political discourse, but that for you "form" is equally important.

SK I think it was Victor Burgin who in the late 1970s pointed out that the politics of form was as important as the form of politics. As an artist, my mediums are images, sounds, and time, as much as words and narrative. Silence can also be a powerful language, as can contiguity, or, for example, or its absence. The psyche is fluent in many languages, not just that of an overt narrative approach.

MO You once said in a discussion that your films have the potential to affect the viewer unconsciously over time. Could you please elaborate on this?

SK Much earlier in my practice, I used to think that I only had a brief opportunity as an artist to affect a spectator, and that the spectator left the space of exhibition with a formed reaction. But it was through my own psychoanalysis over the years that I realized that is not how the unconscious works, and that one can experience an artwork and have it affect one over time, and, maybe more importantly, even without being overtly aware of it. In this regard, one relevant concept for me is the Freudian term *Nachträglichkeit*—in French the *après-coup*, in English the term afterwardsness—which signifies a belated understanding, or a re-interpretation of something in the past, from a present perspective. An event or experience in the present can color or allow reinterpretation of what one thought one knew about an event in the past.

MO In your solo exhibition, we are showing two films [*Missing Asher* (2019) and *Who will save us?* (2022)] as a curated pair. They are shown in two separate spaces, each occupying stages in their own right. And formally they appear very different. But they can also be seen to share many concerns. What are your thoughts on the relationship between these two films?

SK I was very happy when you selected *Missing Asher* to accompany the new work in the exhibition, because I thought it was an intriguing choice in not being an obvious partner to

Who will save us?, which uses historical film material in an allegorical manner, as opposed to *Missing Asher*, which uses a documentary approach to re-presenting an older artwork of my own by tracing its trajectory through a period of nineteen years. *Missing Asher* even includes my own voice as narrator, which is the only work in which I have done that, as I usually prefer to be represented in my work indirectly.

However, it's not surprising that there are many connections between both works, as they both spring from my recurrent interests. Both works trace paths of destruction wrought by neoliberalism, but at two different scales—a very large-scale in *Who will save us?* and a very small-scale in *Missing Asher*. I think that's what gives me so much pleasure in having them shown in the same exhibition—the juxtaposition of a grand, historic scale, and the more intimate scale of the life of one artwork over time.

Related texts:

Wilfred Bion, *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*, (1968).

Conrad Stephen Chrzanowski, “The Group’s Vulnerability to Disaster: Basic Assumption and Work Group Mentalities Underlying Trump’s 2016 Election,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (August 2019).

Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009).