

WHENCE THIS CRAZY POLISH FILM, *SCUM MANIFESTO*?

(2017) 28 minutes, co-produced with Joanna Krakowska, in Polish with English subtitles

<https://www.facetsdvd.com/Scum-Manifesto-p/dv102403.htm>



"Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex."

So begins the infamous 1967 text, *SCUM Manifesto*, by Valerie Solanas – best known as the woman who shot Andy Warhol, and the author of this infamous text. This Polish-language version is an exact replica of the French film made by feminist Carole Roussopoulos and actress Delphine Seyrig, who performed a French translation of about 12 essential paragraphs, line by line, and typed it up – on camera, in 1976. (Their excuse, or conceit – there was not yet a translation of SCUM published in France.) As they read and type, phrase by phrase the text emerges as a catalyzing provocation toward the de-colonialization of the female mind, yet today.

But from whence *this* crazy Polish film, *Scum Manifesto* about Valerie Solanas's famous text of the same name? Here's what happened... a string of accidents and good timing, protected by the good graces of the mothers of the world.

A few years back I convinced my good friends and colleagues, Sherry Milner and Ernie Larson, to produce a DVD collection of many of the extraordinary films they had sourced and curated at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival in 1988. Most of these, ranging from France to Chiapas, Mexico, from Serbia to China, were strongly provocative toward a kind of short, non-fiction, political cinema – I call them "post-realist" films. Together these films constitute an alternative history of short-form, experimental, radical non-fiction media, from 1914 up to the present, which has at times been blocked, repressed, or censored. We agreed that a collection of these films warranted wide distribution. I remember saying at the time that if I had had my hands on these shorts, I would have shown one in every documentary film class I taught. And I would have pushed my production

students towards one or the other of these film's radical strategies, in order to make more useful films than the typical documentary form, with its sad dependence on the "pedigree of the real".

That's how the DVD collection *Disruptive Film: Everyday Resistance to Power*, was birthed. Volume One is available from Facets Multimedia, and Volume Two is on the way.

But *SCUM*? One of the films Sherry and Ernie showed me was a French film made in 1976 by two feminists: a Swiss filmmaker, Carole Roussopoulos, primarily known for her pioneering early documentary films of the women's liberation movement in France, and the actress Delphine Seyrig (*Last Year at Marienbad*, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, and fifty more). Their film offered a large excerpt from the writer Valerie Solanas' 1967 radical text, *SCUM Manifesto*. In the film Seyrig is slowly translating the *SCUM* text into French, phrase by phrase, and another actress, (perhaps Roussopoulos) sitting across the table, is typing it up, bit by bit. A TV is situated between them playing French newsreel clips, without sound: a terrorist incident in Argentina; some troops marching somewhere; battleships plying the ocean; a peace march by the Catholic and Protestant women of Belfast, scorned by the IRA as betrayers of the cause – that is, the news of the world as produced and told by men. Every now and then one of them turns up the sound and the two performers watch for a minute or two, then go back to the job at hand. *SCUM* was my favorite film of the *Disruptive Film* collection. We tried but failed to secure the rights to include it on the first DVD. Alas.

I had read Solanas' *SCUM* text back in the 1970's and found it rollickingly hilarious and wildly over the top and provocative, and preposterous, as many manifestos are. It was a great read, a literary/political thriller, as Solanas propounds her theory that the male is a wannabe woman yet a helpless perpetuator of female oppression. She argues that women can do without men entirely – can procreate, can change labor relations, and can fully enjoy themselves in a world without men. (*SCUM* stands for The Society for Cutting Up Men. Critics tell us that Solanas said that she wasn't actually advocating this violent activity – that *SCUM* was just a literary device.) The text, which Solanas first mimeographed and sold on the street, was later lost, and then forgotten, until she put three bullets into Andy Warhol in 1968 and almost killed him. She turned herself in and defended herself in court. The press took her for a looney and she spent three years in jail. Later she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. *SCUM* was first published by Olympia Press. Later came Canadian director Mary Harron's 1996 film, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, which brought Solanas back into history, for a moment. Then she seemed to disappear again. In the mid-1970s, in New York City, Solanas was "apparently homeless". She died in California in 1988 at the age of 52. But *SCUM* survived has been translated into over a dozen languages and excerpted in several feminist anthologies.

One day in the editing room I began musing about why, just then in 1967, Solanas, pissed as hell at men and their hold on power and control of women, could imagine and project a new world, a world without men. The

feminist movement was just getting going and the forms it was taking and the language being used was pissing her off. English professor Dana Heller has argued that Solanas was "very much aware of feminist organizations and activism", but that she "had no interest in participating in what she often described as 'a civil disobedience luncheon club.'" Heller also wrote that Solanas could "reject mainstream liberal feminism for its blind adherence to cultural codes of feminine politeness and decorum which the SCUM Manifesto identifies as the source of women's debased social status." Recent history proves Solanas was on to something

The 1976 French film, *SCUM Manifesto*, brought Solanas' text back to me, powerfully, and quite differently. Because of the phrase-by-phrase performance, the text is slowed down significantly, and one considers each and every idea – one tries it on, piece by piece, now in the present tense of the film time. The rollicking hilarity is gone, and now the manifesto reads as a highly intelligent and careful discourse on the oppressive lies of the patriarchy. Sometimes one muses, "Oh no! I know some men that are not pathetic, not ogres, nothing like that..." but this changes nothing of the reality of the current situation of women. It arouses memories of one's sense of insufficiency, and all the labors women perform to overcome it, so we can be attractive to men. Solanas makes a strong case to replace Freud's "penis envy" by women into "pussy envy" by men. The film arouses old feminist impulses to change the terms of gender... to imagine one's intelligence and potential again, to dream of gender freedom. This I trust.

"But from whence a new *SCUM*," Milos Stehlik asks me, "and why now?"

I answer, *Especially now, now more than ever*. Here we are. Feminism was almost near dead as an active political movement (before 6/21/2017, that is) except perhaps for the struggle for women's reproductive rights. We are still watching ourselves: eyebrow threading, breast enlargement, push up bras and 6 inch spike heels are back, higher than ever. Consider John Berger's lines from *Ways of Seeing*: "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping." At the least, the *SCUM Manifesto* is a tool for ending the continuous self-watching. It's an invigorating text. It invigorates me.

What most women seem to understand as a feminist act – voting for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election to become the first woman president of the U.S. – was a limited gesture, and failed. I don't vote by gender, and moreover what Hillary did to sabotage the truly progressive and feminist Bernie Sanders' campaign was in full view and despicable. So yes, Solanas' feminist imagination is necessary again, especially now, as Planned Parenthood is demonized by the right and clinics are shut down all over the country. Women are 51% of the population – 51% of the potential source of creative genius and nearly 100% of child producing and nurturing. If women are losing their personal rights and control over their own bodies, if women are raising ill-timed, unwanted children because abortion is unavailable to them, then the books, films, music, science and everything else they could have produced, including well-nurtured children, are snuffed out. And so we perform the *SCUM Manifesto* again.

But whence a *Polish SCUM*, and why today? Of course, it's a long story. In 2014 I had published a long, highly critical article about Joshua Oppenheimer's film, *The Act of Killing* on *Indiewire*. It was called *Killing the Documentary* and I wrote it because almost all the world's critics and festival programmers were praising the Oppenheimer film as the avatar of the "new documentary". I had walked out of the first screening in New York, angry and feeling falsely addressed by the films' proffered intimacy with men who had murdered a million "communists" back in 1967, the death squads of Medan, Indonesia, organized and backed by the CIA. I was sure that *The Act of Killing* could not be the avatar of the "new documentary" and was moved to write – to put out a lonely voice against this almost universal praise. At first I wrote it for some cinema journal's issue on "artivism", a sort of new, arty documentary practice that makes political issues films look good, arty, or sexy, often without any information or useful ideas. My friend Milos Stehlik of *Facets Multimedia* convinced me to put my critique online at *IndieWire*, which I did. Soon enough it had traveled all over the world, attracting mostly negative comments but many grateful ones too.

A filmmaker in Poland, Magda Mosiewicz read my critique, liked it, looked me up and discovered that I had made a film about the Solidarity Movement in Poland, *Far From Poland*, back in 1984. She wrote to her friend, the feminist theater historian Joanna Krakowska, then on a Fulbright in New York City, and asked her to try to find this film. Joanna found it in the New York Public Library. She watched it, then wrote me asking for a meeting. We met. She watched all my old films, and when she returned to Warsaw she convinced the Museum of Modern Art to bring me over for a retrospective. I went and *Far From Poland*, (which had never been seen in Poland because of Communist censorship), was extremely well received and ended up in a national broadcast. It also garnered me a medal, an Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, from the President of Poland, who was voted out of office five months later and replaced by the new, rightist Law and Justice party. Hah!

I showed Joanna some of the *Disruptive* films, and we bemoaned the absence of the *SCUM Manifesto* in the collection. Out of somewhere, or nowhere, I said to Joanna that we should make a replica of the film in Polish for the collection, and at the end of the film, encourage others to make their replicas in their own countries, in their own languages. So in June, 2015, I went back to Poland to shoot *SCUM Manifesto* with Joanna and Magda and two fine Polish actresses.

Magda contributed her partner's house for the set and shot the film. Joanna translated the text into Polish, found the old typewriter and TV set, and wrangled the two actresses to play the parts: Anita Sokołowska, a theatre, film and TV actress, who is also known from her engagement in social campaigns, and "the typist" Hanna Maciąg, a video artist and occasionally a successful theatre and film actress. Joanna and I studied perhaps 50 hours of Polish TV footage and selected the clips that play, sometimes with sound and at other times without. Overall, the footage portrays a Poland going through severe spasms of nationalist hysteria.

See what you think. The Polish DVD has excellent English subtitles, and again, we encourage others to take up the project and keep circulating Solanas' text, in their own countries, and in their own languages. We owe an enormous debt to the French filmmakers' for giving us back *SCUM*, making it comprehensible, and for proposing, with their film practice, just one of a thousand ways to make a useful film. We hope you enjoy it and send it around. And we hope you get hold of Volumes 1 & 2 of *Disruptive Films* to find many more provocative non-fiction, post-realist films to learn from.

Also, I suggest that you read the *SCUM Manifesto* itself. There's a new, elegant English edition out from Verso Press, containing a superb article, "Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas" by the feminist philosopher Avital Ronell. Enjoy, refresh, and learn.

From Avital Ronell's *Deviant Payback*,

"Her decision to pinpoint women grows out of a logical promotion of what she says. If men are weak, reactive, submissive beings, destroyed by an unbreakable complicity clamping together biology and technology – if they are bound to crumble and their game is cosmically called off – then the only troubling site of interference or subterfuge belongs to woman, or women. They are the ones to be feared, the very ones who play power as so many forms of weakness, strength as masochistic fatefulness – systematically downplaying a tremendous endowment of strength. They hold the cards only to deal against themselves. This is the perversion against which Valerie lashes out."

Solanas had called for "secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females" to join her cause. But Solanas also wrote "SCUM is too impatient to hope and wait for the debrainwashing of millions of assholes". Ronell suggests it was "getting lonely as a top."

Jill Godmilow