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## **‘Sometimes the Meaning of the Text is Unclear’: Making ‘Sense’ of the *SCUM Manifesto* in a Contemporary Swedish Context**

By Katherine Harrison<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In 2003 the first Swedish translation of the well known second-wave feminist manifesto, the *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas, was published. Publication of this text became intricately involved with a number of other contemporary events in Sweden which pose questions about that country's widely perceived status as one of the most 'gender equal' in the world. In this paper, I use the text's own challenging content, provocative language and complicated history as a way into exploring its disruptive effects on Swedish society. I ask how and why the text retains its power to provoke and challenge some forty years after its initial publication, and its place in the so-called 'feminist canon'<sup>2</sup>.

*Keywords:* Sweden, Solanas, SCUM

### **Introduction**

Valerie Solanas is perhaps best known for her attempt on Andy Warhol's life. When questioned about her motives for this attack, Solanas referred to a text which she had written shortly before the incident: the *SCUM Manifesto*<sup>3</sup>. First published in 1968, the *SCUM Manifesto* is not only Solanas's justification for her actions, but also a striking example of a 'second wave' feminist text. Considering this text in light of recent discussions about intergenerational dialogue, it is important to ask what this 'second wave' manifesto has to offer to contemporary feminism. In response, I offer a contemporary rereading of this text in the Swedish context. This context offered itself as an obvious choice given my own recent relocation to Sweden and the publication of the first Swedish translation of the text just a few years ago.

The 2003 publication of the first Swedish translation of the *SCUM Manifesto* suggests a continued interest in this text, while the resulting media furore when sections of it were (mis)quoted in a television interview about gender relations in May 2005 suggests the text retains its original power to cause debate. I would like to suggest, therefore, that the *SCUM Manifesto* remains a disruptive, provocative presence nearly forty years after its initial publication, and, through a close reading of the text, to examine how these disruptive effects are achieved.

The hostile reception by both press and public to recent manifestations of the text in present day Sweden hints at an inner contradiction experienced by this apparently liberal state. Sweden is widely perceived as being the most gender equal country in Europe, a perception which Marie Nordberg uses as her starting point in the chapter 'Sweden: The gender equality paradise?', in the 2006 publication, *Men and Masculinities in Europe*:

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was initially developed for the NOI♀SE (Network Of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies in Europe) summer school in 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The manifesto is also referred to as the 'Society for Cutting Up Men' manifesto, a title which has been hotly contested, and is often attributed to the original publisher, rather than Solanas herself.

Sweden has in recent discussions of gender equality often been looked upon as a woman friendly state (Esping-Anderson, 1990). Since 1974 men in Sweden have been able to take paternity and parental leave. Sweden has gender equality laws, a Gender Equality Minister and the former Prime Minister Göran Persson has declared himself to be 'a feminist'. Today, it is considered politically incorrect for a Swedish politician to take an anti-feminist position. (213)

However, as Nordberg notes in her conclusion, while some aspects of Swedish society actively promote and practice gender equality, there remain important omissions, for example the issue of male violence:

Male violence in Swedish society is still not much considered as a gender problem. Every day there are small articles in the newspapers of women and children being abused and killed by men . . . In mass media presentations and the public discussions of the murders there was no consideration of the gender of the perpetrators or connection with ideologies of masculinity. (230)

The twin themes of violence and the body reverberate through both Solanas's manifesto and debates about feminism in contemporary Sweden.

In developing this paper, I took inspiration from Elizabeth Grosz's rereading of the body as a potent, extended, disruptive presence in order to consider how the 'body' of Solanas's text lives on and remains challenging. For example, writing in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Grosz notes that: '[b]odies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable' (xi). I suggest that the 'body' of Solanas's text retains a disruptive potential which generates 'new, surprising, unpredictable' readings and reactions. It is this potential which has ensured it remains fresh and relevant to new generations of feminists, and goes some way towards explaining the enduring interest in it. Thus, I focus here on the 'body' of the text, rather than its historical context, to offer a contemporary rereading of the manifesto. In particular, I will consider the ways in which the text resists production of a definitive reading due to its provocative content, distinctive style and the material conditions of its production. I will address each of these aspects separately, starting with the material production and moving on to language, and then content. The second part of this paper will be concerned with the reception of the publication of the first Swedish translation of *SCUM Manifesto* in 2003, situating this within the context of the 'gender equality' approach taken by Sweden in its national policies and Swedish feminism.

### **Material Production**

Readings of the *SCUM Manifesto* often provide a clear, structured introduction to this text, locating it as historical artefact and suggesting how its production may have related to Solanas's personal history and circumstances. An example of this contextualising move can be seen in the Introduction to the 1983 Matriarchy Study Group edition. However, on returning to the text more recently I have found it strangely resistant to such a clear reading for several reasons, including issues of material production, and related questions about its place in a so-called 'feminist canon'.

Firstly, as the Preface to the 1983 Matriarchy Study Group edition highlights, the manifesto has undergone significant editing during its life. Versions of the text differ from one another in length, content and publication details. This has rendered the text unstable, with no 'definitive' version in existence. For example, my copy of this edition is much

shorter than the first edition and appears to have had several sections (inadvertently?) deleted from the end of it. A simple Google search on 'full text *SCUM Manifesto*' provides numerous examples of a longer version.<sup>4</sup> (My reading will focus on the 1983 Matriarchy Study Group version of the text, although I will make occasional reference to the excerpted sections using an online full text version). In addition, commentators writing on the text date its production as either 1967 or 1968, and its original publication as either through Olympia Press or as hand-distributed copies sold by Solanas herself on the streets.<sup>5</sup> Inevitably, these material differences have resulted in multiple versions, and consequently multiple readings, of the text.

The publishers of the edition in question – The Matriarchy Study Group – offer an abbreviated version of the 'life' of the text, and of the life of the author herself, in the introduction. This move to situate the text is useful in highlighting the differences in opinion which have occurred during production of various editions of the manuscript:

She [Solanas] also says that he [Girodias, the original publisher] made many other changes in wording, though not ideas. This is not entirely true, for example, he plays down her analysis of men's non-cooperation with each other. (Introduction)

However, I would like to suggest that this act of locating the text so specifically in relation to the life of the author is potentially problematic when seeking to use this in a contemporary context. By focusing on Solanas's life the publishers return to the author as the source of definitive meaning for this text. To draw heavily on the life of the author as a way of establishing the 'meaning' of this text overlooks potential insights offered by methods such as practical criticism or deconstruction, which would help to relocate it in a new context.

It is important to consider why the publishers have chosen to contextualise the text in this way. As my title highlights, the publishers clearly found it difficult to establish a definitive meaning for the text. Could this 'need' to locate a source of meaning indicate a desire to establish a stable reading? Can we see this as a response to the multiple versions of the text in existence and its hotly contested condition? Is this a move which is given greater urgency due to the absence of the author herself? And what role does the disruptive excess of the text itself play here?

Having highlighted the material production issues which affect readings of the manifesto, I will now examine its relationship to the 'feminist canon'. The Preface and Introduction provided by the Matriarchy Study Group clearly locate the *SCUM Manifesto* as part of a 'feminist canon':

This book is an important part of our feminist heritage. We think it is very important to reprint it both for feminists who have come across it before, and also for other including younger feminists who may only have heard of it. (Introduction)

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<sup>4</sup> See for example: <http://www.feastofhateandfear.com/archives/valerie.html>, [http://reactor-core.org/SCUM Manifesto.html](http://reactor-core.org/SCUM_Manifesto.html), [http://www.womynkind.org/SCUM Manifesto.htm](http://www.womynkind.org/SCUM_Manifesto.htm), and [http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/e-sermons/SCUM Manifesto.html](http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/e-sermons/SCUM_Manifesto.html). [Accessed 23 October 2007]. A new English language edition was also published as recently as 2004, which contained a foreword by Avital Ronnell. I have been unable to establish which version was used as the source text for the Swedish translation.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Harding states that 'the makeshift quality of Solanas's 1967 self-published *SCUM Manifesto* – she sold mimeographed copies on the street at \$2.00 a copy for men and \$1.00 for women – certainly coincides with avantgarde's traditional hostility toward the established institutions of official literary culture' (151).

Efforts to make this text available to a new generation of feminists are commendable. However, the publishers' decision to compare previous versions, and produce the 'best and clearest of both', can be seen as a move to limit variation among the texts and establish a definitive version going forward (n.p.). This would seem an appropriate point to raise the question of to what extent the *SCUM Manifesto* can be categorised as a feminist text, and furthermore, to consider whether it is a help or hindrance to place it within this context when trying to produce new readings. Following Alison Jaggar's definition of 'radical feminism', the *SCUM Manifesto* does, in many ways, appear as the archetypal radical feminist text,

It is created directly from the experience of women, and it reflects women's pain and anger. It does not arbitrarily limit its sources of information, but utilizes women's special ways of knowing. Its non-linear mode of exposition reflects the human learning process, and the highly charged language of its authors evokes an emotional response in its readers and helps to jolt their consciousness out of the conceptual framework of patriarchy and into a women-centred paradigm. (369)

To define the manifesto as a radical feminist text depends upon a stable reading, a certainty that Solanas was writing a 'serious' feminist manifesto. As I have already noted, the text fails to achieve such a stable meaning and thus resists easy categorisation as a 'feminist' text. This approach also fails to take into account the position of this manifesto as part of an avant-garde art movement. For example, in his article, 'The Simplest Surrealist Act: Valerie Solanas and the (Re)Assertion of Avantgarde Priorities' (2001), James M. Harding explicitly addresses this issue:

Solanas's feminist concerns derive much of their force from the avant-garde context that generated them and that scholars have generally overlooked. While on the one hand examining Solanas's feminist concerns within that context has the potential to completely redefine, indeed to finally establish, Solanas's significance in the history of the American avant-garde, it also necessitates a substantial revision of the reception that her work has received. (147)

It is important to consider how judicious editing by publishers of this text has inevitably played a role in shaping this text to 'fit' with established ideas of what constitutes radical feminism. Notwithstanding the attention that feminism has already given to the problematic notion of 'a canon', I find the approach taken by the Matriarchy Study Group questionable for another reason. They acknowledge Solanas's absence, but then their voices fill the uncomfortable silence left by her absence, retelling her story and speaking *for* the author.

Therefore, even before an examination of the content and language is attempted, the *SCUM Manifesto* is already posed as problematic due to the absence of the author, the conflicting editions in existence and its liminal position at the boundaries of different disciplines. This has resulted in attempts to control the meaning of the text through devices such as explanatory prefaces. The absence of a definitive text and stable meaning opens to the manifesto to new readings and, for me, is key to its potential in a contemporary context. I am keen to avoid reading the *SCUM Manifesto* through an historical lens, as I believe this limits its relevance and potential for contemporary feminism. For this reason, the following two sections concerning language and content will be devoted to a close reading of the text itself, and will not consider in any detail the historical or personal conditions under which it was produced.

## Language and Resistance

Turning now to a consideration of the language and stylistic devices employed by Solanas, I will examine how this manifesto adopts and adapts aspects of a recognised manifesto genre to achieve its ends. I will also consider further here how it responds or ‘fits’ with feminist traditions. The *SCUM Manifesto* draws on many of the ‘tried and tested’ techniques of the manifesto format in both content and language. It demonstrates features such as provocative statements and militaristic metaphors, a utopian/dystopian outlook, a strongly critical voice and a ‘call to arms’:

There’s no reason why a society consisting of rational beings capable of empathizing with each other, complete and having no natural reason to compete, should have a government, laws or leaders. (17)

In the above extract Solanas outlines a utopian view of society, using a calm, rational tone to paint an image of a society so ‘foreign’ as to be almost unimaginable. This tone of voice, however, is not consistent throughout the text; the range of tones she utilises is, in fact, one of the most striking features of the manifesto:

Eaten up with guilt, shame, fears and insecurities and obtaining, if he’s lucky, a barely perceptible physical feeling, the male is, nonetheless, obsessed with screwing; he’ll swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there’ll be a friendly pussy awaiting him. (*Feast*, para. 4)

This extract provides a striking contrast in tone with the previous quotation, as well as setting up a present/ future, dystopian/utopian comparison. The *SCUM Manifesto* also employs other recognisable devices of the manifesto genre, such as the ‘call to arms’:

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. (*Feast*, para. 1)

Solanas calls for not simply equal rights (as previous manifestos such as those by Olympe de Gouges or Mary Wollstonecraft had done), but rather to ‘destroy the male sex’. In framing extreme demands through the format of a recognisable ‘call to arms’, and in making her utopian/dystopian view so exaggerated as to be considered a parody, she challenges and disrupts the accepted boundaries of the manifesto format.

Solanas also uses a number of simple rhetorical devices from repetition to alliteration to emphasise her points. Together with her obsessive use of lists, (for example, describing male art as: ‘obscurity, evasiveness, incomprehensibility, indirectness, ambiguity and boredom’ [24]). These devices work to produce a gradually increasing rhythm and speed as the text progresses, leaving the reader breathless and overwhelmed:

Unhampered by propriety, niceness, discretion, public opinion, ‘morals’, the ‘respect’ of assholes, always funky, dirty, low-down *SCUM Manifesto* gets around . . . and around and around . . . they’ve seen the whole show – every bit of it – the fucking scene, the sucking scene, the dyke scene – they’ve covered the whole waterfront, been under every dock and pier – the peter pier, the pussy pier . . . you’ve got to go through a lot of sex to get to anti-sex, and *SCUM Manifesto*’s been through it all, and they’re

now ready for a new show; they want to crawl out from under the dock, move, take off, sink out. (*Feast*, para. )

The extract above epitomises Solanas's use of lists, and also the use of assonance, alliteration and repetition ('the fucking scene, the sucking scene, the dyke scene') to create rhythm and emphasis in the text. When compared with the previous quote from the opening section of the manifesto it provides a further example of the wide range of register and tone which Solanas uses. There is no evidence here of the 'rational' tone of the opening, instead this passage is angry. In the paragraphs leading up to this passage, she inverts the hierarchy of 'niceness' and 'low-down' to reveal *SCUM Manifesto* as those women who really know what's going on, who haven't been 'brainwashed' into being nice. Her use of swearing and sexual language is deliberately provocative, contrasting with the world of 'propriety, niceness, discretion'. This further breaks with the rational argumentation of a 'traditional' manifesto.

The text remains accessible due to its use of everyday, colloquial language and, while this sometimes dates the text, as for example 'free-wheeling, independent, groovy female' (23), it also frames it as the product of a non-academic context. This accessible language is perhaps the key to its adoption by many radical feminist groups of the time such as Cell 16, and the continued interest in it today.<sup>6</sup>

The intensity of the reading experience caused by the language and style represents one of the most potent entry points into new uses of the text. In particular, Janet Lyon's reading of this as *unheimlich* provides a helpful perspective here:

From the interpellation of an audience of 'thrill-seeking females' arranged around a (literally) iconoclastic program of political, economic, social and gender anarchy, to the utopian rendering of scientific biological determinism, offered specifically as a program of eugenics in extremis, Solanas stretches the manifesto form to its limits. The results are uncanny – *unheimlich* – from a generic perspective. (173)

Lyon draws attention to the way in which Solanas parodies the rhetoric of the manifesto, pushing the limits of both the genre and readers' expectations, and marking a radical departure from the 'rational' argument offered by most manifestos.<sup>7</sup> The excessive, rude energy of the language of this manifesto acts as an eye-catching textual violence. I would like to suggest that this represents a kind of textual putting-into-practice of the action which Solanas advocates in the content of the manifesto:

[H]aving a crudely constructed nervous system that is easily upset by the least display of emotion or feeling, the male tries to enforce a 'social' code that ensure a perfect blandness, unsullied by the slightest trace of feeling or upsetting opinion. (5)

The *SCUM Manifesto* is thus an active (textual) practice against this 'blandness', one which at times feels almost out of control. It is hard to draw a line between a serious call to arms and subversive parody and play in the text. This slippage between parody and paranoia is,

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<sup>6</sup> *Cambridge Women's Heritage Project* defines 'Cell 16' thus: '[I]t began with a group of women gathering at Emmanuel College for a women's conference in 1969. The women broke up into smaller groups, one of which met afterwards informally for a year. In May 1969, the group took the name 'Cell 16' to emphasize that they were only one cell of an organic movement and in reference its original meeting address, 16 Lexington Ave. The group began to publish a magazine, *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation*. The Female Liberation group grew out of Cell 16'. See 'Cell 16'.

<sup>7</sup> See Pearson (1999) and Deem (1996).

however, yet another form of resistance, which poses broader questions about what constitutes theory and practice within feminist theory. In this section I have attempted to show how Solanas's 'knowing' use of the manifesto form actively produces a textual resistance to easy categorisation. By doing this with minimal reference to the historical context, I prepare the way for a consideration of its content before moving on to an examination of the manifesto in a contemporary Swedish context.

## Content

Two of the strongest themes in Solanas's manifesto are the body and violence. In this section I propose to examine her presentation of these in light of the motif of disruption before turning to a consideration of how these are played out in a contemporary Swedish context. The body is forced into centre stage throughout the manifesto through constant reference to bodily processes and products. Here it is the male body which is subject to association with 'negative' aspects of the body:

His responses are entirely visceral, not cerebral; his intelligence is a mere tool in the service of his drives and needs; he is incapable of mental passion, mental interaction; he can't relate to anything other than his own physical sensations. He is a half dead, unresponsive lump, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure or happiness; consequently, he is at best an utter bore, an inoffensive blob, since only those capable of absorption in others can be charming. (*Feast*, para. 3)

Solanas here adopts the negative connotations associated with the body (and traditionally with the female body) to talk about men.<sup>8</sup> By reversing these associations Solanas inverts the stereotyped associations of passivity and activity to give women agency:

Completely self-absorbed, capable of being in relation only to their bodies and physical sensations, males differ from each other only to the degree and in the ways they attempt to defend against their passivity and against their desire to be female. (12)

Solanas erases female bodily reality by transferring bodily experiences to men or channelling them into technology. However, by setting up a difference amongst women, Solanas offers agency only to a small group – 'SCUM' – who are presented as being 'beyond' the body and sexuality. The majority of women (the 'Daddy's Girls') are reinscribed as a 'hot water bottle with tits' (11). The body is thus a problematic, negative space within the text, as is sexuality. While Solanas offers a provocative inversion of men and women's behaviour, she fails to interrogate long-standing associations between the body and woman. Reading this failure through Alison Jaggar's work, it is tempting to see Solanas as part of a broader tradition with American feminism,

Not only do American radical feminists begin with women's experience, however, often . . . they are also content to end with that experience. Radical feminists seek to construct a new picture of the world as it is seen through women's eyes, but currently

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the well known case of *The Second Sex*, in which Simone de Beauvoir wrote that a woman's body 'is a burden: worn away in service to the species, bleeding each month, proliferating passively, it is not for her a pure instrument for getting a grip on the world but an opaque physical presence; it is no certain source of pleasure and it creates lacerating pains; it contains menace' (630).

they give low priority to providing a deep explanation of the social reality they depict. (366)

This distinction between theory ('deep explanation') and practice ('social reality'), with accompanying questions of what constitutes feminist practice, remains topical today. Writing in 1994 about the Lorena Bobbitt case, Barbara Ehrenreich suggests that the absence of practical reform has resulted in a popular perception of feminism as not radical enough:

In polls, American women are strongly supportive of feminist issues, and if they nonetheless shrink from the F word itself, this is not because they think it means man-hating militants from hell. On the contrary, the problem with 'feminism' may be that it has come to sound just too damn dainty. (para. 3)

By contrast, in Sweden much energy has been given to practical reforms regarding pay or parental leave. The issue of 'practice' is central to readings of the *SCUM Manifesto* and I would like to look briefly at one particular example from US feminism, as a way into considering contemporary responses to the text.

Shortly after initial publication the *SCUM Manifesto* was adopted by some radical feminist groups as an inspiration to reclaim the power of the female body. In her reading of second wave feminism, Kyra Pearson explicitly connects the *SCUM Manifesto* with Cell 16's 'karate body':

Cell 16's deployment of the karate body pushes forward *SCUM Manifestos* castrating female, seeking to transform the female body into a weapon. At the hands of Cell 16, karate becomes a mode for disciplining both misogynist speech and the male body. (8)

Janet Lyon describes this adoption as leaving Solanas 'disgusted by the faddish popularity of her manifesto among branches of the feminist movement' (172) and references Cell 16 and The Feminists as two groups in particular who welcomed/appropriated the *SCUM Manifesto*. This supports my earlier point about adoption of the manifesto by the Matriarchy Study Group as part of a 'feminist canon', as well as raising interesting questions about the issues of theory and practice. In Cell 16's hands the manifesto became the 'theory' which justified their 'practice' of learning karate to actively defend and empower themselves. This point is also reflected in Pearson's reading:

For Cell 16, issuing a warning about a 'real' castrating female was apparently necessary one year after the publication of *SCUM Manifesto*, which had yet to register in the political imaginary as dangerous. (8)

Pearson's reading suggests that Solanas's text had limited effects and its incitement to violence was not considered a significant threat, rather its 'violence' was of a textual kind. This distinction, however, correlates text with 'theory' and body with 'practice' in a manoeuvre which is overly simplistic and unhelpful when opening the text to new readings.

The kind of violence which Solanas describes is shockingly extreme, and I suspect that few – if any – contemporary feminists would countenance taking these actions. Instead, I suggest that this portrayal of women conducting violent activities is part of a broader thematic device used in the manifesto to provoke readers. This can be seen as part of the same strategy of inverting male and female roles. While these provocative tactics may be

attention-grabbing, their disruptive potential is ultimately limited by contemporary understandings of sex and gender roles which are (inevitably) missing from the *SCUM Manifesto*.

### **The Swedish Context**

In this final section, I will be focusing on the situation within Sweden, a country which has traditionally led the way in debates and reforms concerning equal rights. It is not only in terms of legal/judicial reforms that Sweden has led the way in gender issues, there remains a continued commitment to gender research by both men and women academics. For example, recent research conducted in the field of men and masculinities within Scandinavia has shown men actively engaging with key issues and theories of feminism. In her fascinating article, 'Killing Bill – men as rebellious feminists in the politics of passing' (2007), Linn Egeberg Holmgren highlights the ways in which men who are interested in/have a belief in feminism struggle to negotiate their commitment to feminism and homosocial behaviours. In her careful, nuanced analysis, she refers to this process with the metaphor of 'killing Bill', as can be seen in the following comment about an interviewee called Oscar,

Being feminist here is being irrevocably deviant, you will not pass as one of the guys and therefore become stigmatised – having Bill killed means that homosocial relations based on masculinity would be lost. Hence, Oscar ends up with inconsistent subject positions, feminist on the one hand but sexist on the other. With conflicting positions, the passing becomes delimited to different contexts. Killing Bill is hard and there seems to be some room for negotiation. (32)

The very act of this struggle she suggests is a sort of honest negotiation. What I find most useful in this context is the way in which her article reveals a deep level of engagement with and knowledge about feminism amongst some men, one which I suggest is yet another indication of a broader commitment to feminist issues within Swedish society. This suggests an active, informed theoretical debate amongst both men and women, in addition to a history of practical reform in the country as a whole. How then has the disruptive excess of the *SCUM Manifesto* been received within this climate?

In his 2006 article 'Fanatical Swedish Feminists', Stanley Kurtz traces the emergence of the Feminist Initiative (FI) political party in Sweden. He outlines its beginnings in 2004 as a response to failure by companies to achieve a better gender balance on the boards of publicly-listed companies, and to the growing calls for a recognition/legalisation of multi-partner relationships. Kurtz highlights these issues as the primary reasons for the creation of a feminist political party, but the FI 2006 manifesto reflects a much broader range of concerns about which Swedish feminists felt strongly. In their six point plan, the FI use the strong language of the manifesto form together with reasoned argumentation to conclude that:

Feminist Initiative formulates a politics, which in every area and aspect of life poses a challenge to patriarchy. We anticipate a large degree of resistance, but expect an even larger and stronger feminist desire for change. (para. 9)

Against this background of growing dissatisfaction with gender equal policies which were often far in advance of many other countries, two important events occurred which led to the re-emergence of the *SCUM Manifesto* as a discussion point for Swedish feminism. The first was the 2003 publication of the first Swedish translation of the *SCUM Manifesto* by Sara Stridsberg. This translation was widely reviewed by the press, including publication of an

article about the new translation in the magazine published by ROKS, the state funded national organisation of shelters for abused women. The second was a 2005 television documentary called 'Könskriget' (translated variously as 'Gender War' or 'Battle of the sexes') which was shown on Swedish national television. This documentary included an interview with Ireen von Wachenfeldt, the then-director of ROKS, during which the article published in ROKS magazine about the *SCUM Manifesto* is discussed. Despite being only one section of the multi-episode documentary, press coverage focused heavily on this interview. This was due to a very public debate as to whether she had been misrepresented/misquoted, and ultimately resulted in her resignation.<sup>9</sup>

Ireen von Wachenfeldt, chairman of the national women's refuge organisation ROKS, was shown in the programme describing men as 'animals' and 'walking dildos', but had claimed that the broadcast version was heavily edited and had taken the comments out of context. (para. 2)

In the television documentary interview, the interviewer tries repeatedly to get von Wachenfeldt to align the ROKS organisational values with the *SCUM Manifesto*. Instead, von Wachenfeldt reacts by trying to 'contain' the excessive quality of the text through a distancing move, in which she makes a clear distinction between the organisation and the book; '[a]re you trying to say that just because we have this article in our magazine that the whole organization agrees with that statement? It's a description based on a book' (Anon, unnumbered). When the documentary was shown, the interview was edited in such a way that this distinction was not clear. However, as can be seen by the eventual publication of the unedited transcripts, both the text and the ROKS organisation eventually slip free of this appropriation and the journalist is represented as having done poor quality research. Kurtz goes on to argue that the furore surrounding this documentary, combined with accusations of 'man-bashing' at the FI conference and adoption of feminist reforms by other political parties in an attempt to win back voters, was ultimately to lead to the downfall and unravelling of the FI party.

Through von Wachenfeldt's interview the whole ROKS organisation became tainted with accusations of man-bashing, and it is here that the most interesting contradictions begin to emerge, and which I would like to tease out in more detail.<sup>10</sup> ROKS is a national organisation part funded by the state and also associated with radical feminism –a striking combination of radical feminist action and state-sanctioned support rarely seen anywhere else, which had been accepted until the documentary was aired. So, Sweden is a country where feminist concerns have apparently been integrated into a national, state sanctioned organisation, until ROKS suddenly achieves a new level of visibility through von Wachenfeldt's interview during which the less-publicised (and highly contested) issue of male violence was brought to the fore.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2005, the unedited transcripts of the interview were finally released. An article which appeared on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2005 in the online newspaper, *The Local: Sweden's News in English*, discussed these transcripts and cast doubt over the validity of other research conducted by the documentary's journalist and narrator, Evin Rubar, concluding with the following statement: 'An article in SvD this week accused Rubar of using a discredited story from the Västerbottens-Kurir newspaper as the basis for her claims. The story was published in March 2004, but following a complaint to the press ombudsman, the paper was forced to print a retraction'. See 'SVT release unedited "men are animals" interview'.

<sup>10</sup> A woman working for one of the ROKS shelters was quoted as saying, 'It's difficult to be part of an organisation which is so strident, anti-men and aggressive.' See 'SVT release unedited "men are animals" interview'.

Central to the contested interview, the work of ROKS and the FI manifesto is this question of male violence. The 2006 Election Manifesto of the FI political party, for example, listed this issue as only second in importance to economic differences between men and women:

Because 46 percent of all women at some point in their lives have suffered physical or sexual violence, or threats of violence by a man and because many women are still afraid of being attacked and raped when they walk the streets at night. (para 1.2)

This statistic was produced by Eva Lundgren, a sociologist at Uppsala University. However, her methodology was later challenged, with government data produced which showed violence at 12%. It is notable that questions of validity and verifiability (in both the case of Lundgren's data and von Wachenfeldt's interview) formed the focus of the media attention, rather than the actual issue of male violence. The real debate is thus 'displaced' onto practical questions about reliable data.

It is also notable that in the media coverage surrounding the debate about the *SCUM Manifesto*, ROKS and the FI, violence 'disappears' from the narrative - for example, the issue of male violence is almost entirely absent from Kurtz's article and he focuses instead on equal pay.<sup>11</sup> The discrediting of Lundgren's data, the misquoting of von Wachenfeldt (with subsequent doubt cast on Rubar's journalistic integrity) and the disappearance of the issue of male violence from reports of the debate meant that the issue of male violence was 'lost' from the debates. It has subsequently failed to be addressed within gender equality debates.

This acceptance of feminism only while it does not upset the status quo is explicitly verbalised in the FI manifesto:

Nearly all Swedish political parties call themselves feminist, but women's lives remain unchanged, day in and day out, year after year. . . . Swedish gender politics have hitherto been based on a view of equality as a non-zero sum game, meaning that women's conditions can improve without affecting those of men. (para. 8)

Publication of the Swedish translation of the *SCUM Manifesto* served to upset (albeit temporarily) the appearance of gender equality in Sweden and to spark debate. In particular, it brought attention to issues which undermine the positive public presentation of gender in Sweden. Through a combination of discrediting manoeuvres, the disruptive excess was managed and dispersed so as to preserve the image of Sweden as a gender equal society. With the FI no longer in existence and the *SCUM Manifesto* relegated safely to the shelves of feminist bookstores, the disruptive power of the manifesto appears to have been subsumed.

## Conclusions

Throughout my reading of the material production, language and content of the *SCUM Manifesto*, I have tried to show how the text remains resistant, preventing readings imposed upon it over time by feminist academics, including my own engagement with the text. I would suggest that it is near impossible to read this text and not get caught up in its passion, not to feel inspired and angry. It is disruptive, difficult and out of control, characteristics which often provoke extreme reactions to the text, as I have shown by

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Socolovsky reduces the issue of violence to two brief paragraphs: one citing the FI manifesto claim about male violence, and a very brief discussion of a survey conducted by Eva Lundgren a sociologist at Uppsala University, whose conclusions are swiftly dismissed. Socolovsky's narrative instead focuses on the increasing numbers of men taking parental leave.

reference to the Swedish reception to this text. Its promise of disruptive potential derives very much from the subversive and striking use of language and parody of the manifesto genre, which together with the accessible language offers scope for new readings and entry points into the text.

The content of the manifesto, however, is riven with internal contradictions, particularly the inversion of the male-female hierarchy which fails to challenge deep-rooted social structures. This internal contradiction also marks the situation in Sweden with regards to gender equal policies, in which social reform appears to be limited to only certain issues in men and women's lives, while others – such as violence – remain marginalised. In this context the textual violence of the *SCUM Manifesto* was sadly not sufficient to resist absorption into an established narrative of gender equality connected to Swedish national identity.

To return to the title of this paper, I would agree with the Matriarchy Study Group that, yes, 'sometimes the meaning of the text is unclear'. However, and despite the reception in Sweden, I would prefer to celebrate this excess and inconsistency as a way of reviving the text for feminism and posing some bigger questions about the relationship between 'theory' and 'practice'.

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