The Novelist as DJ: *Vernon Subutex* and The Music of Our Times

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Virginie Despentes entered the mainstream of French literature by kicking her way in, inflicting a savage assault on moral customs and the established order, and exposing any sense of security and contentment associated with that order to back-alley countercultural subversions of every imaginable kind, from ostentatious representations of drug-taking and sociopathic violence to the promotion of total sexual freedom, including pornography. Today, as winner of the Renaudot Prize and member of the Goncourt Jury, she commands a respected place in the contemporary French literary scene. Her novel *Vernon Subutex*, a large-scale trilogy, has been widely praised as something of a masterpiece. Such an enthusiastic appraisal needs scrutiny, but there can be little doubt that the book has been one of the most energizing French literary experiences in recent years. Media comparisons to Balzac have been numerous, most frequently linked to the novel's social realism dimension and to the perception of its cast of characters as a latter-day *Comédie humaine*.[1] The approach in this article, however, emerges from the sense that *Vernon Subutex* can be more accurately seen as resonating with a more contemporary set of figures in the French literary tradition. As a quest for lost time in which music simultaneously plays figurative and structuring roles, Despentes's work is surely closer to the imagined worlds of Marcel Proust, Céline, and even Patrick Modiano than to Balzac. I argue that in *Vernon Subutex* music is a key to a major transformation of the author's novelistic art, both in what is narrated and in the narrative process itself: not only is music central to her rendering of the French *Zeitgeist* at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is also, through the performance of the novelist as DJ, an underlying principle of the novel's composition and structure. It is a mechanism of what Paul Ricœur called "re-figuration" of time: the creation, through narrative, of an alternative temporal reality that offers greater and more enduring meaning than the raw experience from which it is drawn (3: 11).

It must be noted from the outset that the composition of *Vernon Subutex* was an interrupted process. It is a poignant coincidence that Despentes should share with Proust and Céline the experience of a compositional project

being significantly affected by major external historical circumstances: with Proust it was the advent of World War I, and Céline the rising threat of World War II; while Despentes created her third volume in the context of the very specific urgency associated with the Paris terror attacks of January and November 2015. The decision to include this dimension poses a serious challenge to the music-based aesthetic processes deployed in the first two volumes, but Despentes attempts nonetheless to eke out a note of hope.

Although Despentes's interest in music has always been a prominent aspect of her personal trajectory, there appears to be something of an exponential leap, in terms of the scale and gravitas of her fiction writing, between her previous work and *Vernon Subutex*. Before analyzing this latest work, therefore, it will be useful to examine what, in Despentes's earlier activity and fiction, might be considered as preparatory. This cannot claim to be a comprehensive study: rather, it is an attempt to lay out some main lines of inquiry into one important ingredient of an evolving creative process and practice. There are other ingredients, such as cinematographic and collage techniques, that interact with the use of music, but space constraints will not permit detailed discussion of that topic here. The largely self-taught nature of Despentes's art means that the evolution is organic and instinctive, rather than determined by any pre-existing or articulated aesthetic system: while the author's public pronouncements are often enlightening, this study will rely primarily on analysis of the fictional texts themselves.

Before *Vernon Subutex*

At first glance, Despentes's personal musical activity is not particularly remarkable. Its most salient elements are being a member of a band for a short time in her early twenties; writing or translating lyrics for a handful of songs; and working on the compilation published as *Baise-moi: le son* (2000). In a number of her interviews, however, she makes it clear that the musical universe she inhabited in the 1980s and 1990s, when she was between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, was much more than a sound-track accompaniment to her life. It was fundamental to her whole personality formation and her perception of reality: music—essentially rock and punk and their multiple derivatives—was "une aventure sincère, importante, formatrice, intense" (librairie mollat), at the core of her network of radical political, social and sexual connections. The intensity is related to salutary, meaning-making qualities, capable of transporting the listener beyond depression or despair:

Despentes describes it as "un moyen de s'accrocher à la vie, de continuer à envisager l'existence" (Adler). In this respect, we can certainly situate the genesis of Despentes's artistic inspiration in the alternative music culture—including its central notion of "resistance" to established cultural norms—that flourished in France from the 1980s.[2]

That the preoccupation with music was obsessional is evident in Despentes's fictional work from the beginning.[3] In *Baise-moi*, Nadine is never without her Walkman—in fact, she does not hesitate to kill in order to ensure a reliable supply of these music machines, and her headspace is constantly filled with the sounds she listens to (although it is worth observing that at this stage of Despentes's writing, the music itself is not identified). She also uses the cassette player in the car, and the stereo in the house of the architect she and Manu murder (*BM* 79, 206, 209). We can note in passing that in *Baise-moi*, Manu embodies a cinematic function: the conjoining of the music and the cinema in the novel can be read as an embryonic articulation of Despentes's attempt to synthesize the two aesthetic strands. In *Les Chiennes savantes* (1996), following the direction of the "Saint" Mike Muir epigraph from *Suicidal Tendencies* (*CS* 9), music is also a pervasive presence, an essential ingredient, as Michèle Schaal has noted, with sex, liquor and drugs, of the hard-boiled representation of the world ("Virginie Despentes…" 41). Guillaume, a central character, is a musician; Julien, as a kind of DJ, can be seen as a precursor of Vernon (*CS* 287). *Les Jolies choses* (1998) offers a more complex treatment of the music theme, through the story of the protagonist Pauline/Claudine and her conflicted engagement with the music industry in Paris. We should observe that Pauline has no sense of aesthetic transcendence in relation to her music: it is only ever a means to make money and escape with her jailbird boyfriend—until she discovers his treachery, and leaves with Nicolas instead. In *Teen Spirit* (2002)—where the title is an obvious nod to Nirvana's 1991 *Smells like Teen Spirit*—Bruno's erstwhile career as a punk musician is a key factor in his re-connection with his daughter Nancy.

In a 1998 interview, Despentes asserts that she would have preferred to be a singer rather than a writer: it would have been "classier" (Poncet). Whether this springs from a sense of being a *musicienne ratée* or is simply a bit of tongue-in-cheek self-irony remains moot, but the centrality of music to her ethos is undeniable. In the same interview, she compares her writing process to musical production: a "live" recording followed by extensive studio re-working (Poncet). The metaphor here is striking, suggesting the

performative nature of the writing process for Despentes, together with the implied presence of some kind of "real time" audience.

Bye Bye Blondie (2004) and *Apocalypse Bébé* (2010) mark a qualitative shift in the author's use of music, and the two works can be considered as important steps towards the level of artistic mastery achieved in *Vernon Subutex*. There is firstly a notable increase in the number of specific music references, including the naming of bands: *Bye Bye Blondie* contains more than three dozen song extracts (and indeed includes at the end a list of song credits) (*BBB* 333); and similarly, in *Apocalypse Bébé*, a large number of bands are evoked, representing a huge array of musical styles, from French *chanson* (France Gall and Michel Berger) to Swedish electronic trip-hop (Fever Ray), or from Yacine's "vraie musique" of funk and soul, to Valentine's New York hardcore Agnostic Front (*AB* 111, 126, 145, 277). The world evoked is a trans-national one, in which French groups (and hence the French language) co-exist with Anglophone ones from the United States and Britain. This diversity, with its implicit rejection of gallo-centrism while nonetheless including a substantial dose of French music, is further developed in *Vernon Subutex*.

It would be a mistake to think of the references to band names as haphazard, although they do present a challenge. On the one hand, in their sheer number and range, they could seem like a declaration on the part of the novelist of a secret knowledge only accessible to a happy few. A casual or impatient reader, insufficiently familiar with the intricacies of rock music and its developments, might gloss over them, or perhaps attribute to them a bald generic significance ("oh, another rock/punk/trash band"). On the other hand, if one accepts that they are not random, they appear more as an invitation to learn what they stand for: to investigate the unknown bands and hear their sound and lyrics. An indicative playlist of the music of the first two volumes is available on the *Vernon Subutex* website (Bourneuf), and Vincent Richard (2017) has uploaded on YouTube what he claims to be a systematic and chronological playlist of volume 3. These lists are very helpful to a more rewarding reading of the novel. The musical references come to reveal themselves as integral elements of the narrative lexicon: short-hand or coded, no doubt, but none the less bearers of explicit meaning and mood, indicators of the characters' emotional landscapes, and of their evolution within those landscapes. They also become constituent parts of a musical map of the eras and places evoked: from the 1970s to the present, in Dijon

and Paris for *Bye Bye Blondie*, Paris and Barcelona for *Apocalypse Bébé*. They are, in short, connectors of the imagined diegetic world with an extra-diegetic time/space reality, and they participate in the re-shaping of that reality into fictional form, refiguring time in the way explained by Ricœur.

Some of the ways in which music serves to render Despentes's narrative denser and more complex can be traced through the protagonist's journey in *Bye Bye Blondie*. As a young woman, Gloria is as addicted to music as she is to sex, alcohol and drugs, and she does not differentiate much among them; but the effects of music prove to be more powerful and more enduring than the other intoxicants, and more far-reaching than sex. For her own troubled being, music is the vehicle of profound ambiguity:

> Cette musique qu'elle écoutait en boucle depuis plusieurs années avait deux effets contradictoires: un soulagement extraordinaire, défoulement et soulagement. Et, dans le même temps, ça appelait une angoisse extraordinaire, sans la résoudre, ça parlait de ça, être enfermé, être terrorisé, être dans le noir. (*BBB* 103)

But it is also the pathway through which she can navigate time; as distinct from the dominant linearity of the previous novels, *Bye Bye Blondie* deploys a narrative of considerable temporal flexibility. More than any of the earlier protagonists, Gloria is endowed with a developed psychological and sociological past, and with the need to revisit it in an effort to find purpose and meaning. At the center of this to-and-fro journey is her friendship with Éric—a love at once sexual and quasi-mystical that is profoundly informed by shared musical experience: "Éric la rattachait au monde qu'elle aimait. Il connaissait la musique, ça allait" (*BBB* 76).

Beyond Gloria's individual story, *Bye Bye Blondie* also identifies the punk rock movement as a collective historical phenomenon: "Le punk rock était le premier constat de l'échec du monde d'après-guerre, dénonciation de son hypocrisie, de son incapacité à confronter ses vieux démons" (*BBB* 50). Although too sweeping and vague to stand close scrutiny, the statement nonetheless seems to indicate an attempt by Despentes to connect Gloria's story into a wider socio-political framework, and there can be little doubt that the central tenet about music translating a fundamental rejection of the post-war western world is intended to legitimize the punk rebellion as a positive alternative to establishment life. In this context, the admission that this particular musical universe was more dream than reality is especially potent: "Plus tard, de façon différente, l'un et l'autre [Éric and Gloria] réaliseraient à

quel point le punk rock n'avait pas été une bonne préparation à la vraie vie… trop de rigolade, trop d'utopie" (*BBB* 120). It is striking that when Gloria returns to Eric after the break-down that follows the producers' usurping and bastardizing of her film-script, it is classical music that he plays on the radio (*BBB* 244), bringing to a close what both have experienced as an exceptional adventure by opening their world to a mainstream aesthetic norm. Gloria's sense of loss and failure is mitigated, at least for the time being, by the reassurance of survival.[5]

Both Gloria and Éric can be read as prefiguring the character of Vernon: Gloria through the socio-psychological collapse that sees her so close to becoming a street person, Éric through the salutary role he plays in saving Gloria from her own self-destructive leanings. In *Apocalypse Bébé*, music remains a constant presence through references to bands and styles, but the element that can most clearly be seen as anticipating *Vernon Subutex* is the use of a number of different narrative perspectives to advance and enrich the story: in addition to the principal narrator, Lucie, whose parts are written in the first person, there are third-person sections representing the points of view of François (Valentine's father), Claire (her step-mother), Yacine (her cousin), Vanessa (her mother), La Hyène, Elizabeth, and Valentine herself. Despentes describes this technique in terms of collage (Adler), and it has been used in a number of prominent films: it is a favorite process with Jim Jarmusch (e. g. *Mystery Train*, 1989, *Night on Earth*, 1991) and has been successfully used, among others, by Robert Altman (*Short Cuts*, 1993), Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction*, 1994) and Alejandro González Iñárritu (*Babel*, 2006)—all of which would surely be known by Despentes. But it is also very much a musical strategy, composing a text from different voices, rhythms and resonances. In *Apocalypse Bébé*, this polyvocalism remains experimental, and although generally effective as a way of transmitting the inner worlds of various characters, it is sometimes less convincing: particularly in the cases of the wicked Elisabeth, whose motives remain obscure, and of Valentine herself, whose failure to reveal anything of her terrorist act, even to herself, stretches verisimilitude. As a whole, the novel does not quite escape the frame of parodic *polar*, deliberately established by Despentes when she has Lucie working for Redlanch (an anagrammatic wink at Raymond Chandler) (*AB* 109), and emphasized by the apocalyptic Houellebecq-like ending. I shall argue that the close of *Vernon Subutex* is similarly problematic.

Vernon Subutex

Vernon Subutex, too, has parodic features and many echos of *bande dessinée* caricature. Humor and irony are never far from the surface in Despentes. But notwithstanding the distancing and fairy-tale qualities, the seriousness of purpose of this novel is inscribed from the very beginning, in the Horace epigraph "*Non omnis moriar*" (*VS* 1: 7) It is surprising to find Despentes positioning herself with such a classical reference—especially one in Latin—but, taking into account the oblique allusion to her Latinist ex-partner Paul B. Preciado's tattoo, this can also be interpreted as expressing a desire that her fictional world might attain recognition as deserving a place in the collective imaginary. The epigraph announces a memorial project, the time-defying ambition to use her art (one might refer again to such "classics" before her as Proust and Céline) as a way of saving from oblivion what she sees as most distinctive and most valuable in her own journey, namely the musical adventures of her youth. *Vernon Subutex*, in an impressive act of synthesis, draws together all the threads of Despentes's musical interest: the half-century of musical creation to which she feels she owes so much, and whose memory she wishes to preserve; her reflection on this music as a metonymic expression of rebellion against socio-political failure; and her appropriation of it as a narrative compositional device.

The first chapter of *Vernon Subutex* contains no fewer than three dozen names of bands or musicians. This litany, dominated by American and British groups, but with an honorable showing from France, and ultimately with a spectrum covering more than twenty different countries, grows over the course of the novel to over 300, with very few repetitions. It would be tedious to list all the names here, but as was observed earlier, the range is enormous, covering a time span from Mama Thornton's *Hound Dog* (1952) to the final albums of Leonard Cohen and David Bowie (2016), though never chronologically, and including contemporary singers like Beyoncé, Shakira and Rihanna (*VS* 2: 349; *VS* 3: 355, 279-80; *VS* 1: 327). And, once again, the names are not gratuitous; they are short-hand for actual musical performance and experience, emblematic of the characters being presented, of a world that the author is seeking to memorialize, and of her continuing commitment to music as a source of quasi-magical power.[6] In the first chapter, the rush of names corresponds to Vernon's former profession as the owner of the record store Revolver; it works to demonstrate his breadth of taste, his extraordinary

knowledge, and the uncanny ability with which he marries that knowledge—more visceral than intellectually encyclopedic (a fact that seems to apply to the author as well)—with the musical needs he intuits in his clients. Across the novel as a whole, the accumulation of names comes to stand for the entire world of Rock as perceived by Alex Bleach—a cathedral full of saints: "Souviens-toi, Vernon, on entrait dans le rock comme on entre dans une cathédrale, et c'était un vaisseau spatial, cette histoire. Il y avait des saints partout on ne savait plus devant lequel s'agenouiller pour prier" (*VS* 2: 135). The religious connotations are notable, since they sharpen and expand the sense of loss associated with the evaporation of the world in which so many, including Despentes herself, believed so fervently (librairie mollat). The loss has a spiritual dimension.

It is the figure of Alex that symbolizes that loss most fully. But the dead music star becomes the black hole that generates the novel's main plotline, the videotape of his testament-confession acting as the driver of multiple quests, differently motivated, but ultimately convergent. The climactic revelation of the tape's content underscores the pessimism represented by Alex's suicide, and indeed sets the pattern of decline for the novel as a whole; but is also the turning-point after which Vernon's trajectory becomes more redemptive, indicating that lament and nostalgia are not Despentes's last word, but that, rather, she is seeking a path of resistance.

Alex's tragic destiny mirrors that of the musical era that constitutes Despentes's *terroir*. It runs from innocence—the discovery, through The Kingsmen's 1960s *Louie Louie*, of the simplicity and sheer joy of music-making—through stardom and the indulgences of drugs, alcohol and unbridled sex to a loss of self-belief, creative impotence, a caving-in to the interests of money, and the failure to defend his soul-mate Satana (*VS* 2: 126-50). At the heart of the end-of-century disillusionment and collapse is global commercialization. Rock is appropriated by the advertising industry; the music creators and their fans are reduced to being product-makers and consumers, and are eventually consumed themselves. Music of protest continues to be made, but the musicians and their listeners, whether they know it or not, are all indentured performers, prisoners of a commercial system that controls every aspect of their talent and their taste. Alex Bleach's last words are pure despair:

> J'ai peur. J'ai honte. Et je suis lucide : personne n'en aurait rien à foutre. Tu connais cette citation que se racontent les Juifs : 'Ils ne nous

> pardonneront jamais le mal qu'ils nous ont fait'? Les Juifs sont des putains d'optimistes. Ils ne peuvent pas s'empêcher de faire confiance à leur prochain. La vérité, c'est qu'ils ne nous pardonneront jamais d'être encore en vie. Ils ne dormiront pas tranquilles tant qu'ils sauront que nous en tirons encore quelque plaisir. (*VS* 2 : 160)

The grimness of this assessment is darkened further by the producers' attempts to exploit Alex's skin-color and push him into music they see as more appropriate for a black man: Hip Hop, Reggae, Jazz, Zouk (*VS* 2: 135). His sudden, late awareness of an ethnic identity fills him with the guilt of "acting white" (hence the nickname "Bounty"),[7] and of being a traitor for liking, for example, Iggy Pop (*VS* 2: 133-34). What is at stake here is precisely the capacity of music to transcend boundaries that place limits on identity or self-fulfillment—the sort of music that, like Bertrand Burgalat's *Aux Cyclades électroniques* (2000), allows Alex to find love with Satana, and to draw from that relationship a renewal, albeit it temporary, of his inspiration (*VS* 2: 126-50).

The crushing of the spirit of musical freedom, knowingly and callously carried out by the powers of greed and self-interest (represented in the novel by the demonic figures of Laurent Dopalet and his acolytes) is shown to be directly related to a more broadly based socio-political disarray. That Alex's story is originally told to a sleeping Vernon evokes the public indifference not just to an individual's distress, but to the unravelling of the whole French historical Republican ideal of a society in which citizenship and its benefits should not depend on any ethnic or religious discrimination.[8] It is surely no accident that Despentes devotes the section following Alex's confession to the perspective of Sélim, the apparently well assimilated university professor, specialist of contemporary cinema and philosophy, ex-husband of Vodka Satana, father of Aïcha, the adolescent who has ostentatiously re-adopted her Islamic origins: Sélim is a figure through whom the novelist launches some of her most direct commentary on the French failure to live up to and maintain their own nation's ideals (*VS* 2: 151-75).

> Il a aimé ce pays, à la folie. Son école, ses rues propres, son réseau ferroviaire, son orthographe impossible, ses vignobles, ses philosophes, sa littérature et ses institutions. Mais autour de lui, les Français n'habitent plus la France qui l'a enchanté. Ils souffrent. (*VS* 2: 171)

It is at the end of this sequence that Sélim encounters Vernon at

the Buttes-Chaumont and receives the embrace that dissipates his anger and his anxiety. This is a pivotal moment in the narrative, the point where the downward, negative impetus associated with the metaphorical death of music gives way, for a time, to a movement towards rebirth. The chief instrument of the re-emergence of music as a life force is of course Vernon himself.

The transformation of Vernon Subutex from the amiable, seductive, ego-centered, pleasure-seeking, opportunistic, middle-aged sponger that we meet at the beginning of the novel, to the messianic guru community-builder of the end of the second volume and the beginning of the third, has everything to do with the change in his relationship to music. At the start, it is as "le gardien du temple", as Alex puts it (*VS* 2: 140), that he draws the affection and the appreciation of others. With the collapse of the record market and the closure of his shop Revolver, however, compounded by the death or defection of his musician friends (Alex, Jean-No, Émilie, Patrice), his *raison d'être* belongs to the domain of the past, and less to his own memory than to that of his friends. And while music remains a reality of experience, it is one that no longer has any purchase on the present other than as a habit.

Making no effort to nourish his endearing qualities, which include his knowledge and his sensitivity to others' musical needs, he simply relies on them, and in doing so lets them drain away, even as he uses other people to avoid facing any responsibility. His inexorable decline from comfortable bohemianism to actual destitution and beggardom does not appear to cause him anguish. On the contrary, it is his indifference to his own fate that stands out. His personal salvation comes not from himself, but from the determination of others to preserve what they see as his human value as an agent of musical pleasure.

It is when, thanks to the mediation of Gaëlle, Vernon takes on the role of DJ at Kiko's party, that his musical gift is revitalized: he becomes the composer of an original sound-scape, and the creator of a new musical event (*VS* 1: 215-26). At this point in the story, he is not really aware of the transformation—he has yet to sink deeper into the abyss—but it is here that he is first shown to have the artistry that will give him the salutary powers he wields at the end of the novel. The two segments that comprise this episode are surely among Despentes's most original literary achievements. The first, narrated from the perspective of the cocaine-sniffing, narcissistic trader Kiko, is a brilliant amalgam of a self-portrait by a very smart man entirely given over to the business of making money, and a respectful homage to a musical era

that stretches from the 1960s (Rod Stewart and Candi Staton) to the present (Britney Spears, *Work Bitch* 2013) (*VS* 1: 215-26). The second continues the musical homage, but is recounted from the viewpoint of the Brazilian transgender woman Marcia, who dances for Vernon and becomes for him the discovery of a new kind of love (*VS* 1: 227-37).

It is highly symbolic that Kiko, who represents the very kind of mentality that has led to Vernon's fall, sees Vernon as an artist and a mystery, and acknowledges in him a genius and virtuosity equal to his own: "branché sur le flux unique, le pouvoir en ligne directe" (*VS* 1: 240). In the war between the mercenary and the spiritual, in order to choose the latter, Despentes must place her faith in at least equivalent powers. Kiko throws Vernon out when he finds him in bed with Marcia, but he will become a "disciple" by the end of the novel. (Not an unambivalent one: despite giving up his trading and demonstrating Christ-like generosity for a few months, he is keen to make Vernon a big thing, à la Ron Hubbard.) (*VS* 3: 26). It is also symbolic that Marcia should be both transgender and other than French. Vernon's music opens her to being able to face her own story with relative equanimity; she, in turn, opens him to restorative levels and dimensions of feeling. The "otherness" that she embodies can be seen as prefiguring and fertilizing the multiplicity of being that he experiences at the end of the first volume when, in a transcendence of age and gender, he imagines himself as a whole succession of fleeting identities (*VS* 1: 395-97).

Only a few of the pieces on Vernon's playlist at Kiko's party are not identified explicitly in the text: the *Vernon Subutex* website playlist gives the first one, by Rod Stewart, as the 1971 *Maggie May*, and the one by Rihanna as *Umbrella* (2007) (Bourneuf). From these, and those that are fully identified, we can see that Vernon's choices manipulate a wide spectrum of eras, styles, and geographical origins, and that he manages many changes of tempo and mood, molding rhythms and ambiance, choreographing a whole roomful of people into a vast dance. From the up-tempo driving athleticism of Britney Spears's *Work Bitch* and the kickdrum urgency of Janet Jackson's *All Nite*, to the bass guitar groove and the tight brass riffs of Candi Staton's *I'd Rather be an Old Man's Sweetheart*; from Daniel Viglietti's *Construccion* bossa nova to Prince's rapping *Sexy Motherfucker* to Freddie King's slow blues *Please Send Me Someone to Love* to the metallic storm of Noir Désir's *Tostaky*, the shifts are sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic, but there is never a break in continuity, or hesitation in the energy flow (*VS* 1: 217-33).

The ability to bring together into a single experience — to compose — the diversity of sounds, styles and lyrics, and all the different people, each with a distinctive story, is the key to Vernon's art as a DJ. It is what elevates him, after the purging homeless adventures of the streets and the parks, when he learns that his survival depends on the goodness of others like Charles and Olga, to the shaman-like role he fulfils with his disciples at the Buttes-Chaumont, and then at the ceremonies in the Vosges: "Tout autour des vivants dansent les morts et les invisibles, les ombres se confondent et ses yeux se ferment. Autour de lui, le mouvement est déclenché. Ça commence. Il les fait tous danser" (*VS* 2: 405).

Although he does not really change the world, Subutex lives up to his name as a kind of substitution therapy, creating a situation in which many different people can envisage their own lives with less angst, and can even form a loose soul-soothing community that gathers periodically in what the third volume calls "convergences" (*VS* 3: 19). In the economy of the narrative of the first two volumes, Vernon's musical creativity succeeds in bringing back to life the spirit represented by Alex.

The optimistic utopianism crumbles away across the third volume, as the fairytale atmosphere becomes more and more poisoned: by the suspicions raised within the group about Vernon's honesty in relation to the promised inheritance from Charles, by the increasingly ruthless violence plotted by Dopalet and his associates, and, perhaps most insidiously, by the corrosive fear generated by the terrorist attack on the Bataclan. The real-life massacre at Paris's most emblematic live music venue enters the fictional world obliquely, through the story of Sylvie and Émilie going to a Madonna concert (also a real-life one) at Bercy: but its cancerous effect is unstoppable (*VS* 3: 198-200). Other real-life elements invade the narrative: a Joey Starr concert at the Olympia; the Nuit Debout phenomenon at the Place de la République; the torrential rains that flooded the Seine and drenched much of France during May 2016 (*VS* 3: 325-30, 345-46). In this second major battle between music and the forces of death, it is death that wins out. This is signaled symbolically in the musical references to recently dead superstars that frame the main body of the third volume narrative: the opening epigraph from David Bowie's Lazarus,[9] and then, on the eve of the last convergence, Leonard Cohen's last words to God: "*You want it darker. We kill the flame*" (*VS* 3: 7, 355, italics in original).[10] But throughout the third volume, Despentes builds the tension inexorably—through the scheming of Dopalet, Max and Solange; through

the kidnapping and savage treatment of Céleste; through a sharp increase in angry polemical socio-political commentary, from La Véro, Stéphanie, La Hyène, and Olga.

Despentes's decision to render the final cataclysm indirectly, firstly through Léonard and then through Vernon's fragmented memory, can be seen as an aspect of a determination to affirm that life must go on, even after such a comprehensive disaster (*VS* 3: 370-73, 385, 388-90). In itself, this makes sense, but it does little to mitigate the very problematic nature of the novel's ending, with its sudden shift into a futuristic pseudo-science fictional mode. To be sure, one can play, as Despentes does, with the idea of a spiritual/civilizational "convergence" produced by the co-existence, on the Greek island of Hydra, of the resurrected Christ-like Vernon (now Marc Campadre) with the Muslim Aïcha and her daughter Sabra (connoting children born in Israel); one can imagine, as Despentes does, Hydra as a haven from the pollution of modernity (cars are banned there), or as a crucible for artistic inspiration (Axel Jensen, Leonard Cohen) (*VS* 3: 382, 394-99); one can even posit, as Despentes does, the post-nuclear war birth of a new syncretic religion that spreads across the world: "C'est ainsi que, contre toute attente, on continue de danser, dans le noir, sur une musique primitive dont le culte semble ne jamais vouloir s'éteindre, au crepuscule du troisième millénaire" (*VS* 3: 399). But such imaginings seem particularly impoverished in the context of the rest of the novel, and are indeed subverted by the inclusion of details like Dopalet's success in making a successful TV series about the Bleach-Subutex phenomenon and his elevation to sainthood in the new religion (*VS* 3: 375, 391-92). The weakness of the ending inevitably raises the question whether this novel about the fragility of art in the face of the contemporary world is itself ultimately an artistic failure. I contend that that is only partially the case.

The Novelist as DJ

In terms of its content, *Vernon Subutex* makes a significant artistic contribution in its blending of musical and social representation. Equally important from an artistic viewpoint is the way in which Despentes appropriates the key musical trope—the image of the DJ as a restorative artist as the central principles for the novel's construction. Using the same polyvocalism technique she introduced in *Apocalypse Bébé*, but with much greater complexity and virtuosity, the author conducts a vast DJ-like performance across the three volumes of the work. Each of the sections, with a couple of exceptions where

internal mixing occurs, is constructed around a singular perspective, and is represented by a distinctive individual voice, more than two dozen of them in all, over the course of the work. Despentes "plays" these voices as if they were records—which of course they are: records of particular lives, experiences and emotional states which, as they build up in the reader's memory, give increasing density and depth to the imagined world.

Actual first-person narration is sparingly used: the Kiko segment is sometimes almost interior monologue or stream of consciousness; the first person also occurs at the end of the first volume when Vernon, semi-delirious, experiences the multiple possibilities of identity that blur the borders between genders, ages and social backgrounds; it is used for Alex's testament (*VS* 1: 395-97; *VS* 2: 126-50). And the various characters speak of themselves in the plentiful dialogue throughout the text. But even with the dominance of the third person, each different voice remains the expression of a unique life that, being presented from its own perspective, generally elicits empathy. There are some exceptions: it is hard to warm to the exploitative Dopalet; Xavier's casuistic hypocrisy and self-justification are often galling; Patrice, as an unrepentant woman-beater, is difficult to accept; La Véro's incessant complaining grates; Max's almost total amorality is disgusting; above all, Vernon himself, in his shameless and deceptive behavior towards his friends, especially in the first part of the novel, but elsewhere as well, is never completely sympathetic. But even with the negative characters, because of the subjective voice, there are moments when the reader is drawn into an effort to understand: the injustices suffered by La Véro as a school teacher, for instance, help explain why she has become such a shrew; and Dopalet seeking solace from his suffering by listening to Marin Marais in *Tous les matins du monde* is, at least temporarily, a little less hideous (*VS* 3: 35-59, 78).

Each character, when introduced, becomes a recurring motif in the textual composition. At the beginning, it is Vernon who dominates, but as each new voice enters, the dynamic alters, and little by little, the interweaving and layering of voices creates other centers of emotion and meaning, and the story of the individual protagonist is merged with stories of relationship and community. The father-daughter relationship between Aïcha and Sélim — the adolescent girl and her single-parent Algerian father, so profoundly complicated by the decision of their mother and wife to leave them for sex-work, and even more so by the humiliation imposed by the lie of the French promise of equality and integration, which in turn has led to Aïcha's turning

to Islam—could readily have been developed into a novel in its own right: as could Aïcha's later forbidden romance with her friend Faïza's husband. The figure of La Hyène (reappearing after her role in *Apocalypse Bébé*), a veiled but powerful voice for female homosexuality and ethical probity, who guides and protects behind the scenes, also invites further development. The scene in which she washes and clothes Vernon in advance of the revelations of the Bleach tapes is one of great mystery and beauty, and it is more about her than about Vernon (*VS* 2: 123-24). One could cite many more examples: Despentes creates a vision of humanity as infinitely varied as the musical universe that inspires it.

The novel recounts Vernon's journey from uselessness to usefulness, but it does much more than that. It is also the story of the transformation — albeit ephemeral — of a large array of discordant voices into a more harmonious chorus and the re-forming of a community from a group of largely atomized individuals. To return to the DJ analogy, Despentes achieves the overall effect by controlling the beat, rhythm, mood and tempo of each section and the sequencing of sections. The transitions are often surprising, unsignalled—the sudden appearance of a character whom the reader has never met before directly, the opening up of a life whose connection to the previous action is not immediately clear: this is the case with Sylvie, for example, in the first volume, an ex-girlfriend of Alex's whom Vernon will shamelessly exploit (*VS* 1: 129-42); it is also the case with Léonard, at the end of the novel, who becomes one of the sources for learning about the final massacre (*VS* 3: 368-76). Sometimes there is dramatic contrast through direct juxtaposition: for example, the frenetic buzz of the Kiko segment followed by the gentler, more sensual unfolding of the one devoted to Marcia—both occurring during Vernon's DJ performance. But there is never any loss of movement or cohesion. If a DJ's principal task is to keep people dancing, we can argue that Despentes does precisely this with her reader's minds.

The success of a good DJ's tracks will depend on the total playlist—and we have seen how Vernon's brilliance in this regard is underscored by his creator. Despentes has built her own "playlist" in a very structured way, though possibly more through inspired instinctual improvisation than through previous intellectual planning. In schematic form, this is what the "track" organization looks like (where **V**=Vernon as subject; x=other voice; [x]=reprise of other voice).

Vol 1: **V**x**V**x**V**xxx**V**xxx**V**xx[x]xxx**V**x[x]x**V**
Vol 2: **V**x[x][x][x]**V**xx**V**xxxx[x][x][x][x]**V[**x]x**Vet al.**
Vol 3: **V**x**V**[x]**V**x[x][x]x**V**[x][x]**V**[x][x][x][x][x][x][x]xx**V**x

In addition to the already mentioned increased spacing of the segments recounted from Vernon's perspective (and we should note that the final segment of the second volume ranges over many different perspectives as the community is drawn into the dance), we can see that while certain voices-motifs appear more than once, the form as a whole, in the first two volumes, maintains a balance between the familiar and the new. It is also, in those volumes, an open form, extensible and centrifugal, with a seemingly unlimited potential for expanding the number of voices to be heard. This is another quality of a good DJ: the ability to create the impression that the music, and the dance, will never end.

But, inevitably, they do. The "playlist" pattern for the third volume is less open, with familiar voices dominating new ones by a proportion of two to one. It is also more strident. The known voices are mostly marked with gloom: Vernon's raging toothache in the opening sequence is a harbinger of a steady fall from grace; Xavier is grumpy and will become more so; Pamela, the group's peace-maker, is sick of the voices in her head and of the lack of recognition of her work (*VS* 3: 12-14, 133-51, 171-84). Even La Hyène, until this point self-assured and efficient, is unsettled; her trip to Paris distresses her: "la capitale est devenue galerie des atrocités, une démonstration quotidienne de ce que l'homme est capable de refuser à son prochain" (*VS* 3: 306). Almost all the new voices are associated with negativity: La Véro, Stéphanie (mother of Max's son), Max himself, Stéphanie (the assassin) and Léonard (Dopalet's comforter) (*VS* 3: 35-59, 109-32, 154-70, 356-67, 368-76). The artistic work of the novelist-DJ continues unabated, as Despentes measures out doses of anxiety or relief (the story of Céleste, for example), of protest (Olga), of romantic passion and betrayal (Aïcha), of treacherous revenge (Dopalet and Max). But the dance in the reader's mind becomes progressively more and more a *danse macabre*. As for the voice in the final track, it is totally disembodied, emptied of any passion or personality, barely a rustle of white noise before the speakers fall silent: how can one not feel let down by the sense of defeat?[11] But conversely, given all that has come before, how can one not salute the novel's real artistic achievements?

Conclusions

This study has argued that through her use of musical themes and her writerly appropriation of compositional techniques, Virginie Despentes has, in *Vernon Subutex*, greatly enlarged the scope and impact of her literary art, in terms both of the scale of her imagined world and of the originality of her narrative strategy. Music has always been a passion for Despentes, but by mobilizing that passionate energy as an explicit driver of literary creation, *Vernon Subutex* attains a power that far outstrips the earlier work. As a metaphorical representation of contemporary France, it conveys with potency and poignancy the social, political and moral discomfort of the national community. Despentes's fictional universe adds a jarring new dimension to what, for those familiar with contemporary French cultural history, is a much-discussed and troubling set of problems. But it surely has a more universal reach as well. Every Western society has the same kind of under-belly zones and characters as we find in the novel. Everywhere, there is a similar sense of crisis and dissolution: joblessness, sleeping rough, gross and unjust discrepancies in wealth, loneliness, tribal gatherings, addiction to drugs and alcohol, broken people with broken dreams. The nostalgia Despentes expresses for a lost time in which real and positive change seemed possible is not limited to France, and nor is the quest she develops for some kind of altruistic, messianic force of healing.[12] The tension between disillusionment and hope is in many ways the music of our times, and Despentes's version of it will leave many readers waiting to see what she writes next.

Notes

[1] A Google search of Despentes+Balzac reveals dozens of such references since *Vernon Subutex* first appeared. The comparison has become something of a journalistic cliché. See for example Xavier Delaporte: "Car vous êtes, Virginie Despentes, notre Balzac, et je ne suis manifestement pas le seul à le penser…" See also, in this volume, Maxime Goergen's article "*Vernon Subutex* et le roman 'balzacien'" (165-82).

[2] The phenomenon has been ably documented by, among others, David Looseley and Barbara Lebrun.

[3] Several commentators have drawn attention to the significance of music in Despentes's early fiction. See, for instance Louar 83-98; Saint-Amand; and Schaal ("Virginie Despentes…") 102-24.

[4] See Bourneuf. Vincent Richard had originally posted more comprehensive lists for volumes 1 and 2 as well, but these have been removed.

[5] For the importance of punk-rock culture and music in *Bye Bye Blondie*, see also Schaal ("Un Conte…") 49-61.

[6] Note her statement in the number of *Les Inrockuptibles* of which she was guest editor (24-30 May 2017): "la musique reste le truc le plus magique dans ma vie quotidienne" (Kaprièlan and Despentes 25). Despite her admitted nostalgia, she would certainly reject Bill Flanagan's suggestion that rock has reached "a stage of reflection on past glories."

[7] The "Bounty" bar is made with a chocolate-covered coconut filling: dark on the outside and white on the inside.

[8] In this pessimistic view of France, Despentes (via Alex, Sélim, and later many other characters) joins a well-established chorus. At least since Alain Peyrefitte's *Le Mal français*, there has been unremitting public hand-wringing about the state of the nation and its society. See also the more recent *La Hantise du déclin de la France* by Robert Frank and the very insightful and well-documented final chapter and conclusion of Sudhir Hazareesingh's *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People* (287-326).

[9] In the video clip for this song, the images are as eerily macabre as the lyrics, with Bowie stretched out on a bed, his face bandaged, and buttons for his eyes, and then his final backing into a closet to disappear (DavidBowieVevo).

[10] YouTube offers the full song, see LeonardCohenVevo.

[11] The above-mentioned *Les Inrockuptibles* interview has as its lead caption "ma colère est une colère de vaincu" (Kaprièlan and Despentes 20). For the context of this statement, see page 26 of the interview.

[12] See also, in this volume, Goergen's article (165-82).

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