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Book Review

***Vernon Subutex (1&2 vols)* by Virginie Despentes Paris. Grasset. 2015. 396 & 382 pages.
Hardcover €19.90, Paperback €7.90, (ISBN: vol. 1: 978-2253087663, vol. 2: 978-2253087670)
(English Version: MacLehose Press forthcoming)**

Reviewed by Joseph Beaudreau

On the surface, *Vernon Subutex* is an engaging thriller about the purgatorial existence once a life of sex, drugs and punk rock has faded. French rock icon Alex Beach is dead in a bathtub due to a drug overdose. His death seems as clichéd as his betrayal of punk rock sensibilities when he embraced fame and pop culture status. His fans are devastated, but his death has a particular impact on Vernon Subutex. Alex was not just his best friend, but also his financial benefactor after his record store - a Parisian icon in its own right - becomes another victim to a post-Napster music industry. Vernon was a man of the scene in the '80s and '90s but without the record store he falls into obscurity, becoming isolated and exclusively cyber-connected. Keeping his internet subscription had been his most important financial obligation after rent, but now that Alex is gone his life changes dramatically: he's kicked out of his apartment brusquely with little regard by his landlord and forced to couchsurf among his estranged friends until he eventually ends out on the streets. Then begins an urban manhunt as word spreads that Subutex possesses the last known recorded interview of Alex Bleach. What will it reveal?

While the plot is thrilling, the real driving curiosity and discomfort is the mirror that Despentes holds up to Western society where the tensions and contradictions are impossible to ignore. In a climate of increasing political revolt, whether led by a new wave of progressive leftism from Jeremy Corbyn to Black Lives Matter to Nuit Debout or by racist populists like Trump and Le Pen or movements with bewildering conclusions like Brexit, *Vernon Subutex* is a book of our time, a book that examines the alienation and isolation across society. Many characters that she introduces are marginalized members of society, whether mediocre professionals, homeless, aging singles, disenchanting social activists, former porn stars, or transgender immigrants. As one follows their journeys you can see the forces of neoliberal and social traditionalism pulling in opposing directions, both offering a losing proposition. It is no wonder many of the characters carry a sense of hopelessness and anger that is expressed in waves of hate and love. Thankfully Despentes has littered the book with moments where humor tempers the overarching darkness.

Virginie Despentes is an author deserving of more recognition outside of France and beyond the few underground feminist circles in which her name and literary contributions are celebrated. In 1994, she published her first novel *Baise-moi* (published in English as *Rape Me*), a controversial novel that immediately created an image of Despentes as a radical, aggressive feminist to be admired or hated depending on one's opinion of patriarchy, its existence, and permeation. It is a story about two women who, after experiences of rape and other violence by men, see little value in anything after society shows little regard for them, so they decide to create their own modern version of "rape and pillage". This reputation was only enhanced with her feminist manifesto *King Kong Theory* where she uses her past experiences with rape, prostitution, and work in the porn industry as reference points to explore common attitudes towards and about women. While Despentes certainly deserves her threatening stature to defenders of misogynist culture, it is often distracting from her brutally accurate portrayal of societal failures under capitalism. *Vernon Subutex* is a political journey through social classes of France that proves beyond a doubt that Despentes has too much breadth of observation and

intelligence to be reduced to a single issue author. While she does not provide solutions to these political problems, at least not in the first two volumes, it is a novel worth reading by political theorists because her frank, empathetic insight into the minds of the marginalized can enhance one's understanding of the age we are engaged in and the economic, social, and political systems that contribute to this malaise.

The book was well received in France by critics and readers alike, and went on to win numerous literary awards. One of those awards was the Prix Anaïs Nin 2015, which is decided by a jury of French writers and English and American literary agents with the aim of choosing a French novel to be translated into English. This translation of Volume 1 of 3 is scheduled to be published in June 2017 by MacLehose Press.

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