Vernon, I feel you

Journal on the translation of *Vernon Subutex* by Luz & Virginie Despentes

By *Lilian Pithan*

Translated from the German by *Steven Corcoran*

I've been waiting for you

Listen to that awesome solo!

Vernon! Are you listening?

What's that song, DJ?

He's killing me, she said

Are you asleep, Vernon?



Turn on the record player, right there on the shelf. Put on Joy Division. *Disorder*. Listen to the bass line. First you just twitch, then it knocks you over. *Let it out somehow*. You turn around, there's a guy in the doorway, tall, thin, bright blue eyes. He's looking for a place to sleep for the night, wonders if he can crash on your sofa? He sits down, starts talking. His life is a novel. Dead buddies, bailiffs, bass players, passers-by, dealers, students, screenwriters, groupies, traders, bar girls, porn stars, university professors, homeless people, Nazis, thugs and a hyena. Everyone is talking at once, your head is spinning. In French now. *Désordre*. Different singer, different voice. Everyone wants to tell the story. About Vernon, Alex and these crazy binaural beats. This is important, this is real. You know what I mean? There's the text and the imagery. A unity in the stroke. You dismantle it, examine the parts, twist and turn it, polish it a bit, reassemble it. The blue eyes always at the back of your neck. *I'm watching you*.

Joy Division, *Disorder*
https://open.spotify.com/embed/track/5fbQCQt91LsVgXusFS0CCD?utm_source=generator&theme=0

I've been waiting for you

Vernon Subutex is not just anyone. He's a DJ, a guru and, above all, a legend of the Parisian punk rock scene. *Vernon Subutex,* the comic, is not just anything either.[1] Arising from the dual quills of Virginie Despentes and Luz, it seems to me almost baroque in its exuberance. Despentes has been an integral part of the French literary scene since her debut *Baise-moi* (1994), and *Vernon Subutex* has become a best-selling trilogy of novels. Luz became famous for his cartoons for *Charlie Hebdo*. He was one of few to escape the attack on the editorial office on 7 January 2015. His comics are political, personal and distinctive. They are the perfect pair for this story.

When I read the comic for the first time, my head spun. So many voices, so colourful, so much action between the panels, places, and time levels. But the confusion is good. It shows what is special about the medium of comics and what makes a successful literary adaptation. From the very first page it is clear that there is no escape:

> *I've been waiting for you*

The Hyena, ex-dealer and troll *avant la lettre*, who does the digital dirty work for rich people, is faceless. Or is it perhaps Vernon speaking here after all, in disguise, in a second life?

> *We need to talk about things that are between you and me.*
> *I will tell you the true story of Vernon...*

But the story we hear is not just hers. It is multi-voiced and lets everyone have their say, from the annoyed bailiff to the homeless communist. What Despentes exemplifies in her trilogy of novels, Luz translates into fantastic images. Each panel contains at least one person, and often several, and always features some talking, arguing, singing or narrating. A soundtrack thunders in the background, knotting classics from rock, punk and R&B into a hypnotic loop.

Playlist, Spotify, „Vernon Subutex – der Comic“
https://open.spotify.com/embed/playlist/3LHrJI5dyc6shgi3X0em6R?utm_source=generator

Listen to that awesome solo!

It also becomes immediately clear to me that I have to find the right voices for this translation. Vernon and his buddies speak a colloquial language. They use *argot* and *verlan*, the language of youths in the Parisian suburbs, which is now used by almost all French people this side of fifty. They occasionally also sprinkle in an English word. Most of them are in their late forties but would like to be younger, more laid-back. And when they are high, they might happen to discuss things with dogs.

How would Vernon speak in German, if he lived in Berlin and had ended up on the street in the district of Wedding? In search of an answer, I ride the underground, listen to people, store up trivia, secrets and exciting phrases. Then I phone and write,

especially with French friends, to understand the sound of the original in all its nuances. We go out in the dark Berlin winter and ponder the layers of meaning of girlfriend and *Tussi*[2], *meuf*, *nana* and *pouf*. If Luz describes the Hyena and her little friend Aïcha as *paumées* in French, are they then simply *verpeilt* (lost or dopey) in German? And how to put the many layers of meaning of *crevard* into one German word? Schnorrer (scrounger), Loser (loser), Arschkriecher (arse-licker)?

Isabelle Liber recommends Bob, a fantastic online dictionary of French colloquialisms. Every word seems to exist here, in a hundred variations. I accumulate material, write down associations of feelings, write back and forth with native speakers. Bob becomes my best friend during these months. I often have to think of Pieke Biermann, who said that, contrary to the cliché, translating is not a lonely business. One is always in conversation with others! In my case, there were also electro-producers, SPD people and experts in the porn business helping me with their linguistic competence. And my head is still spinning. The only thing that helps is the soundtrack from Bad Brains, as their fast screeching rhythmises my thoughts.

Vernon! Are you listening?

Two voices dominate the story: there is Vernon, the record dealer who first loses his shop, then his flat, and surfs from sofa to sofa. In his luggage he has the confession of rock star Alex Bleach, a friend from his youth who drowned in the bathtub at the height of his fame with too much coke in his nose and pills in his blood. What he confesses to is not known; after all, Vernon has not watched the video tapes. Nor has he listened to the binaural beats on Alex's USB sticks. Instead, it is with Joy Division that he opens the gates to music for him, *Disorder*; Alex's breakthrough comes with his song *Désordre*. Vernon is now excused for everything, including the fact that he deprives the reader of the real core of the story.



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Like the novel, the comic jumps between time levels: a flashback is followed by action in the present, interspersed with dreams and lucid moments of intoxication. To reflect the rhythm of the prose, Luz works with different panel sizes, page layouts and changes of perspective. The rhythm is particularly impressive when the levels of language and of perception intertwine:

Vernon Subutex im Park
Editor: Lilian Pithan

https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/G1JITH4kVtw

A third level runs through the comic. A narrator hovers between the panels, she summarises, defines, specifies, introduces new scenes. She, too, is polyphonic: sometimes she sounds like a stranger, sometimes like the hyena and then again exactly like Virginie Despentes. But it is also the voice of Claudia Steinitz, who has translated Despentes' novels from French into German. Luz has taken the narrative texts in the comic from the original, so there has been no need to translate all 303 pages. However, many of the dialogues are new or are only to be found in rudimentary form in the novel. Claudia confirms my first impression: it's all about the voices, the diversity of expression. She did a lot of preliminary work that I can draw on, talked at length with a homeless woman in Berlin and documented the language of Nazis on the internet. Luz has also inserted entirely new scenes in the comic, in which he deepens Vernon and Alex’s relationship or expands on the backstories of individual secondary characters. As befits a good literary adaptation, not everything in it matches the original.

Michael Groenewald, editor at Reprodukt, and I work in parallel: I translate the dialogue, while Michael takes on Claudia’s translation and looks up individual sentences in books and e-books. It quickly becomes clear that Luz loves taking his liberties. He has brushed the original against the grain, made a cut here and there and rewoven the whole thing. In some places he inserts jokes, in others he replaces individual words. I also notice subtle shifts in register: *femme* becomes *meuf*, *ami* becomes *pote*. Depending on the context, women become chicks (or bitches), friends become buddies. The dialogues rewritten by Luz are far more colloquial than the original novel. Despentes was also involved in the adaptation, proofreading and smoothing the texts. On the page, everything fits together perfectly, the different levels do not confuse but emphasise the polyphony. In the translation, one voice stands out for me in particular: that of Alex, which is hypnotic, sexy, overexcited. The rock star steals the show from everyone.

What's that song, DJ?

Without music, Vernon would be a different man. His record shop defines him, even long after it has closed down. How can the sound of Joy Division, Tricky or Lydia Lunch be put into words? In every translation, it is important to me to get the sound of the sentences right, but in *Subutex* this becomes the dominant principle. Again and again I speak out the individual scenes to myself, change the rhythm, slip into the skin of the characters. Suddenly I can feel Vernon's despair when he winds up on the street. Emilie's anger at her band members becomes mine, as does Sylvie's loneliness and Patrice's resignation. When, due to the effect of chronic repetition, the words almost lose all meaning, I listen to music. Some songs I know, others are discoveries. The playlist “Vernon Subutex” on Spotify counts 319 tracks.

Spotify, Playlist „Vernon Subutex“
https://open.spotify.com/embed/playlist/5LthiOw5VTJ4Wta03UYW7d?utm_source=generator

I work my way through the music, the text and again and again I digress at the pictures. Luz intersperses his comic not only with melodies, but also with pop culture quotations. When Vernon is put out on the street by the bailiff, a disgruntled Michel Houellebecq, choking on his fag, trots past him. While he is lounging on the sofa at

Xavier's, the radical right-wing politician Éric Zemmour is spraying his venom on the television. Alex reminds me of Tricky and Lenny Kravitz, of Don Cheadle in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but in his coolness he also has something of Jean-Michel Basquiat. He’s dying from the music industry, capitalism, racism and his own drug addiction. When Vernon tells rock journalist Lydia Bazooka about him, he becomes a philosopher:

> *Success is like beauty, there's no discussion: when it hits you, it hits you. And in the end, Alex had to die.*

So music does not save anyone, contrary to urban myth. Nevertheless, it bales Vernon out more than once. This much it does, at least.

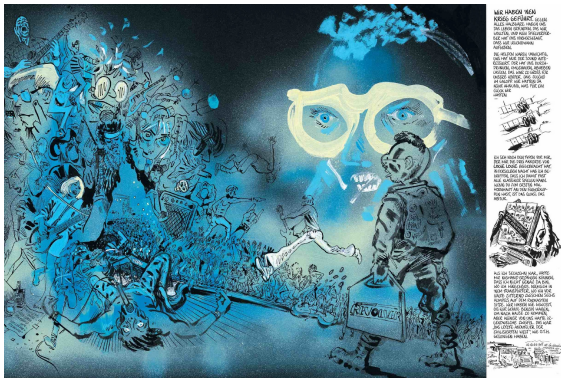


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It takes a lot of time to take the comic apart right down to the smallest detail, to illuminate every word, every line. Of course, this is done too little, and the closer the deadline gets, the more my perception of the weeks and months that have passed becomes distorted. While I'm still translating, part of the text is already being edited and passed on to Olav Korth, Reprodukt's letterer. Every word has to be rewritten and come as close as possible to the verse of the original. The art is not one that all have mastered. Olav’s mastery is undisputed.

He's killing me, she said

At some point Vernon does watch the confession on the cassette. But only after he has been chased all over Paris, picked up by the hyena and pinned down by his friends. What Alex babbles on about in the semi-darkness is crazy, hair-raising and tragic. His ex-girlfriend Vodka Satana is dead. The media say it was a suicide, Alex says murder. The fragments of words and images from the video that runs through the comic from page 32 onwards, are elegantly put together by Luz. Though the words are often repeated, the images are new each time. Sometimes we see Alex working with the camera, sometimes we are in Vernon’s head looking through his slowly closing eyes, then again Alex gets out of a steamy shower and conjures up his past in cigarette smoke. These scenes show what makes comics special as a medium: good illustrators play with perspective, show different snapshots, twist and turn the panels until they tell not just one but a multitude of stories in ever new combinations. Then there is the colouring: Luz gives each character a unique colour palette, in Alex's case it is black, azure and pastel yellow.



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Red is only brought into the picture when Satana's nose is burning with coke. One page later she is dead and all Alex is left with is the prophecy she uttered during their last argument:

> *I have a list. I'm going to talk. I told him: That's enough! You want me to keep quiet? You'll have to fork out. He said he's gonna kill me, and he's gonna kill me...*
> *The bastard's killing me!*

What her death entailed exactly remains unclear. The life of Vernon Subutex will ultimately be moving on; there will be a second volume. Satana’s last words ring in my ears as I jump between scenes while translating. Her accusation also worries me because I feel like a killer myself. I always have to shorten sentences, patch them up again, delete whole passages: there's simply not enough room in the speech bubbles. It doesn't look any better with the narrative texts, the words crowd into a very small space in the boxes. If you inquire into what the biggest challenge is with translating comics, you often hear: “The space!” But I'm not sure that's really true. After all, what is said can always be made more precise. The art of condensation connects comics with poetry: no word is too much, each has to fight for its place. I like this play with boundaries. The fewer letters I have, the more meanings shimmer in a single word. Nevertheless, it hurts to have to sacrifice another beautiful construction. Kill your darlings.

Are you asleep, Vernon?

When the countless voices come together at the end on the lettered page, it seems to me like a miracle. Everything falls into place so perfectly. The images come to the fore again. While I've already let go of the book, I think about why so few literary adaptations work as comics and how Luz has achieved it. He describes his work on the text as lacemaking in which it is sometimes necessary to use a chainsaw. He also says, “I wanted Virginie to read something other than her own book in my adaptation." He has achieved that, she says. Vernon now has a face and eyes that no one can “unsee.” But he is not simply a copy of the character in the novel; he is a wholly new person. The pictures don't support the text, they grow beyond it. Luz formulates this as follows:

> *For me, a good adaptation means respecting the text, violating it at an*

> *unexpected moment and, above all, not illustrating it.*

You could also sum it up in this way: in comics, text and image are one. They can only work together, not alone. When translating, one therefore thinks in completely different relations, has less leeway but more freedom. Vernon and Alex Bleach are also a unit. A bromance par excellence. Alex's words resonate for a long time:

> *You were a smuggler, dude, for all of us. We liked you and you didn't notice. You were the king, Vernon.*

We never find out what really happened. Vernon's true story is one among many, a hypnotic babble of voices that you can't understand, only feel. And through it all, the binaural beats pulsate.

Spotify, Tricky, *Excess*
https://open.spotify.com/embed/track/6lLaMbLUj1gsl2m5aqy9s0?utm_source=generator&theme=0

The record is spinning, the song is different. Rough voice, hard rhymes, have you gone through too much? Either you give it your all or you don't. They won't let you go, these voices. They are manic, self-centred, imperative. *I believe in people lying*. You no longer believe they're telling you about Vernon, they're each spinning their own story. Maybe it's the binaural beats, the pressure and sound waves that no one can escape. Nothing can be controlled, everything takes off. The guy is still sleeping on your sofa, silent, rarely opening his blue eyes. You don't know what he's thinking, you really don't care now. The truth lies in-between, in the feeling that a word triggers when it hits your brain via eye, mouth or ear. Unambiguity is not the answer. Feel him, even if he says nothing. Then the whole thing falls into place, everything has its place. *We all sound the same, you don't know my name.*



The launch of the book and the TOLEDO journal took place at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin on 25 June 2022 as part of the 'Handeln mit Sprache' festival. The video can be viewed on the LCB website.

Endnoten

1 Luz & Virginie Despentes: Vernon Subutex 1, translated from the French by Claudia Steinitz and Lilian Pithan, Reprodukt Verlag 2022.



2 Depending on the context, this German slang term can mean anything from a chick to a bimbo to a bitch.

#Comic, #Subkultur, #Romanadaption, #Comicübersetzung, #Polyphonie, #Musik



Lilian Pithan, ©Bea Davies

Lilian Pithan studied Comparative Literature, Romance and English Studies in Tübingen and Paris. Since 2013 she has been working as a freelance translator and editor with a focus on graphic literature. She curates exhibitions for the International Comic Salon Erlangen and moderates the Graphic Novel Day at the International Literature Festival Berlin. She is also co-founder of the German-Arab cultural magazine FANN and the Arab-German Literature Days Berlin. In addition to poetry, she translates French and

English-language comics by Hervé Tanquerelle, Camille Jourdy and Luz, among others.

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