Whatever became of ‘Génération Mitterrand’? Virginie Despentes’s Vernon Subutex

Michèle Schaal

*Iowa State University, mschaal@iastate.edu*

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Abstract
The first two volumes of Virginie Despentes’s trilogy, Vernon Subutex (2015), offer an assessment of the “Génération Mitterrand” and those born during François Mitterrand’s presidency (1981-95). Drawing on sociological and historical studies, this article argues that Vernon Subutex charts the contemporary consequences of the neoliberal turn taken during Mitterrand’s era. This socioeconomic context significantly impacted the characters’ identities and life paths: while some have benefited from class privileges, others have fallen down the social ladder. As for the younger generation, it has internalized the rules of the neoliberal system.

Disciplines
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Comments
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Orthodox Spirituality and the Boundaries of Europe in the Novels of Maria Maîlat and Liliana Lazar

by Oana Sabo

This article analyzes comparatively Sainte Perpétuite (1998) and Terre des affranchis (2009), by Romanian-French authors Maria Maîlat and Liliana Lazar, as texts that reflect on the cultural place of Romania in present-day Europe through the theme of spirituality. Their vivid portraits of Orthodox religion, which contrast with French secularism, and the exotic place of the Balkans in the French cultural imaginary largely explain their favorable reception. Yet, when read in light of their formal aesthetics—ambivalence, circumlocution, metonymy, irony, and trace—these novels complicate neat East-West divisions, thus proving to be more than exotic fictions designed for easy consumption.

Whatever Became of “Génération Mitterrand”? Virginie Despentes’s Vernon Subutex

by Michèle A. Schaal

The first two volumes of Virginie Despentes’s trilogy, Vernon Subutex (2015), offer an assessment of the “Génération Mitterrand” and those born during François Mitterrand’s presidency (1981–95). Drawing on sociological and historical studies, this article argues that Vernon Subutex charts the contemporary consequences of the neoliberal turn taken during Mitterrand’s era. This socioeconomic context significantly impacted the characters’ identities and life paths: while some have benefited from class privileges, others have fallen down the social ladder. As for the younger generation, it has internalized the rules of the neoliberal system.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Slam ô Féminin’s Collective Relationship to Print, the Spoken Word, and Marginalia

by Andrea Jonsson

This article looks at the relationship between print and spoken poetry in the writing philosophy and written contributions made by the slam poetry association Slam ô féminin in its 2009 anthology. Part of Slam ô féminin’s philosophy derives from making use of the miscellaneous tidbits of our everyday life and engaging with them in a process called marginalia. For this reason, the journalistic fait divers serves as a productive symbol of their writing philosophy. The engagement between textuality and orality provides a collective agency that counteracts a feeling of marginalization.
Whatever Became of “Génération Mitterrand”?  
Virginie Despentes’s \textit{Vernon Subutex} 

by Michèle A. Schaal 

2016 marked both the hundredth birthday and the twentieth anniversary of the death of François Mitterrand, \textit{président de la République française} from 1981 to 1995. As a result, several books, articles, documentaries, exhibitions, or shows were devoted to his political and social legacy. Many discuss the “Génération Mitterrand,” whose definition, from the onset, has been elusive if not paradoxical (Bergounioux 93, 101; Guillaumin 144). “Génération Mitterrand” was originally a slogan coined by publicist Jacques Séguéla for Mitterrand’s 1988 reelection campaign. Séguéla explained that it stemmed from a demand addressed to the French President: to create a better future for his daughter. The Génération Mitterrand could thus be defined as comprising children born under his presidency—a characterization reinforced by Séguéla’s poster featuring his daughter holding the hand of a man. Maud Guillaumin also includes individuals born in the late 1970s, who grew up during Mitterrand’s presidency (13). Jean-Baptiste Montvalon adds to the Génération Mitterrand contemporary French politicians of various affiliations—Cécile Duflot (Europe Écologie Les Verts) or Damien Abad (Les Républicains)—who, because of their age, could not be politically active in the 1980s (10).

The campaign slogan was also quickly applied to left-wing, multicultural young activists who enabled Mitterrand to be re-elected (Guillaumin 143–49, 153–54). For Sylviane Zappi, “moins politiques que leurs aînés de 68, plus portés sur l’antiracisme et l’humanisme que les révolutions. [La Génération Mitterrand va] réussir à creuser [son] trou dans une société qui vante alors tant l’individualisme et le libéralisme” (117–18). Indeed, some of its members went on to become prominent French political figures, including Harlem Désir, co-founder of the antiracist organization SOS Racisme and later secrétaire d’État chargé des Affaires européennes, or Laurence Rossignol, ministre de la Famille, de l’Enfance et des Droits des femmes (both in governments headed by Manuel Valls). The movements initiated by the Génération Mitterrand—“La marche des Beurs,” SOS Racisme, or the protests against the “Loi Devaquet”—testify to their focus on human rights, solidarity, antiracism, and social justice. Finally, Marie Darrieussecq, who asserts
her belonging to the Génération Mitterrand, claims that it also produced some of the most acclaimed and controversial French writers, such as Michel Houellebecq, Christine Angot, and Virginie Despentes (Bacqué and Chemin).

For Richard Werly, if the 2016 “Mitterrand-mania” appears nostalgic or festive, it also shows “la France désenchantée de la Génération Mitterrand.” Mitterrand’s presidency was also marked by a series of scandals (the sinking of Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior, the exposure of his involvement in the Vichy regime), political disappointments (his handling of the post-Cold War world or the conflicts in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia), and, most importantly, the socioeconomic changes brought upon by neoliberalism and globalization, which would dramatically impact this very generation and the next ones. Furthermore, the Génération Mitterrand’s political activism did not yield long-lasting results. Darrieussecq states that the movement SOS Racisme or the protests against the Loi Devaquet were trendy, chiefly festive, and apolitical (Bacqué and Chemin). Racism has obviously not disappeared in France, neither has the fact that cultural capital is necessary to succeed in academia. In addition, while Mitterrand’s re-election was supported by prominent young social activists—such as Isabelle Thomas, one of the student leaders during the protests against the Loi Devaquet, or Malek Boutih, an SOS Racisme activist—they were never rewarded with political appointments (Guillaumin 153-54). The Génération Mitterrand is thus contradictory at best: it comprises individuals from a wide-ranging age group, with social, cultural, and political potential, and, simultaneously, individuals who would be unable to fulfill this potential—in part because of the socioeconomic instability and vulnerability brought upon by the neoliberal turn.

Despentes shares Darrieussecq’s disappointment and disillusionment regarding Mitterrand’s presidency. However, as an “écritain de gauche,” Despentes focuses primarily on the socioeconomic impact Mitterrand’s era and global context have had on this generation and their identities (Trapenard, “Monde”). Upon the release of Teen Spirit (2002), Jean-Louis Tallon asked her: “Pensez-vous que la gravité et la violence de vos romans est symptomatique de cette génération sacrifiée, qui avait dix-huit ans dans les années 80, et qui fut entre autres chose [sic], marquée par le chômage et [le] SIDA?” Despentes answered: “Oui, absolument. C’est la génération post-mitterandienne [sic]. Ceux de ma génération craignent d’être sacrifiés à n’importe quel moment, de ne pas trouver leur place dans la société, de pas avoir d’avenir. Contrairement à ceux de 68 qui étaient animés par la révolte et l’espoir” (Tallon). In 2015, Despentes published two volumes of a trilogy entitled Vernon Subutex. The portrait of a suffering or sacrificed generation that experienced the 1980s became a leitmotif in the press and interviews after the release of the first volume. Despentes even reiterated that she depicted and belonged to a “génération désemparée” (Kapriélêan 26).
Despentes has portrayed a variety of individuals of her age who have been unable or unwilling to adapt to mainstream society. However, her fiction has also represented, albeit as fleeting figures, the socially privileged. Therefore, from the onset, she has illustrated the contradictory social experiences of the Génération Mitterrand. As her neologism “post-mitterrandienne” implies, she has also considered all those born during or immediately after Mitterrand’s presidency. Since Despentes intends to create “un livre-patchwork qui travers[e] toutes les classes sociales” (Kaprielan 22), Vernon Subutex also pursues her exploration of social and class disparities (Schaal, “Nécessaire” 276). More specifically, Despentes charts how the socioeconomic context that marked Mitterrand’s presidency impacted both generations’ individual identities and social experiences.

Mathias Bernard explains that, unlike its preceding decades, 1980s France has thus far not been the object of comprehensive studies (8). Yet, “de multiples questions [qui] se posent aux dirigeants comme aux citoyens des années 1980 [...] se posent toujours dans la France du XXIe siècle. C’est sans doute là que réside l’actualité des années Mitterrand” (330). Those questions included the European Union, the rise of extremisms, deindustrialization, and how to deal, socially, with neoliberalism—a problem yet unresolved. For specialists, Mitterrand’s presidency was marked by globalization and the neoliberal turn (Bernard 71–99, 323–24; Castel 95–96; Zappi 118). This implied a shift from industrial to financial capitalism, whose impact has been especially visible on employment, health, housing, and family.7 Neoliberal ideology is based on individualism, flexibility, mobility, maximizing profits, and “une dynamique de décollectivisation, ou de réindividualisation” especially within the workplace (Castel 23; italics in original).8 As a result, it has generated what Robert Castel calls “l’effritement de la société salariale” (95; bold in original). The later term designates the various legal protections, state-funded policies, and benefits that were gained by workers under industrial capitalism. While not eradicating all inequalities, Castel claims that “la société salariale” granted most French citizens a number of social rights and benefits, solidarity among workers, and a status within society that was based on wage-earning and not private property (15–23, 416–24).9

However, neoliberalism eroded this system by triggering “la précarité,” which included mass unemployment as well as the multiplication of hybrid and intermittent forms of employment that reduced income and social benefits: CDD or “contrats à durée déterminée,” subcontracting, and (unpaid) internships.10 While Mitterrand was not directly responsible for this socioeconomic shift, many consider that he failed to address these changes effectively, especially regarding mass unemployment.11 Instead of developing and reinforcing socialist policies, he took “le tournant de la rigueur” (1982–83), making a significant number of individuals socially vulnerable (Bernard 32, 52–53; Guillaumin 54). Furthermore,
while it was initially perceived as temporary, this socioeconomic vulnerability—first labelled, under Mitterrand’s presidency, “la nouvelle pauvreté”—has become the social norm to this day. Hence, this situation has generated a social anxiety about “le déclassement social”: slipping into unemployment or permanent poverty. Furthermore, “la précarité” now impacts a portion of the population that, under the “société salariale,” had been lifted out of poverty. “Précarité” or “déclassement social” do not merely trigger anxiety: when people are affected by them, and especially by long-term unemployment, they may develop certain pathologies (depression or alcoholism), they are stigmatized for being unemployed or for receiving welfare, just as they may develop identity crises, since socialization is still based on being a wage-earning worker and, hence, an active participant in society.

Since Apocalypse bébé, Despentes has developed a specific aesthetic: novels with multiple characters and where each chapter, with a few exceptions, focuses on one character in particular. As in previous publications though, she alternates between using discours indirect libre and a multifocal perspective. Readers feel that the characters themselves describe their experiences, especially since, throughout Vernon Subutex, Despentes meticulously transcribes how their personalities and social situations have been impacted by both personal experiences and the neoliberal turn. Oftentimes, those chapters or passages take the shape of bitter, disillusioned, nostalgic, straightforward, and occasionally unapologetically egotistic self-assessments. Critics have also described Vernon Subutex as a portrait of a country in crisis, plagued by “la précarité” and people’s constant fear of becoming social outcasts. The first two volumes chart, indeed, the “précarisation” of the Générations Mitterrand and post-mitterrandienne, with the lexical field of “précarité” present throughout both novels. For instance, Olga and Laurent, two homeless characters, use “exclus” and “inclus” to speak of their situation (VS1 339; VS2 188). “L’exclusion” nowadays applies to those who experience social vulnerability or worse (Bernard 293; Castel 85–86; Damon 3–5). Despentes also deploys numerous acronyms for benefits or programs meant for the socially vulnerable or typically associated with lower-paid occupations: HLM, TUC, SMIC, RSA, AFPA, GRETA, CFA, BEP, CAP. Finally, Vernon—the eponymous protagonist—becomes a faithful rendition of how, for Serge Paugam, “la précarité” occurs through a number of successive stages. In the opening chapter, Vernon transitions from “la fragilité” to “la rupture du lien social” (Paugam 5; italics in original): he loses his job, obtains the RSA, desperately attempts but fails to find a job, then lacks money to afford his rent, public transportation, or basic necessities, eventually loses his benefits and is evicted from his apartment (VS1 9–47). Vernon then hops from friend to friend for shelter before becoming homeless. While Despentes’s characters are not exclusively determined by their social status, it remains a significant aspect of their
biographies: “la précarité” has dramatically impacted their aspirations, social experiences, and lives.

In *Vernon Subutex*, Despentes illustrates the contradictory experiences of members of the Générations Mitterrand and post-mitterrandienne after the neoliberal turn. Neoliberalism reinforced social class discrepancies, since a higher percentage of the population is now impacted by “la précarité” (Castel 28). Of the twenty-four characters featured in *Vernon Subutex*, ten come from the lower-middle or working classes and experience social vulnerability. This of course includes Vernon—who is of the Génération Mitterrand—but some of his friends, acquaintances, or people his age have experienced similar circumstances. Some live in HLM, others have hopped from one temporary job to another for nearly three decades; some are stuck in low-paid positions, others (like Vernon) have become homeless. In general, younger individuals have never known employment stability.

Despentes depicts eight other characters who have managed to climb the social ladder or to remain in a middle-class position. They are, however, not necessarily happy, due to both personal and social circumstances, including the anxiety mentioned above, but also because of the persistence of other discriminations such as sexism or racism—thus stressing the failure of the Génération Mitterrand to successfully address the latter issue. Finally, she features six characters who have always benefited from social class privilege and thus have never known or cared about the neoliberal changes. Some have even tremendously benefited from them.

With the acronyms and the emphasis on one’s employment or precarious situation, Despentes demonstrates that identity, in a neoliberal context, remains not solely based on idiosyncratic traits. Instead, identity intersects with one’s position within the neoliberal spectrum and with social privileges. However, if *Vernon Subutex* undeniably belongs to a twenty-first-century trend Böhm and Kovacshazy call a “représentation esthétique de la précarité” (13), I argue that it is also a novel of agency—or lack thereof—under neoliberalism.

Despentes illustrates how this socioeconomic context has generated two distinct subjectivities. As mentioned above, individualism is inherent to neoliberalism. Under Mitterrand’s presidency, individualism increased significantly and even became a trait of the Génération Mitterrand itself (Bernard 153–210; Guillaumin 14, 276, 279; Zappi 118). For Castel, in a neoliberal system, where

*l'injonction à être un individu se généralise* [Certains] maximisent leurs chances et deviennent hypercompétitifs [D'autres] sont impuissants à maîtriser [le changement] Le plus souvent ils n'ont pas été formés à le faire, ni accompagnés pour le mener à bien. Ils manquent des 'capitaux' au sens de Bourdieu [...] Ils sont ainsi menacés d'invalidation sociale. (24–25; italics in original)
These two subjectivities are what Castel calls “individus par excès” and “individus par défaut.” Nearly all characters in Vernon Subutex incarnate one of these subjectivities. The “individus par excès” are typically those who have benefited from social class privilege, and the “individus par défaut” all others, with some exceptions.

In volume one, Despentes introduces Kiko, a millennial trader belonging to the post-mitterrandian generation. His chapter is an eleven-page, cynical, neoliberal rant:

Les bénéfices se comptent en milliards. Ou les pertes. Et tu es responsable. C’est l’infra-instabilité. [...] Il vaut cet appartement, il vaut les filles qui bougent leurs fesses dans son salon, il vaut la drogue. Il vaut ses Berluti. [...] tout le monde donnerait n’importe quoi pour être à sa place. [...] Qu’est-ce que les riches ont de plus que les pauvres? Ils ne se contentent pas de ce qu’on leur laisse. Les mecs comme lui ne se comportent jamais en esclaves. [...] Celui qui se laisse dominer mérite d’être dominé. C’est la guerre. Il est un mercenaire. [...] Qui est le plus fort. Le plus rapide. C’est la seule question. (VS1 216–22)

Kiko is the epitome of neoliberalism and Castel’s “individu par excès” (25, 424–33): he is a narcissist, he blames the poor for their condition, he never feels solidarity for anyone, he has developed a ruthless sense of individualism, he uses a lexical field of violence and conquest, he has a thirst for money and material possessions, he worships power, and he thrives off financial capitalism. However, he is not the only character in the novels who has developed such a subjectivity. Laurent, a man of Vernon’s age and therefore from the Génération Mitterrand, is an influential movie producer who holds a similar discourse in his chapter (VS1 102–15). Kiko, Dopalet, and other “individus par excès” tend to downplay the importance of social class privilege in the neoliberal system. However, as specialists point out, since the 1980s, those primarily impacted by “la précarité” and the neoliberal turn are unskilled young individuals and women. Furthermore, Castel explains how the bourgeoisie has best managed the transition to postindustrial capitalism. It perpetuated an annuity system but also secured competitive college degrees and high-paying jobs (Castel 156). Although no backgrounds are given for Kiko or Dopalet, it is safe to assume that they come from either the higher or middle classes. All of the four remaining privileged characters thrive because they too illustrate how the bourgeoisie has successfully adapted to the neoliberal system. Despentes also underlines how the neoliberal “individu par excès” is not solely a phenomenon or ideal for the privileged classes. Charles criticizes Laurent for having “le même arsenal de conneries [qu’un] cadre sup [...] des petites poulettes ultra light, de la verroterie Rolex et une grosse maison sur la plage. Que des
rêves de connard” (VS2 23). Being an “individu par excès” has thus become the standardized social norm for everyone.

Naturally, the “individu par défaut” par excellence in both volumes is Vernon. Despite his strong sense of individuality, he is not socially and personally equipped to develop a successful subjectivity within a neoliberal system. Bernard underlines how rock music became especially important for young people’s identities in the 1980s, with bands such as Trust or Téléphone translating their “malaise” or even rejection of mainstream society (270–73). As a young man in the 1980s, Vernon participated in the rock subculture. However, even if individualistic, his friend, rock singer Alex Bleach, explains that it was not based on neoliberal diktats: “Mon aristocratie, c’est ma biographie [...] j’ai connu un monde qu’on s’était créé sur mesure, dans lequel je ne me levais pas le matin en me disant je vais encore obéir” (VS2 129). Bernard also explains that 1980s rock music was “une contestation sans réel débouché politique” (271). In addition to sharing this perspective, Despentes had already emphasized in previous fictions that, while an enriching experience, rock culture had made individuals even more vulnerable or unable to cope with mainstream society (Schaal, “Conte” 48).

With the character of Vernon, Despentes maintains this bittersweet assessment. For instance, she writes that, in Vernon’s time and subculture, not having money was not frowned upon and even “ajoutait en crédibilité” (VSl 28). Then, he became a successful record store owner but one understands, throughout both volumes, that sharing his passion for music mattered more than making a profit. Consequently, once he is jobless, he is unable to find another position since, in his field, “les offres d’emploi étaient plus rares que s’il avait travaillé dans l’extraction du charbon” (VSl 10). Even the objects he mentions or takes with him before he is evicted from his apartment testify to his misunderstanding of the new socioeconomic context: they are either personal items or rock culture artefacts that are nearly worthless in mainstream society (VSl 39). Vernon is undeniably an “individu par défaut”: although he attempted to develop an independent individuality, and for a while successfully did so, he lacked the social class capital to understand and adapt to the neoliberal world. This eventually left him homeless. Nonetheless, Despentes does not fall prey to an easy “blame the system” criticism. If Vernon becomes “précaire” and homeless, it is also because he is “immature” and a “looser” [sic] who failed to take his situation and the broader social changes seriously (Brocas and Einhorn 28).

Although all age groups are impacted individually and socially by the neoliberal turn, Vernon’s experience illustrates an important difference between the Générations Mitterrand and post-mitterrandienne. Beyond what Julien Damon calls the “fracture générationnelle” between “des baby-boomers qui ont eu un accès aisé à l’emploi et au logement quand leurs enfants vivent plus intensément la
flexibilité, la précarité et la flambée de l’immobilier” (38; italics in original), Despentes shows how some members of the Génération Mitterrand have become “individus par défaut” because they still believed in the “société salariale” that granted protections, benefits, a social status, and even class mobility. For instance, Despentes writes about Vernon’s business:

Jusqu’au début des années 2000, un tas de gens se débrouillaient plutôt bien. On voyait encore des coursiers devenir label managers [...] même les branleurs finissaient chefs d’un rayon disques à la Fnac [...] Vernon était entré [dans son magasin] comme vendeur à vingt ans et avait repris la baraque à son compte [...] pendant plus de vingt ans, qu’il vente ou qu’il ait la crève il avait monté le putain de rideau de fer de sa boutique, coûte que coûte, six jours par semaine. (VS1 12–13)

Here, and very ironically, the rebellious Vernon articulates a “working-class hero­ism” standpoint (coming to work regardless of the circumstances), shows how social mobility was a reality for unskilled individuals (he took over his boss’s business, merit-based promotions were more common), and even believes in personal and social identity granted via work. In addition, readers understand that a decent living was achievable even with a low-income job and individuals could keep the same occupation for their entire professional lives. Nonetheless, because of his inability or unwillingness to accept the social changes, Vernon slipped into “la précarité.”

Individuals from the post-mitterrandian generation, have, on the other hand, developed a radically different mentality. As Patrick Cingolani stresses, “la banalisation des mauvaises conditions de travail est renforcée en ce que les nouvelles générations n’ont souvent d’autre expérience que l’instabilité et l’insécurité” (54). Anaïs mirrors this new situation. To a certain extent, her experience is similar to Vernon’s as she is the daughter of baby boomers who achieved social mobility through hard work (VS2 245). Furthermore, they transmitted to Anaïs their work ethic and the idea of meritocracy. Yet despite all of her efforts, she has never managed to secure stable employment. Unlike Vernon, however, she is not careless about her situation. Echoing the individuals Cingolani mentions in his study, she attempts to remain visible on the job market at any cost (54) and has, consequently, developed “une peur phobique du trou inexplicable dans son CV” (VS2 245). She has also multiplied opportunities to gain experiences or jobs in her field (VS2 244–45). Several items transpire through Anaïs’s portrait. First, she has internalized the new social and employment norm: one must be flexible and accumulate experiences to be competitive. Then, that in spite of the changes, identity and social agency remain tied to work. Finally, she too is an “individu par
défaut”: she plays by the system’s rules, but because she lacks social capital or support, she has not managed to thrive within the neoliberal system.

Another example of the post-mitterrandian specificity is Céleste, the daughter of a former client of Vernon’s. She is the incarnation of what Cingolani calls “des parcours amphibies” where individuals engage in activities—paid or unpaid—based on their personal aspirations and in addition to having a low-paid job that enables them to earn a living (72–73). Cingolani interprets this “discontinuité” as a way to assert one’s individuality and a mode of resistance to “la normativité sociale du travail avec son mode d’imposition disciplinaire” (73). Amphibious is certainly Céleste’s situation: she is unable to earn a living from being a tattoo artist, her passion, hence she has a bartending “taf [job] alimentaire” and has had a series of different unskilled jobs (VS2 204). However, unlike Anaïs or Vernon, she no longer believes identity or status may come from society or long-term employment: “‘mais c’est fini papa, plus personne ne sera fonctionnaire à vie, laisse-moi faire mon truc’ [...] Ça se saurait, si ce que veulent les gens modifiait quoi que ce soit à la politique. Ça l’énerve de les voir tout le temps croire en des choses qui n’existent plus” (VS2 207–10). In this passage, Céleste has fully internalized the neoliberal reality: she lives in a ruthless society where instability is the norm, benefits and protections have disappeared, and rebellion is useless since former generations have not managed to change the system. This passage is also a criticism of her father, of the Génération Mitterrand (more specifically Vernon’s community of friends), and of mai 68. Céleste despises their pitiful clinging on to a bygone system or to the idea of a revolution. Her beliefs or behavior are not unique. They are shared by at least two other post-mitterrandian characters, Aïcha and Vernon’s “conseillère RSA,” Madame Bodard (VS1 11, 252). As Anaïs, Céleste has internalized this idea of mobility and flexibility with her two occupations (even if she resents one); just as she is focused on developing a specific subjectivity as a tattoo artist. As such, “work,” even if “atypical,” still represents for her a way to express personal and social agency. Yet she too remains an “individu par défaut” since she lacks social class capital, education (she dropped out of college), and perhaps also a network in the tattoo world to succeed (VS2 206–07).

With Vernon Subutex, Despentes demonstrates that Mitterrand’s presidency and the 1980s were a crucial era for French society and its citizens. The neoliberal turn has dramatically influenced individuals, their identities and social experiences. In particular, Despentes carries out a comprehensive and bittersweet assessment of what has become of both generations in the 2010s: some have succeeded yet at the cost of their aspirations, some have fallen down the social ladder, some have never risen or cannot rise above their dire conditions, some still try to cling on to youthful ideals, some have benefited from class privileges, and some have never known anything but the neoliberal system.
Nonetheless, Vernon Subutex cannot be interpreted as purely pessimistic. Volume two offers a glimpse of hope. Despentes claims that the Spanish alternative communities and political parties, such as Podemos, have influenced her trilogy (Brocas and Einhorn 28; Sulser). Hence, volume two also portrays the characters attempting to rebuild the solidarity and communities destroyed by neoliberalism. Whether those will succeed and help the Générations Mitterrand and post-mitterrandienne develop new social patterns or fulfilling identities is a question left for the yet unpublished third volume.

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Notes

1 "La marche des Beurs," initially called "La marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme," took place from Oct. to Dec. 1983. The early 1980s had witnessed incidents in some banlieues near Lyon, as well as several instances of racist police brutality. As a result, a group of young people initiated a protest march in Marseille that would eventually lead them to Paris, where Mitterrand met with them. Although unrelated to the march, the organization SOS Racisme was created a year later. In 1986, Alain Devaquet, ministre délégué chargé de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche (in Jacques Chirac's cohabitation government), introduced a bill aimed at modifying the university system. Changes would have included more selectivity of students, higher tuition fees, and a devaluation of some diplomas and universities. Denouncing the inequalities such a system would engender, students mobilized nationally from Nov. to Dec. 1986. After Malik Oussekine—a young man who was neither a student nor partaking in the protests—was killed by the police, the bill was abandoned and Devaquet resigned. Mitterrand, even if indirectly, supported the protesters both in 1983 and 1986 (Bernard 273–82; Guillaumin, 50–68, 97–99, 106–11).

2 An ever-complex label, Werly's definition also includes emerging politicians—Jean-Louis Bianco or Ségolène Royal—who were appointed by Mitterrand in the 1980s.

3 See Bacqué and Chemin; Bernard 41–57, 186–97; Castel 95–96; Guillaumin 54, 103, 173; Tallon; and Zappi 118.

4 See also Bernard 295. For similar criticism of SOS Racisme (as as a tool of the Socialist party), see Bernard 278–79; and Guillaumin 99–103, 156–59.

5 At the time this article was written, the third volume had yet to be published.

6 See Bonnaud et al. 40; Cohen; Kaprièl 26; Leyris, "Colère" 4, "Gants"; Roulier; and Sulser. The 1980s alternative rock culture was primarily discussed in interviews or articles.

See Bernard 153–210; Castel 11–30, 41–46, 143–51; Cingolani 34–38, 85–86; Damon 38, and Paugam xiv, xxiv.

See also Bernard 267. In interviews, Despentes also claims that the 1980s marked the end of an effective social system that granted people, and her generation especially, a number of social rights and benefits (Cohen; Kaprièlan 26; Roulier).

See Bernard 106, 117, 267–68; Castel 96–97, 162–69; Cingolani 5–10, 21–80; Damon 4, 20–21, 37–38; and Paugam xiv–xviii.

See Bacqué and Chemin; Bernard 42–57, 114–19; Castel 95–96, 339; Guillaumin 103; and Tallon.

See Bernard 42–46, 106, 117; Castel 159–83, 234, 438–40; Cingolani 18–19; and Paugam xxvii–xxviii.

See Castel 288; Cingolani 78; Damon 19–20, 36–40, 84, 97; and Paugam x, xxvii, 58–62.

See Bernard 293; Castel 342–43, 347, 439; Cingolani 15–16, 83–90, 109; Damon 30, 50; and Paugam 3, 58.


See Bonnaud et al. 40; Brocas and Einhorn 26, 28; Crom 6; Kaprièlan 22; Leyris, “Colère” 4, “Gants” 4; Stemberger 166; Sulser; and Trapenard, “Monde,” “Douce.”

The following abbreviations will be used for the two volumes of Vernon Subutex: VS1 and VS2.

Respectively, “Habitation à Loyer Modéré,” “Travaux d’Utilité Collective,” “ Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel de Croissance,” “Revenu de Solidarité Active,” “Association Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes,” “Groupement d’Établissements” (for the education of adults), “Centres de Formation d’Apprentis,” “Brevet d’Études Professionnelles,” and “Certificat d’Aptitude Professionnelle.” Only the TUC subsidy was established under Mitterrand’s presidency (Bernard 115; Castel 166). However, the RSA is the more recent version of the RMI, or “Revenu Minimum d’Insertion.” Despentes mentions this change (VS1 14). The RMI is also considered one of Mitterrand’s—and his Prime Minister Michel Rocard’s—major political legacies (Bernard 97, 307; Castel 236–37, 358–59; Cingolani 119–21; Damon 59–65). Despentes frequently depicts female protagonists benefiting from the RMI (Schaal, “Virginie” 48–49).

For example, Émilie is a former bass player who became a civil servant but who is unhappy with her middle-class life. Her unhappiness also stems from the sexism she has faced in both rock culture and mainstream society. Furthermore, she can only afford to live in Paris because her parents bought her an apartment there (VS1 50–56; VS2 50–53). Sélim is the son of an Algerian immigrant, who has become a university professor. However, he is angered and depressed by the lack of respect for intellectuals and by an increasingly vocal social and political racism (VS1 242; VS2 153–61).
20 For instance, Antoine Dopalet became a famous street art gallerist chiefly because he was the son of an influential man. Furthermore, because of his social capital, he—and not the working-class artists he championed—profited from this business (VS2 231–34). Gaëlle may live frugally but Despentes implies she does so solely because she is a “petite fille de riche” (VS1 212).

21 A brand of luxury shoes.

22 See Bernard 116–17; Castel 98; Cingolani 25, 51, 60–66; Damon 29, 38; and Paugam xiii–xiv.

23 Sylvie lives off her family’s fortune and a hefty alimony (VS1 148–49). Xavier, although barely earning a minimum wage, has a privileged life because his wife is the daughter of “rentiers” who own the Parisian apartment they live in (VS1 82–83).

24 In interviews, Despentes shares a similar perspective (Cohen; Crom 6; Kaprièelan 22; Trapenard, “Douce”; Roulier).

25 See also Kaprièelan 22.

Works Cited


