

How to Detonate the Novel: A Rough Guide to the Later Fiction of Louis Armand

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Abstract:

This essay contends that in his later fiction, Armand has worked towards detonating the novel in that in Armand work, “form follows destruction.” In a panoramic overview of the Armand canon Wolff’s crucial three points are that Armand’s oeuvre does not seek refuge in a single type of fiction (literary / popular), genre (mystery, thriller, epic), or scale (doorstopper, novella), that it searches for means of subversion and parody in the use of popular genres, and that it increasingly explodes the novel-form.

Keywords: Louis Armand; genre; novel; subversion; parody.

With a voluminous output ranging from academic texts to poetry to fiction, Louis Armand, the Prague-based writer, has, in his later fiction, worked towards detonating the novel. To parody the oft-quoted phrase, “Form follows function,” Armand’s “Form follows destruction.” In addition to his literary activities, he organises festivals and magazines *VĽAK* (defunct) and *Alienist*. Amid this plethora of work, where does one begin?

For those in search of answers or some overarching pattern/motif/monomania to Armand’s oeuvre, this piece can serve as a rough guide, of sorts. By no means comprehensive or authoritative, it offers an impressionistic, highly subjective, non-academic, incomplete interpretive gloss to Louis Armand’s “late works” (in part to establish chronological boundaries and in part because I simply have not read everything Armand has produced). With this specific case, Armand’s “late works” is defined as (almost) everything considered fiction from *Breakfast at Midnight* (2012) to *Glitchhead* (2021).

This “rough guide” also has the paradoxical (or is it contradictory) purpose of illuminating Armand’s “literary style” (a kind of textual “creative destruction” to co-opt Joseph Schumpeter’s term [Schumpeter, xv]). How do we define form for an artist who seeks to destroy the novel-form? And to borrow/steal/co-opt Tony Judt, presented here is “a history in fragments” (Judt).

***Breakfast at Midnight* (2012): Acid Noir**

Deliciously sordid, *Breakfast at Midnight* involves the appearance of a redheaded girl in a morgue. The two main characters, Blake, a pornographer, and an unnamed (and unreliable) Narrator, attempt to solve the mystery of the girl’s demise. For the Narrator, the redheaded girl triggers memories of a redheaded girl he loved and lost.

Classified as “acid noir,” *Breakfast at Midnight* takes place in post-communist Prague. Like *The Big Lebowski* or *The Long Goodnight*, *Breakfast at Midnight* is a meandering noir. Blake acts as an authorial stand-in for Armand, monologuing pitch black truths about politics and philosophy

like a *Mitteleuropa* Hunter S. Thompson. Post-communist malaise hangs about like an airborne toxic event.

Armand's "acid noir" operates within the double meaning of acid: first, on the formal level, with the noir's psychedelic plotline, the onrush of nightmarish images; and second, acid as a caustic substance that burns away weaker stuff, whether it is wax or human flesh. Blake calling out the world's bullshit amid Prague's post-communist, End-of-History free market triumphalism.

As the Narrator searches for his lost love Regen, he travels the globe, adopts a dead man's identity, and is unsure that he is a reflection of Blake (and vice versa). Despite all these narrative machinations, the noir structure remains relatively intact. Since history is an inherently retrospective practice, *Breakfast at Midnight* seems more conventional than Armand's later works, albeit in the form of a Central-European *Chinatown* channeled through *Apocalypse Now*. His writing style a seamless combination of Jim Thompson's pitch-black vision of humanity alongside Terry Gilliam's gallows humor.

***Cairo* (2014): Conspiracy, Crime, and Paranoia**

In contrast to the acid noir *Breakfast at Midnight*, *Cairo* is a multilayered tale of conspiracy, crime, and paranoia. With multiple locations and multiple plotlines, it is a narrative told in short episodic bursts. Ranging from Ground Zero in New York City to the Australian outback, from the ancient past to the far future, from the criminal mind to the mentally disturbed, the novel leaps back and forth between settings and characters.

The crux of the narrative involves a satellite crashing at Ground Zero. This itself is an odd echo: a crash at a former crash site. The alleged contents of the satellite become a trigger for multiple actors to gain control of its information.

The novel begins in the abstract, a city where "Everything about it seems fake and yet too-real" (*Cairo*, 1). In London, Joblard, a go-between with a massive frame and a small Vespa, maneuvers through the underworld. In Australia, Lawson, a half-Aborigine/half-American, travels to the outback to retrieve another satellite. Her mixed-race status acting like an exposed power line in its exposure of Australia's virulently racist past and present. In New York City, Osborne wanders on his way to Ground Zero, driven by unnamed forces. A Beckettian derelict struggling through the neoliberal hellscape of a modern megalopolis. There is also a sexy assassin in Prague, a resurrected man in a future Cairo, and other eccentric side characters populating the novel.

Cairo contains noir elements intermixed with conspiracy and science fiction, along with spy thriller, Guy Ritchie-esque yobbo criminality, all interspersed with dribs and drabs of secret societies, alien technology, and econo-political critique. A kind of multi-genre stew, as ever spiced with parody and critique.

The novel hearkens back to classics like *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* and contemporary pop kitsch like *The Da Vinci Code*. On the most elemental level, *Cairo* belongs to the Artifact Conspiracy genre, itself populated with titles from the likes of Umberto Eco to the latest bestseller schlock on pharmacy spinning racks.

Within this genre, Armand creates an atmosphere full of hard-boiled dialogue, scientific technospeak, and vicious critique. The pop genre has been transubstantiated into a political platform,

sideways autobiography, and parody/homage/critique. It demolishes an otherwise staid genre in an oversaturated marketplace brimming with replicas and shameless cash-grabs.

Mainstream novel conventions favour narrative linearity. *Cairo* takes the narrative line and fragments it into a several smaller narrative shards. Liminal characters—those who are biracial and/or mentally disturbed and/or of the criminal Lumpenproletariat—populate a diverse and fragmentary constellation revolving eccentrically around Ground Zero, the ultimate mass media spectacle.

***The Combinations* (2016): The Magnum Opus and/or The Ulysses Manqué**

I previously wrote about *The Combinations* in a multi-part literary essay on my blog, *The Driftless Are Review*:

The Combinations is a vast sprawling novel, 64 chapters, 888 pages, and a convoluted plot taking place in Prague, a city beset by ghosts, history, conspiracies, and a fascinating literary history. The novel centers on the misadventures of Němec, a hapless schlemiel caught up in events beyond his control, mirroring the troubled history of Czechoslovakia, a pawn too-easily sacrificed to the whims of ideological assertiveness and Cold War spheres of influence. ... Before engaging in the quest to solve the mystery of the Prof's death, Němec must first deal with the vagaries of personal freedom. He has left the confines of a state-run mental institution and found himself plopped in post-Communist Prague. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of its former client states, the onrush of Capitalism and Democracy have not ushered in a New Jerusalem. This is less about the Invisible Hand and all its glories, but about a new globalised economy bringing "corpses to the banquet" (to steal the poetics of literary genius/epic poet/anti-Semitic traitor/fascist tool/crank economist Ezra Pound). ...

Along the way, Němec forages through the Prof's old apartment and finds a copy of the Voynich Manuscript. Yet *The Combinations* barely dwells on this epic revelation before it dives into another digression, another character's rant, and another fever dream. Plot becomes less a propulsive force than an inconsequential encumbrance. *The Combinations* blasts apart the trendy creative writing technique known as "invisible style." This is a novel written in a self-consciously exuberant and excessive style. While parallels with *Ulysses* are inevitable, the mock-heroics hew closer to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. While Rabelais mocked the holy trinity of Church, Monarchy, and Academia, Armand skewers contemporary sacred cows like Soviet Communism, Western Free-Market Capitalism, and the Literary Form. ... With all the conspiracies, Wunderkammern, history, and relics filling the novel, Ezra Pound's command to "MAKE IT NEW" seems rather ill-placed. Němec finds himself imprisoned in the nightmare of history. Even awake, the differences, for him at least, remain superficial. Instead of struggling beneath the jackboot of Nazism or the Russification during Soviet rule, Golem City lies beneath the warm blanket of Capitalism and Democracy. "New boss / Same as the old boss," to quote the Who song. ... All the meandering, digression, and conspiracy place *The Combinations* more in line with a penny dreadful or a potboiler. Yet it is replete with stylistic tomfoolery and typographic variety one would see in a Danielewski or Vollmann novel. The massive novel is neither an innovative experimental work nor a more traditional

exemplar of bourgeois kitchen sink realism. It is neither and both, thus creating a Žižekian “short-circuit.” (Wolff 2019)

This leaves the elephant in the room, the elephantine novel itself. It seems too easy to call *The Combinations* a *Ulysses*-manqué, an ill-fated attempt to replicate Joyce’s modernist classic. The assertion becomes all the more convoluted since Armand is an academic specialising in James Joyce in particular and the avant-garde in general. It seems almost inevitable that *Ulysses* comparisons sprout up, an “ineluctible modality of the visible,” as it were (The quote from the “Proteus” chapter of *Ulysses*... and Proteus the god who could change form... and the theme of this essay being Armand’s protean acrobatics of the novel-form. Criticism can fast devolve into a free associative rabbit hole).

But the assertion needs a linguistic clarification, since Armand’s magnum opus is not simply a mawkish imitation of *Ulysses*. It is not so much an *imitation of* as a work *inspired from*. Again, further complicated and convoluted by the fact *Ulysses* is itself an inspiration/parody/critique of *The Odyssey* by Homer. High Modernism—Joyce, Pound, Eliot et al. —like the Renaissance, breathing new life into old forms.

While the Irish author used English to out-English the English, Armand’s magnum opus situates itself in Prague, not too far geographically from Joyce’s Trieste (both cities belonging to the defunct Austria-Hungary). Armand, an Australian, settling in Prague, exchanging the antipodean convict colony for the Central European city, the jewel in the crown of a Hapsburg Empire fragmented after the Great War. A psychogeography of a psycho geography.

Like his genre manipulations with the noir novel or the conspiracy thriller, Armand erects a narrative edifice that abounds in Laurencian digression and Rabelaisian excess. A simple tale—a hapless schlemiel wandering about a city—blown up to epic proportions, a mock-epic chronicling the absurd slaughterhouse of early modern and modern Prague (and European) history.

***GlassHouse* (2018): Mystery, Mayhem, and Mob Violence**

Armand followed his magnum opus with a work of literary miniature, a neo-noir phantasmagoria that revisits the noir genre (*Breakfast at Midnight*), the murder whodunit, and space aliens (*Cairo*). From my blog review:

Split into three parts, the first part is pure detective noir. A body of an elementary school teacher is discovered in the Jardin des Plantes at the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle. Detectives Schönbrunn and Laborde are called in to investigate. Schönbrunn is pissed, because it’s he’s hungover, sleep-deprived, and it’s his day off. Laborde, his partner, is an obese hater, an ice-hearted repository of contempt and ridicule for women and minorities, despite a perceptive acumen and the possibility of being right in his hunches. The museum staff are shocked at the developments, along with an accumulating crowd on the outskirts of the crime scene. ... This fractured narrative continues until mob violence erupts and the curated order of the Jardin collapses into chaos and slaughter. The focus shifts from noir to a disorienting array of perspectives; a kaleidoscope vision of ants, punk rock fish-people, a corpse, and the mob. ... *GlassHouse* is a neo-noir phantasmorgia, Faulknerian and Lynchian by turns, written by a scholar of James Joyce and the avant-garde. Don’t expect any hand-holding or infodumps to clarify the situation. Although one shouldn’t take that as a reason to avoid

reading the short book. In fact, like the works of Gilbert Sorrentino or Anthony Burgess, this metafictional odyssey is actually quite fun to read. It is a mystery story, but it is also a frenzied ode to the majesty and convolutions of language. (Wolff 2021)

***Death Mask Sutra* (2018): Plague, Prague, and Papa Walt**

This brief novel ushers in what could be classified as the *Alienist-style* of literary production. Published by *Alienist Magazine* with the authorial by-line of “Interior Ministry,” *Death Mask Sutra* re-imagines the 2000 Prague anti-globalisation riots as a zombie invasion movie.

The novel—if it can be called a novel—is structured not with chapter titles but with paragraphs, verbal snippets, and communiques beneath bold-faced titles. The titles could be tongue-in-cheek or gnostic in their meaning. Examples: **First Thesis, The Brain That Wldn’t Die, Inflatable Alma Mahler Doll, The Senses Are Fraudulent Oracles**, etc. The titles sometimes operate as a critique of the action, narrative non-sequitur, philosophy, dare, or reportage. Occasionally the text will give way to a visual image, either a grainy image or a diagram.

One of the central characters is Papa Walt, a corporate oligarch as human monstrosity. His main antagonist is THE Š.V.E.J.K., a shadowy organisation that releases political communiques. They say things like:

World order isn’t necessary, it’s only inevitable. The question is, what this order *means* – since clearly we aren’t speaking of a liberal democratic or global economic *délire de grandeur*, but “order” in its more worldly ramification of productive dynamics, of homeostasis & perturbation, of productive entropology. (Ministry, 17)

Near the end of the novel, a random voice says, “Hey, did you hear the news? A couple of cartoon planes just crashed the Twin Towers! Someone finally did it! And w/ cartoon planes!” What will become a new global war is recorded as background noise, no one understanding their participation in the riots is mere prelude, a dress rehearsal for something more monstrous being birthed in yet another geopolitical re-arrangement and scramble for resources.

Death Mask Sutra presents itself as political critique and textual collage, a fragmentary narrative stitched together with violence, sex, satire, and manifesto-like prose, thick as bricks lobbed into the glass-and-steel enclosures of oligarchs.

***The Garden (Director’s Cut)* (2020): Pastiche as Style**

The collage technique is further explored in *The Garden (Director’s Cut)*, a 2020 re-release of a 2001 text. The novel is based on notebooks from the author’s journey to Morocco and the Western Sahara in 1994 with photographer and anarchist “Dekaro.” *The Garden* fuses together sacred and profane sources: *Genesis*, Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Perfumed Garden* by Shaykh Nefzawi, Pierre Guyotat’s *Eden Eden Eden*, and Derek Jarman’s film of the same name. The result is a novel written in a single sentence, by turns sacrilegious, erotic, visionary, and violent.

... *this* body *this* bed *this* room though being nothing but phonetic gibberish muttered foreignly from afar turned to dopplereffect *yeux lèvres rêves* a preceding echo a voice beside itself plagiarised by its significations the way Allah braille-fingers mysteriously open His keyboard & words words words puking *spilling out of nowhere* ... (Armand 2020, 2, italics in original)

Images flit back and forth, emerge and disappear, amid a word-torrent. Logorrhea exposing the inadequacy of language. Obscene visions reflected back upon the real-life obscenity of existence, a panorama of sex-violence and rhetoric reduced to noise.

Armand's single-sentence novel is reminiscent of Philippe Sollers's 1973 novel *H* in its dedication to breakdown conventional language. Narrative, character, dialogue all disappear on a flat plane of perception, jumbled together in a profane and prophetic pastiche. Balanced in a zone between prose poem and anti-novel, *The Garden (Director's Cut)* takes the narrative form and stretches it to the very limits of comprehensibility.

Vampyr: A Chronicle of Revenge (2020): The Pandemic Bites

A pandemic text written with sound and fury, *Vampyr: A Chronicle of Revenge* charts the life and times of Offensia, the daughter of Eddie van Helsing. A parallel narrative follows the development of CORVID-69 virus in Golemgrad. An epic of Rabelaisian excess and the polymorphous perverse in prose, it ransacks genre and media in a frenzy, an onrush of images and text that recalls *Death Mask Sutra's Alienist-style* ("The Gospel According to Offensia" appeared in *Alienist VIII: Covidology* (May 2020) in the very thick of the Covid-19 pandemic).

At over 500 pages, *Vampyr* sprawls with Armand returning to the large-scale, long-form encyclopedic epic. Or mock-epic, given the pitch-black humour within, more on par with a Pynchonian evisceration of the American dream, this time the pandemic serving as a critique for a global neoliberal capitalism gone off the rails from the virus's ravishments, its inadequacies and inequalities laid bare, with corpses stacked in shipping containers like so much commodified product.

As an autobiographical aside, the death toll dwarfing the September 11th terrorist attacks and the economic chaos dwarfing the 2008-2009 "too big to fail" global economic meltdown, the events were truly unprecedented. Throw in a Twitter Shade Queen as "President," and the recipe for real-life dystopia is set in place (The attempted coup of January 6, 2021, and the witch's brew of misinformation, disinformation, and bad information about both the virus and the vaccine lay ahead, unbeknownst to even the most cynical, jaded, despairing social media political junkie).

Vampyr belongs to that canon of literature one can ascribe as encyclopedic: *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, etc. Countless other literary references, parodies, etc. abound within the text, supplemented by *Alienist-style* images and textual shenanigans. While the narrative has recognisable characters and a central through-line, it embraces other media like plays, film scripts, political communiques, manifestos, the mock-epic, lists, and inventories. Apropos since the smartphone and the Internet have whittled away our attention span and journalism has become nothing more than a listicle one scrolls through to kill time.

At heart, *Vampyr* is a Offensia's story. Scion of famous parents, former Riot-Grrl (their violence and gender non-conformity are echoes of William S. Burroughs's *Wild Boys*), beneath all the postmodern pyrotechnics, it remains a heartfelt examination of a womxn ground beneath the gears of institutional greed and incompetence.

The novel is also about the failings of global capitalism against the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the fissures and failures of the socioeconomic system. Capitalism adapted, as it

always does, but the new social mediated reality exposed how it failed millions. The robust political-economic relation that triumphed over Soviet Communism now seemed rather fragile with one false move rendering it obsolete with only chaos and anarchy in its wake. This echoes throughout all Armand's work, all the way back to *Breakfast at Midnight* with Blake's venomous truth-telling.

Capitalism, like vampirism, is about consumption. *Vampyr's* theme could be summarised by Volumnia, one of the scariest matriarchs in literary history, from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*:

Anger's my meat, I sup upon myself,
And so shall starve with feeding. (Shakespeare, Act IV, Scene 2, Lines 53-54)

***Glitchhead* (2021): Chaos and Its Aftereffects**

I had the fortune (or misfortune) to read *Glitchhead* before reading *Vampyr*. Reading the previous volume offered some degree of illumination, but with *Glitchhead* Armand detonates the novel form into a chaotic explosion of shards and fragments. A novel insofar as it is bound by a front and back cover and written in text, everything in between the first and last page is a defiant challenge to the reader.

The narrative—if it could be called that—follows Offensia and others. Like *Vampyr* it is a typographic funhouse, replete with rants, manifestos, visions, and gnostic sayings. As in the case of its predecessor, it is a work as much about visuals as text. Astrological signs, clipart, and text in multiple columns create a deliberately non-linear reading experience (*Vampyr*, for all its Rabelaisian excess, required one to read in a linear fashion, with some minor exceptions).

Described by Armand as “a chaotic inventory of aftereffects,” *Glitchhead* could be seen as a collection of “deleted scenes” from *Vampyr*. Throughout the text, Armand plants truth-bombs set to explode preconceptions: “IT IS BECAUSE DICHOTOMIES ARE FALSE THAT THEY PERSIST” (Armand 2021, 28, all caps in original). “What use is a language that can only describe itself?” Offensia, Nyx gLand, Moloch, and Moldbug engage in epigrammatic conversations:

Offensia: Devastation is never *aimless*: everything tends to the form of its own destruction.

Nyx gLand: Why's eschatology all of a sudden *my* personal cross to bear?

Moldbug: History's an umbrella brandished against an avalanche.

Moloch: Economy of scale is always relative.

Offensia: A system matched on by its inverted self. (Armand 2021, 94)

And so on... The novel does not conclude as “its end is neither a culmination nor a great overcoming, but the desultory cessation of an illusion.” (Armand 2021, 113) It is less a novel, as traditionally perceived, than a collage, a multivariable irruption, a multitonal dissonance, a textual and visual mosaic, an electric shock aimed to “short-circuit control.”

How to Detonate the Novel

From its fragmentary beginnings (*The Satyricon*, *Tristram Shandy*), the novel-form adopted a specific set of literary and materialist conventions based on the increase of readership, cheapness of products, and reliability of return-on-investment. The false dichotomy of marketing rhetoric

(literary fiction vs. popular fiction), genre conventions, and the endless chorus of “the death of print” insured a readymade debate for journalists and academics alike.

Louis Armand’s late fiction does not seek refuge in a single type of fiction (literary / popular), genre (mystery, thriller, epic), or scale (doorstopper, novella). Throughout his late work, he has used popular genres as a means of subversion and parody. Like an exploitation film-maker, the disreputable genre could be of use to slip in revolutionary ideas. Hence his use of Blake, the pornographer, to utter otherwise taboo truths about the world we live in. Since no one takes the pornographer seriously – his job is inherently sinful, etc. – why not make the most of it? It’s no coincidence the French state took umbrage with Sade’s atheism, not his erotic capers, something that made him just another ordinary aristocrat.

Not knowing the production history of every work profiled here, I refrain from any authoritative assertion about his late work “progressed” or “developed,” even though *Breakfast at Midnight* is more formally conventional work than *Glitchhead*.

The path from inception to production to publication is rarely ever a straightforward process. Market forces, production costs, current affairs, and the overall cultural zeitgeist offer impediments or opportunities, depending on the content of the novel, the personal life of the author, and the fickle tastes of the public. To call the formal and stylistic “development” from *Breakfast at Midnight* to *Glitchhead* seems, at best, naive, and at worst overly schematic. If anything, it reveals the pattern-seeking bias of the author and not Armand’s intended creative plan. It is generally frowned upon to see conspiracies where none exist.

With *Glitchhead*, Armand has taken the novel-form and exploded it into a multitudinous, fragmentary textual-and-visual narrative artifact. Once the novel has been exploded, what lay ahead?

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