Shadows of the Future: Louis Armand's Megaphones of Prague

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Abstract:
In this essay, Michel Delville focuses on Armand's "post-lyric" collection *VITUS*, whose fusion of poetry, photography, documentary, and other forms of artistry and criticism departs from traditional, linear notions of the aesthetics and politics of historical representation and commemoration. Delville traces the development, in Armand's poetry, of an entire phenomenology of the city of Prague in which Derridean "hauntology" becomes not just a working method for social analysis but also a compositional technique in its own right.

Keywords: Louis Armand; poetry; psychogeography; hauntology.

Since the publication of his debut collection, *Seances*, in 1998, the work of Louis Armand has grown into an oeuvre of formidable diversity and magnitude, a whole much larger than the sum of its parts thriving on a catalytic alchemy of extrapolation, speculation, and interpenetration. With more than thirty poetry collections and novels—some of them of Dostoyevskian proportions—to his credit, Louis Armand is in the process of establishing himself as the Michael Moorcock of the neo-avant-garde. At fifty he has become a centrifugal creative force to be reckoned with and which resists generic categorisation, as attested not only by his work as a painter and a video artist but also by the verbivocovisual hybridities of his fictional and poetic output, which often mixes cut-and-collage techniques with edgy, surreal visual elements, found material and complex typographical interventions. As if that was not enough, Armand has also been active as a publisher, a lecturer, a performer, an editor, a curator, a cultural agitator and promoter for experimental art and activism, in Prague—where he directs the Centre for Critical & Cultural Theory at Charles University and runs the city's Microfestival of the Arts— and elsewhere.

Nowhere is perhaps this teeming creativity and multimodal risk-taking more salient than in the haunting landscapes and multiple sub-plots of *The Combinations* (2016), a novel published a mere two years after the equally monumental *Cairo* (2014), a work blurbed by Stewart Home as "a genre defying anti-novel" which, "like communism," represents "the movement of vast majorities unfettered by a state" (Armand 2014, cover blurb) *The Combinations* is a vast, erudite behemoth of a book which confirms Armand's status as one of the most intriguing and ambitious presences in Europe's expat avant-garde community. That the novel's epigraphs feature quotes by the likes of William Blake, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Robert Johnson and Bobby Fischer, already says a lot about the sheer scope of histories and cultural references covered in the volume's 888 pages and 64 chapters. In many ways, Armand does for Prague (here as in other novels such as the Kafkaville of *Breakfast at Midnight* [2012] or the Golemgrad of the more recent *Vampyr* [2020]) what the already cited Moorcock or, say, Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair have done for London's cultural and political palimpsest, offering a kaleidoscopic account of the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is the capital's contemporary history, a vision replete with ghosts of the past and temporal variations which require the reader's collaboration in the production of meaning and the coupling and co-action between the book's segments. Appropriately, the dominant mode in Armand's exploration of Golem city is

the grotesque, and the shadow of Gustav Meyrink is never far from the glittering surfaces of post-postmodern, post-Warholian, post-everything landscapes and situations encountered in the book, where one is as likely to philosophise about the evolutionary nemesis of dog astronauts as to encounter an "empty 300ml PragoCola bottle" standing next to a petite sixth-former blonde "with a name redolent of some ancient-of-old from a Norse saga" (Armand 2016, 21). *The Combinations* is a maximalist monument of unfettered fictional and critical paranoia, one which sets out to reclaim "the wits of former days" (Armand 2016, 1) while being aware that somewhere, in a parallel world, history may just be "a catalogue of yesterdays & not this appalling compulsion to repeat" (309). This monumental tragico-epic extravaganza will sit comfortably on a bookshelf alongside Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Moorcock's *Pyat Quartet*, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

Although it shares many of the thematic obsessions of his fiction, Armand's poetry has had a tendency to depart from the sweeping breadth and cosmopolitan scope of his novelistic output to focus on more circumscribed zones of existential unrest and social critique. The epigraph to Armand's latest collection to date, *VITUS* (2022), "sur le pont de prague, l'on y danse" (9), is a détournement of the popular nursery rhyme, "Sur le pont d'Avignon," itself an ambivalent hymn to an imaginary city of happy workers featuring gentlemen, children, babies and army officers dancing round and round on the Pont Saint-Bénézet in a repetitive choreography of aimless gestures and intentions. Armand's collection responds to the song by evoking the convulsions the St Vitus dance of present-day Prague: a city-space both haunted by the ghosts of its totalitarian past and the prospect of a different sway, that of "private & public realisms" in an age governed by corporate interests and "secret harbingers of the next 1000-year Reich, the corporate metaverse" (Armand 2022, 4). The presence of the army in an otherwise idealised community in the old French rhyme points to the subtext of Armand's collection, which explores the psychogeography of Prague through the prism of the megaphones lining streets and squares still haunted by their totalitarian past and the shadows of the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The book is appropriately dedicated to the memory of Lukáš Tomin, whom Armand describes elsewhere as "something of a René Crevel of Prague's nascent post-Revolution scene in the early nineties" (Armand 2013, 43). The author of three books, including an intriguing poetic novel entitled *The Doll*, Tomin was forced into exile in 1980, returned to Prague in 1991 where he eventually committed suicide in 1995, at the age of thirty-two.

With this overall mood of persecution and insecurity as its backdrop, *VITUS* opens with the first of twenty-five black-and-white word-and-image collages originally inspired by a project begun in 1996 and entitled "The Megaphones of Prague," a project described by Armand himself as an ongoing action of "poetic research, guerrilla installation, appropriation, détournement, documentary, psychogeography, & various 'ephemerisations,' of these banal yet eerily erotic mouthpieces of authoritarianism & insurrection, power & disempowerment, totality & obsolescence—& the fugitive consciousness of continuing to live in their shadow" (Armand 2022, 5) Here is Josef Straka's account of the psychogeographical context surrounding *VITUS*:

> Armand's writing is a testimony, recorded in shorter & longer texts, of "the megaphones of Prague": based on observation of these mouthpieces-of-anything, with their past & lived present: a definition of the city by way of loudspeakers, of orders & distributors of all kinds of messages, in a combination of poetry, photography, installation, collage: also an evocation of what lies beneath the megaphone, its surroundings, but also its time, as well as our personal subjective time, the moment we pass under it, what mood is affected, & the sounds we imagine

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the megaphone to be making. The megaphone might be mute, but it still resonates with a spectral voice. And then there's the systematic longitudinal record, covering 25 years, creating a specific mosaic of the city, captured by way of various approaches & syntaxes, commentaries & documentary impressions: a report on a psychogeography (Armand 2022, 3).

Straka's insistence on the spectrality of history extends beyond the commonplace that the phantoms of the past always return to haunt the present, for Armand's traumatology does not limit itself to unearthing the layerings of Prague's tormented history. Rather, it seeks to capture and reactivate the paradoxical, Mallarméan moment where the mute megaphones resonate with the disjunct convulsions of the city's history. This truncated narrative acknowledges the megaphones' equivocal status as "flowers of evil" ("instruments of Nazi propaganda & terror [broadcasting the deathlists], of the Soviet puppet régime [providing the soundtrack of Normalizace]") and instruments of subversion ("the May '45 uprising," Armand reminds us, was transmitted over the PA system [virus-like], Prague Spring, the Velvet Revolution") (Armand 2022, 4). It also points to the last few decades of Westernisation during which "the memory of these ranting machines has gradually abated as they themselves slowly but surely retreat from view, all but invisible now, their periodic (satiric?) eruption into music, static, public service announcement, claxon, come as if from nowhere, hinting at unbidden forces still able to supervene, a ghostly echo of His Master's Voice that once bellowed from the sky, more disquieting because less obvious" (Armand 2022, 4). For Armand, the ultimate tragi-comical outcome of this process resembles the above-mentioned "St Vitus Dance" choreographing the combination of physical and virtual worlds promised by the corporate metaverse. Here as elsewhere, *VITUS* departs from traditional, linear notions of the aesthetics and politics of historical representation and commemoration and comes closer to Mark Fisher's hauntology, a model which stresses the "crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion" of the 21st century while exploring how "cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity" (Fisher, 9). In *VITUS*, this "strange simultaneity," which returns us to Derrida's Hamletian poetics, is less akin, however, to the oft-quoted phrase (in *Specters of Marx*) that "the time is out of joint" than to a critical method which interrogates and dramatises the spectrality of politics as such in a context of the increasing globalisation and virtualisation of human activity. In this respect, Armand's St Vitus dance seems to partake of Fisher's second definition of hauntology, which designates not that which is no longer present but "that which … has not *yet* happened," but which, like Derrida's specter of communism, is "*already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior" (Fisher, 19).

The question then arises as to what happens to poetic language and the lyric in such a disembodied and volatile environment. Theodor Adorno wrote of the lyric address as "a sign of the absence of a social totality" and the expression of a "pure subjectivity" opposed to the collective, a mode in which "the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself" (Adorno, 41-42). By contrast, in Armand's writings, the social value of poetry would seem to stem from two primary intentions: 1) its refusal to embrace a continuous, self-present notion of the social whole; 2) its capacity to mobilise meanings and configure strategies that highlight the rhetorical construction of the subject without embodying Adorno's notion of the lyrical speaker as an "I" immersed in its own verbal circumvolutions. The specters of *VITUS* visit decentered selves within decentered worlds. They "speak" through the voice of an "I" which is neither transparent, nor impersonal. Nor is it necessarily tied to what Lawrence Ferlinghetti rather elusively termed "the fourth person singular" (Ferlinghetti, 26) (or to its

subsequent, and equally elusive, reappropriations by Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Michel Maulpoix), as suggested by the first collage of the collection, which returns us to the Orwellian "ghostly echo of His Master's Voice that once bellowed from the sky" before introducing us to a panting version of the Jack Russell Terrier listening to the cylinder gramophone in the iconic HMV logo in a gesture which addresses the complex relationships between mass entertainment and totalitarianism. The omnipresence of dogs in *VITUS* generally functions as a trope which highlights the unresolved persistence of animality within the modern city: "one dog fervently / noses the arse of another / in a world where / poetry's unnatural" (Armand 2022, 34). Earlier in the volume, the sentence "do we own our own guilt?" (Armand 2022, 11) participates in a radical questioning of the self-present lyric and its assumptions of unmediated authenticity. Elements of an answer to this question can be found in a catalogue of apocalyptic fears and anxieties coalescing into a nightmare of indistinct images and half-heard voices. A fragmented tale of existential suffocation and self-consumption, *VITUS* explores the invisible plagues and bipolar disorders of late-stage (cognitive) capitalist subjectivity. Central to this project are Armand's variations on an open body—or is it a Deleuzian body-without-organs?—which governs the destinies of a self unleashing its unstable organicities into an expressionless void ("body w/out / diaphragm / w/out / lungs w/out / larynx / moutheye consumptive / to tempt fate they / swallow their / tongue / the chance / of not throwing up again") (Armand 2022, 14).
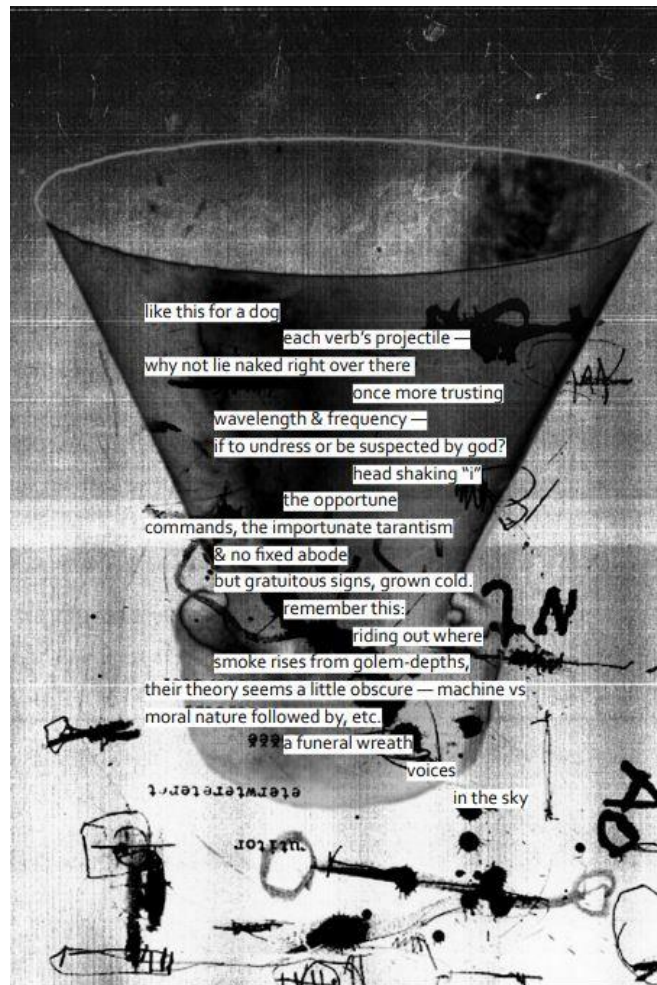

What follows is a becoming-machine process whose grotesque character finds its ultimate expression in the image of a silent megaphone-headed citizen, as Armand's frenzied verbivocovisuals abandon themselves to the sleepless cadences of an "importunate tarantism"

(Armand 2022, 15). As if to drive the nail into the coffin of Cartesian dualisms (there are no ghosts in Armand's Beckettian machines, only a network of free-floating signifiers existing in a state of option between speech and silence), the following collage—which features a megaphone turned upward resembling a funnel down which the speaker pours meaning— derides the "machine / vs. moral" dichotomy promoted by "obscure" theories while prophesising about the fate of public and private language debased into "gratuitous signs / grown cold" (Armand 2022, 15).

like this for a dog
each verb's projectile —
why not lie naked right over there
once more trusting
wavelength & frequency —
if to undress or be suspected by god?
head shaking "i"
the opportune
commands, the importunate tarantism
& no fixed abode
but gratuitous signs, grown cold.
remember this:
riding out where
smoke rises from golem-depths,
their theory seems a little obscure — machine vs
moral nature followed by, etc.
a funeral wreath
voices
in the sky

As the spectral, shadowy textures of the word-and-image experiments of *VITUS* indicate, the working out of Armand's phenomenology of the city reflects his attempts to understand hauntology not merely as a state of mind or a working method for social analysis but also as a compositional technique in its own right, one which develops a wide methodology for understanding temporal and spatial stresses, cultural displacements and experiential shifts. Some of Armand's collages capture such moments outside the ranging pulses of the St Vitus dance. Such instants of mock-imagist repose, however, only serve to reveal the troubled affects of a schizo-flâneur wandering the streets of a "trepanned city" (Armand 2022, 28). Armand's post-lyrics seem irremediably marked by the threat of dissociation and depression, bound by inexpressible residual passions and haunted by the mute sonic landscapes of a snake-like metropolis "taught cruelly by chance" (Armand 2022, 19).

born for these
moments. from windows &
love or normalisation

their master's
voice
day in day out
writing on concrete floor
"i do not sleep"
private devotion to people unmet
the virtuous, mute
in humid underground
parking lots.

biding time
[not theirs]

Armand's city vignettes evoke an underworld of disenfranchised and vulnerable beings under the threat of political and linguistic "normalisation." To that end, they display a fiercely disjunct syntax that underpins the intricacies of a self caught between repression and fear, resignation and revolt, between the past from which it is estranged and the future for which it longs. The poems of *VITUS* are so many flashes of episodic memory testifying to the complexity of Prague's spatial and temporal palimpsest and leaving the reader with very little hope of a successful resolution of its multifarious anomalies and immaterialities.

As for the megaphones themselves, they seem to have folded Armand's hauntology back upon itself, having become the specters of their own absence. There is no ghost, albeit *sous rature*, to be left behind. Or, to quote from Armand's 2006 long poem *Picture Primitive*, "there's no-one else / here / ~~the ghost's gone & the story ends.~~"

In a recent essay on the commodification of the neo-avant-garde, Armand considers Debord's claim that the revolutionary potential of poetry lies outside poetry writing as such ("where Surrealism, in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life, could precisely define its arsenal as 'poetry without poems,' for the [Situationist International] it has now become a poetry *necessarily* without poems)" (Armand 2015, 31) and ventures that "[the traversed duality of poetics and history] is really a refusal of a certain fictional status, adverting to the fact that whatever, within the institution of literature, etc., can be presented as 'poetry' is already a fictionalisation of its revolutionary potential," "just as an institutional avant-garde is a contradiction in terms" (236). "By détourning the process of domestication in

language," he concludes, "the poetic transfigures, reinvents," becomes "a *perpetuum mobile*," "a revolutionary machine," "a cinematograph," "a writing-in-motion" (Armand 2015, 236). Warning us about the risk of a self-indulgent annihilation of meaning this posture might entail ("subversion not irrationalism … if by irrational we mean a systematic alienation from linguistic potential; normalisation by abstraction") (Armand 2015, 236) Armand—who writes elsewhere that "totalitarianism makes art an obscenity" and that "capitalism makes it idiotic" ("Louis Armand," homepage)—conceives of his work as a context, as well as a practical reading philosophy, which broadens the ways in which poetry "cannot be reduced to an array of poetic objects; past monuments, Ozymandias-like: aggrandised bits of cultural detritus … until they, too, are reinvented: no longer monuments, but revolutions" (Armand 2015, 242).

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