

# The City Voiced

*R.E.M.'s Überlin*

**Katarzyna Jerzak**

All actual life is encounter.

—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

The street... The only valid field of experience.

—André Breton

### **When I was eighteen years old I won the national English**

competition in Poland and, as a prize, flew to Manhattan. It was June, the smell of fumes at JFK was overpowering, and all I remember is how impossible it was to get my Polish suitcase out of the cab that took me to my hotel on Lexington Avenue. The hotel boy helped me, for which I felt obliged to tip him with a five-dollar bill, half of the money the Polish Ministry of Education gave me for the six-week trip. A quarter of a century later I came back from America to Poland and was shopping at Manhattan, one of the first shopping malls that sprang up there after 1989. It is in Gdańsk-Wrzeszcz, at the crossroads of two major streets, very much in the heart of the city. Conscious of the irony contained for me in the name Manhattan, I thought of how I abandoned America only to find such palimpsestic traces of it inscribed at home. Walking around the mall, I heard a familiar voice call “Hey!” The voice came through the loudspeakers in a song, but I took its call personally. I felt addressed, spoken to, accosted even, but in a good way, as if an old friend called out to me. As I kept walking with my three children in tow and the voice kept singing, I realized that I knew this voice for sure. “Alexander,” I said to my teenager, “I know this man’s voice, who is this?”

“Mom,” came the nonplussed reply, “if you know him then I probably don’t.”

Then came the email from Athens, GA, about the end of R.E.M. as we knew it. And a Polish friend from Paris posted on Facebook the link for Sam Taylor-Wood’s video for the song “Überlin,” starring

Aaron Johnson. I watched it, mesmerized. Why? The setting is quintessentially urban and I don't like big cities. Graffiti make me yearn for fresh paint and I don't generally think highly of parkour. What, other than the song, made the video beautiful, even addictive?

I watched "Überlin" again and again. Then I understood. Aaron Johnson, in T-shirt and exercise pants, with all the awkwardness and grace of youth and all the nimbleness in his movements, is the modern Apollo. He is also the postmodern equivalent of the flâneur, the man who strolls through the city aimlessly. Like his Baudelairean counterpart, the young man in "Überlin" makes his way through the city as if he did not have to work, or to be anywhere in particular, as if time and space were at his bidding, the peripatetic chronotope his element. He is the epitome of youth, limber and clumsy at once. We recognize something akin to what J.D. Salinger describes in a 1957 letter justifying his refusal to sell stage and screen rights to *The Catcher in the Rye*: "A Sensitive, Intelligent, Talented Young Actor in a Reversible Coat wouldn't be nearly enough. It would take someone with X to bring it off, and no very young man even if he has X knows quite what to do with it. And, I might add, I don't think any director can tell him." Aaron Johnson has X.

Watching Aaron Johnson in "Überlin" I remembered myself at twenty, when I worked as a *petite vendeuse*, a shop clerk really, at the Hermès store at 24 Faubourg St. Honoré in Paris. The store, needless to say, was all form and class. Ralph Lauren would stop by and so would Catherine Deneuve. I lived in République and to get to work had to take the metro, of course, changing at les Halles, I think, and getting off at Concorde. I was miserable in Paris because my boyfriend stayed back in Providence, RI. He was cutting down trees as a way to pay for his ticket to Paris. When he finally arrived, I was properly groomed, my unruly hair tied into a bun with the help of an Hermès pochette, and sported a uniform, a little navy blue skirt and a polka dot top, with matching shoes. David walked into Hermès in a pair of torn blue jeans and a purple T-shirt with a cow on it. His hair was long and curly, and his sports shoes were held together

with silver duct tape. It was 1988 and Paris was *very* French and *very* formal, not the New Yorkish melting pot it is today. I thought the doorman was going to kick David out, but no—it turned out that clothes don't make the man. David was twenty, tall and muscular from his summer job as a lumber jack, and spoke no French. The Hermès guys and dolls gasped with awe. The truth is that he looked like his namesake, Michelangelo's Florentine David. And so does Aaron Johnson in "Überlin." So much so that he takes me even further back, all the way to ancient Greek sculpture—to Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo."

Rilke wrote a poem about a statue so filled with energy that even headless, limbless, and scarred it is powerful, like a star. It is not mere stone, it is a challenge: "You must change your life," demands the famous last line of the poem. Why, my students at the University of Georgia, Athens, asked when we read this poem, why must I change my life simply because Rilke looked at an amazing piece of marble in the Louvre over a hundred years ago? But if a piece of stone in human shape can contain so much energy, can be so moving, then how much more moving should an actual human being be? Aaron Johnson moves and is moving; R.E.M., too, is nimble after thirty-one years because they move us still. "Überlin" is about vulnerability as much as it is about strength. It is a wake-up call because if "take your pills" becomes as routine a task as "make your breakfast," then something is wrong. After a four-day trip with his eighth-grade classmates from a posh private American school my son told me that what took longest was the roll-call for the distribution of medications to the students at breakfast. We must indeed change our lives.

But who is the speaker in the song speaking to?

**In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau** posits that our imperative to talk is a consequence of our incapacity to remain contained. Help me or love me, says the first man. The lyrical expression of this need has been somewhat stifled since Rousseau's

times, but contemporary music confirms that it's nonetheless here. Hence the young people everywhere with headphones. Michael Stipe's voice, as Peter Buck noted in an interview in *Rolling Stone* in 1987, is so emotive that people assume he is speaking to them. That, of course, is the mark of all good poetry. The way that Rilke felt addressed by Apollo's torso, and addresses us in its name.

"Who am I without you?" asks the poet. The language of prayer and the language of love: it is not a coincidence that love poems often deify the beloved. You want to know, to get to know, the one you love, but most of all you want to talk to him or her, you want to hear his or her voice. There is no lack of talk these days. Your microwave says "Enjoy your meal" in an undertone. Voice mail greets you and bids you to talk. Your car suggests in a murmur that it is dusk and you might want to turn on its headlights. Who is talking? Who is speaking to whom? It is irrelevant, you'll say, because these are not conversations. Nobody mistakes voice mail for a soul mate, just as nobody falls in love with the image on the screen of their plasma TV. Or do they?

Rousseau's exemplary man is sensitive. He responds affectively to the presence of the Other. If language, in the long run, culminates in a perverted sociability in which the individual seeks distance, not togetherness, nonetheless its first movement is a passionate movement of the heart, and hence the first human language is lyrical. The city, however, is the anti-lyrical space par excellence. In the city, everyone is a stranger and strangers do not talk, at least not meaningfully. On the New York subway, people don't start up conversations.

If we grant, along with Rousseau's imaginary scenario, that the first human language was poetic, a language of the heart, then we must concede that we are witness to its demise. Our model of speech, in our electronic devices, doesn't seem to be lyrical any longer. "Überlin" resists this tendency. "I am not complete," sings Michael Stipe, and we are stunned by this admission of insufficiency in the era of self-love, self-absorption, and solipsism.

The lyrical is the language of love, of desire, of worship, but

also of suffering. It speaks to the Other, not merely of the Other, it implies the Other as a subject, not merely an object, as an agent, not only a recipient. And what it says to this other as a bearer of meaning requires a response, to confirm a shared space. “Look at me,” the lyrical subject says, “say something to me.” Or he asks, like Eurydice, “Please, turn around. I am here.” The voice which extends to the other, which, as Martin Buber says, intends the addressee, that kind of voice is irreplaceable; it stands for the whole person. In the summer of 2006, during the *Fête de la musique* in Paris, I heard “Losing my Religion” played live in the street near Place Monge. I was away from home and R.E.M. was like home, except it wasn’t even R.E.M., only some random French band. It was not the real thing but it made me recall my not so real home in Athens, GA, and as a result made me feel more at home in Paris, where I was once more a stranger. When Stipe’s voice called out to me in Poland, I recalled the timbre of his voice but not the name of the band. The name was supplied by a couple of strangers, whom I accosted by the mall’s elevator, and who, as if on cue, said “R.E.M., of course. From the last album.” It was as if I met myself through them, and them through R.E.M. The circle was completed: away from my adoptive hometown, the voice took me on a journey back there, even though, like Orpheus, I was not supposed to turn back. The shopping mall, like the subway, is a peculiar kind of labyrinthine public space, half shelter, half purgatory—even though the mall aspires to be paradise while the metro can’t help but resemble hell. The voice that calls in the mall and in the subway recalls Orpheus in hell. A voice that breaks through the nearly infernal anonymity of public places. “Do you want to go with me tonight?” Stipe asks in “Überlin.” Eurydice may be rescued after all.

**If the lyrical subject, willing to admit his need of the Other, is** one protagonist of this song, then the city is the other. The city that’s part you, the city that surrounds you and serves as the Other, as friend and foil. And, despite the title, it’s not just Berlin. The hero

here—much more than a background—is the city of distraction filled with signs and advertisements. The street of the odd walk in the video is not exactly real, neither is it home. It's unpredictable, like the great outdoors, but it seems to be made tame by the man who walks through it, subdues it with his dance and gymnastics. Berlin—the modern city that was reborn after World War II, then cut through by the Berlin Wall and reborn again after its fall—is a changed city. The official lyrics video of the song may look like an interactive map of a subway but in fact it is a metaphysical GPS. All the roads are there, including the ones not taken. Akin to Jorge Luis Borges's "Garden of Forking Paths," this chronotope, or space of time, is painful because regrets abound, and once you are of a certain age, it is hard to make it "through the day and through the night" knowing that your choices are now writ in stone, that you have become who you are. That it is ever harder to change your life.

**And yet the electrical charge, the potential for change contained** in the invitation and in the ostensibly random trajectory in "Überlin" recalls the extraordinary promise of happiness, *une promesse de bonheur*, which Walter Benjamin experiences as a flammability of sorts as he, a stranger newly arrived in a city, unable to speak its language, walks the streets of Riga to visit a woman friend: "Nobody was expecting me, no one knew me. For two hours I walked the streets by myself. Never again have I seen them so. From every gate a flame darted, each cornerstone sprayed sparks, and every streetcar came toward me like a fire engine. For she might have stepped out of the gateway, around the corner, been sitting in the streetcar. But of the two of us I had to be, at any price, the first to see the other. For had the fuse of her glance touched me, I should have gone up like an ammunition depot" ("One-Way Street"). Every place is the place of potential encounter. This is an archetypal situation but Benjamin depicts it in terms of physics, as an impending collision between high energy electrons. If not here, then where; if not now, when; if not you, who? The flammable protagonist ignites the city

like a meteor. In the beginning of “Überlin” there is “no collision” while later there is change that will save, an encounter, a star flying into a meteor. There is Berlin, the city, and then there is “Überlin,” the city changed through the addition of the umlaut, punning on über and Berlin, and contrasting with *Untergrundbahn*, the subway known as U-bahn, making Berlin a city seen “over” and “under.” The “U city” is the city *apprivoisé*, tamed, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s the Little Prince might say. Überlin is a different Berlin, one seen as a series of “stops” on the U-bahn, conceived as a place of encounter, an antidote to routine.

**The song opens a cosmic space with the words “I am flying on a star.”** Like the Little Prince, the lyrical subject connects two worlds: the U-bahn is under the city, the star is over the city, or *über* Berlin, and the metaphysical conceit links the underground to outer space. There are five thousand roses in the garden which the Little Prince visits on Earth but they are not at all like his rose because he has not tamed them, they are empty. “Count a thousand million people,” sings Michael Stipe, “with their stars on bright.” “Wait for a time, exactly under the star,” begs the narrator of *The Little Prince*. There are five hundred million stars, but on one of them there is a little man with golden hair and a rose, and therefore one star is unlike all the others. Find it.

Riding the metro with David that summer, with a vacuum cleaner borrowed from friends who lived in the 5th arrondissement—so from Jussieu to the 11th, changing at Châtelet-Les Halles, talking about going to see 37.2 *le matin*—did I know that I was flying on a star? No. I thought I was a poor student on a fancy internship, doubly displaced—an Eastern European come from the U.S. to Paris, with a boyfriend who was above all that angst and with whom I broke up because of an idiom I did not understand. “Are you getting cold feet?” he asked in a transatlantic call as I stood, barefoot, on the tile floor of a friend’s bedroom in Plaisir, wearing only a nightshirt. “Of course I’m getting cold feet,” I answered. He tried to explain



something, I cried, someone hung up. It's been twenty-four years. Oh my heart.

"I know this is changing me," Stipe sings. The city changes faster than the lyrical subject. The changes affect the speaker who is forever chasing a phantasm. But even if the city were more static, millions of people live in it, crossing paths in its underground channels and streets. Charles Baudelaire's "A une passante" ("To a Passer-by") encapsulates the lightning speed of love in the city: one glance in the crowd and she's gone, but I've loved her and she knew it, says Baudelaire, speaking the city's lyrical voice. "I know, I know, I know what I am chasing," insists Stipe, in the voice of the *flâneur*. Contrast this position with the person the singer addresses in the first lines of the song, who is "off to work"—the phrase impersonal and curt, imperative and deadly. So, the question is, are you off to work, your routine, or do you want to go somewhere else, "take the U-bahn, five stops, change the station," arbitrarily, or "Hey, man, tell me something, are you off to somewhere? / Do you want to come with me tonight?" If you come with me, you might not end up anywhere, but you will be with someone, you will stand in relation. "Where am I?" asks Snow White in the Brothers Grimm folk tale. "You are with me," answers the Prince. "We walk the streets"—together—"to feel the ground I'm chasing." Though what we're chasing may be the stop where one gets left behind, and the other goes on.

"Überlin" has something primal about it, almost like a fairytale as well: it tells of a city, real and figurative at once, where "intrusion" and "collision" are possible, in which one human being encounters another. In Rilke's sonnet, the energy of the statue bursts like a star, cannot be contained, while in "Überlin" the speaker flies on a star into a meteor. A meteor falls, but as it falls it burns bright, incandescent in the encounter with the atmosphere. The voice of the song, like the voice of the city, heard in a crowd, a mall, in the movement of the streets, carries us from the daily, deadly routine of pills, meals, and work, to an epiphany, a possible encounter that will ignite us like the young Benjamin alight on the streets of Riga, or Baudelaire

glimpsing a stranger in Paris, or like me, hearing Michael Stipe call me in a voice familiar from Athens, GA, recalling the Paris of David and me, to make “my imagination run away” from any particular city to collapse in a boundless, timeless Now.