

Just another rusty seismographkid

Steven Cline wants to re-invent Play

Jason Abdelhadi

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a review of

AMOK by Steven Cline. Trapart Books, 2022

Alone hitchhiker sticks out his thumb on a dusty Georgia back-road. He is wearing an all-white paint suit, clutching an ambiguous briefcase. His bearded face is ornamented in haphazard colors, ghastly reds and yellows. Disturbingly, he is not wearing any shoes. Does he not know where he is headed? Maybe he just wants to go, to go out there, to go with you, to show you...What? Do you pick him up?

If you did, maybe you were the vehicle that picked up Steven Cline as he spontaneously hitchhiked away from the Polymorph Bodyshop Surrealist exhibition's opening night in 2019.

Cline, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is a Surrealist, organizer, anarchist, explorer, and dreamer who has made many discoveries in a variety of fields: collage, critical writing, poetry, games, objects, photography and even ritual performance.

He has been a longtime catalyst for the marvelous, the revolutionary, and the strange both internationally and in the Atlanta area. Along with his wife Hazel and comrades in the Atlanta Surrealist Group / House of Mysticum, he has undertaken many astounding initiatives and published a plethora of zines, books, and journals.

Often to be found in the front lines of any number of fearless collective endeavors, in this volume, we finally get Cline the thinker-tinkerer in a corner by himself. Made up of a variety of critical, poetic, political, and automatic texts, Amok shows us the swirling vortex of anarchic creativity of a hungry body-mind that won't settle for anything less than everything.

This is a book that bites. Cline has long made known his special admiration for the Surrealist Benjamin Péret of the first-generation Paris Surrealist Group. Péret was known above all as embodying the principle of Surrealist attack.

In this spirit, Cline lets loose a sparkling combination of automatic eros and uncontrollable frenzy that nevertheless manages to capture key theoretical, critical, and political insights into the current situation. What's astounding is his capacity for a simultaneous double-pronged attack, both highly analogical imagery and critically astute commentary. It's a mystery how he does it.

Perhaps he is able to create a schism in the poetic waterfall just long enough to insert some(sur)rational comment before plunging back into the torrent. In some ways, his punny and playful combination of critique, humor, criticism and vivid, often blasphemous poetic imagery also reminds one of the old IWW columnists of the Industrial Worker newspaper. I am thinking especially of the great T-Bone Slim.

The fundamental insight of this thread being, that play is the means that justify the ends. Or, in Cline's own words, "Just another rusty seismographkid, writing underneath that eternally shifting, marvelous starsign—PLAY..." In the title piece, "Amok," Cline invokes, through a delirious and humorous chattering, the spirit of total revolt, the vein that pulses throughout this entire collection. He dialectically splits up his surrealism into a tripartite goal: "the liberation of the world," "the liberation of the word," and "the liberation of the mind."

To Cline, these three tasks are one and the same. Total liberation is simultaneously a social, poetic, and psychic emancipation. In sympathetic vibration are the other calls to action in the book, including the text, “Minneapolis Athanor,” which was written at the height of the George Floyd protests in 2020 and reads as an impassioned plea for imaginative and political liberation in totality in the face of catastrophic authoritarian racism. It first appeared in the Fall 2020 Fifth Estate.

Among my favorite texts are examples of pure Surrealist research and play. In “The Santa Thing,” Cline mythologically explores a long-held conviction of his that Santa Claus is a monstrous cryptid.

In “The Great Savannah of Ottawa,” Cline and his wife Hazel outline their attempts to explore Savannah, Georgia using a map of Ottawa, Ontario. In so doing, they perform a Surrealist displacement of space and perhaps even a thinning of the poetic veil with astounding results. Many of the texts veer into a kind of “poetry by other means,” ranging from a Surrealist anthropology of early human evolution, the deep psycho-traumatic implications of exploring a crawlspace, to abject poetic musings on defecation, and even an eroticized etiological mythology that turns scripture on its head: “In the beginning was pleasure.”

Cline also partakes in the long tradition of Surrealist film criticism. With a taste for the shocking, marvelous, pulpy, and atmospheric, Cline avoids the usual aesthetic or formalist assessments and instead uses his love for film as a window for interpreting and transforming the world itself.

In “An Attempt at a Busby Berkeley Exegesis,” Cline plunges into the director’s unhinged musical choreographies, reading them as some hidden paranoiac recipe for unleashed desire, “a secret magickal working.”

His love for the gruesome and shocking horror comes out in “Guinea Pig 6” and in “Lucio Fulci’s Conquest.” He turns to the delirious world of pulp Italian fantasy to draw out his own apologia for the passions of novelty and novelty of passions. A further essay on the riches to be found in the “Trash Stratum” of popular culture underscores this vital Surrealist natural resource, the extremities of popular culture. Among all the prose marvels, it’s also worth mentioning that the book has a nice selection of black and white photos, found illustrations, and other sights that show strange, but shockingly compelling confrontations, serving as the perfect analogical commentary to the writing.

The afterword by the longtime Surrealist Mattias Forshage captures the thrust of Cline’s project perfectly, comparing thinking itself to a “useless” and therefore “interventional” activity, a kind of “toy.”

For those looking for an ecstatic, erogenous, poetic experience, *Amok* is your ticket to escape your own skin.

Jason Abdelhadi lives in Ottawa, Ontario. He is involved in local and international Surrealist activities, including the Ottawa Surrealist Group, and is an editor for the Surrealist journal, *Peculiar Mormyrid*.

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