

# Taking the Power Back: William S. Burroughs' use of the cut-up as a means of challenging social orders and power structures<sup>1</sup>

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William Burroughs recounted the event: 'In 1959 Brion Gysin said: "Writing is fifty years behind painting" and applied the montage technique to words on a page' (Burroughs, *Adding Machine* 52). Gysin had accidentally cut through newspapers beneath something he was mounting. He gathered the fragments and pieced them together.<sup>2</sup> The first cut-ups appeared under that title in *Minutes to Go* (1960), 'unchanged unedited... emerging as quite coherent and meaningful prose' (Burroughs, *Third Mind* 29).

Gysin considered the power of the collage texts to be limited and short lived, but Burroughs was excited by the potentials of the cut-ups, and encouraged Gysin to assist him in a spell of rigorous experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

... we cut up the Bible, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, our own writing, anything in sight. We made thousands of cut-ups. When you cut and rearrange words on a page, new words emerge... New words and altered meanings are implicit in the process of cutting up, and could have been anticipated. Other results were not expected (Burroughs, *Adding Machine* 52).

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<sup>2</sup> 'The pieces sort of fell together, and I started matching them up, and I thought Wo-o-o-o-ow, it's really very funny. And I took some of them and arranged them in a pattern which was visually pleasing to me and then typed up the results; and I have never laughed so heartily in my entire life.'

Robert Palmer. 'The Rolling Stone Interview.' *Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, p. 185

<sup>3</sup> 'The first time around, doing your own cut-ups and seeing the results, there's a sort of hilarity... But it doesn't happen again. It's a oner, a single sensation that happens just that one first time... But I must say that I thought it was a rather superior amusement, and was very impressed by William's immediate recognition that here was something extremely important to him, that he could put into use right away, and did.' Robert Palmer. 'The Rolling Stone Interview.' *Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, pp. 185-6

Amongst the less expected results emerged what they saw as the ‘exposure’ of a text’s true meaning. ‘A text may be “found out,” exposed as empty rhetorical gesture or as a system of manipulations,’ explains Robin Lydenberg (102).

Based on these discoveries, Burroughs began to formulate numerous theories around the ideas of language preconditioning and control.<sup>4</sup> He also strove to address the issues of the ownership of words and the ‘the author function.’<sup>5</sup> As Lydenberg again notes, the ‘cut-ups defy copyright and ownership, transgressing the regulations of boundary and convention’ (49). Gysin – and Burroughs – contended that words are the property of no-one, and that an author manipulates words just as an artist would paint, stressing that, ‘the poet’s function is to free words’ (Heidsieck 141).

Burroughs saw within the technique a means of initiating a revolution – not only in terms of the formulation of narrative, but a real social and cultural revolution:

The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper ... if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system. (Burroughs, *Job* 33-34)

Herein lies one of the primary assumptions behind the purpose of the cut-ups – that language equals control, and those who control the language hold that control by having the capacity to write history, which thus has a direct bearing on the future. Burroughs contended that language controls man, and not vice versa, but was also aware that the ways in which words are used provide structure to the world and the societies within it. Mankind has used written communication to elevate itself above

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<sup>4</sup> These are detailed in *The Third Mind* and *The Job* (with Daniel Odier), as well as in numerous interviews.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault suggests that ‘author’s name... is functional in that it serves as a means of classification. It can group together a number of texts, thus differentiating them from others. A name also establishes different forms of relationships between texts.’ Foucault: ‘What is an Author?’ *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 123. The cut-ups serve to dismantle the image of the omnipotent author figure through the incorporation of other texts and reliance on collaboration.

other species, and to structure the social order within human culture. The power of persuasion and propaganda lies in the use of language, and laws exist by virtue of their being set in the written form. Burroughs would go on to expound that in order to attain true freedom, and to evolve in order to survive, the human race must free itself from the tyrannical constraints of language control.<sup>6</sup>

The discovery of the cut-ups and their subsequent exploration led Burroughs to begin to theorise on the origins of language – or, in Burroughs’ terms, Word. The idea that ‘Words is Virus’ provided a central theme to Burroughs’ middle-era work.

My general theory [is] that the Word is literally a virus, and that it has not been recognised as such because it has achieved a state of relatively stable symbiosis with its human host... But the Word clearly bears the single identifying feature of virus: it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself (Burroughs, *Adding Machine* 47).

Burroughs’ solution was to use language against itself – that is, by cutting it up and realigning it in new ways – in order to smash the mechanism of control and reclaim the power of language for the ordinary man.

## **The Nova Trilogy**

Having devised a set of writing techniques which suited his purposes and reflected his preoccupations, Burroughs began to apply the cut-up and fold-in methods for the formulation of longer narratives.<sup>7</sup> The *Nova* trilogy, consisting *The Soft Machine*

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<sup>6</sup> In various interviews, Burroughs suggested that silence – both internal and external, i.e. a wordless state was in fact the ideal state for mankind, and that to survive in the future, the human race must leave both language and the body behind and move from earth into outer space. (*Burroughs Live*)

<sup>7</sup> Burroughs describes the fold-in as ‘an extension of the cut-up technique’ and explains the process as follows: ‘A page of text, my own or someone else’s, is folded down the middle and placed on another page, the composite text is then read across half of one text and half the other. The fold-in method extends to writing the flashback used in films, enabling the writer to move backwards and

(1961, 1966 and 1968), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962, 1967 and 1968), and *Nova Express* (1964), sees the methods applied to ‘the novel.’ Across these works, Burroughs renders explicit the idea that ‘the parasitic control system operating through drugs, sex and religion is grounded in language, in distorted methods of exchange and communication’ within the framework of a story of galactic war (Lydenberg 129).

Border city ... noon ticker tape ... word falling ... the board flakes of electricals ...  
break through in grey room ... photo falling ... down into present time and there  
investigate purpose ... distant city is Red Mesa ... fight erupt like sand on iron ...  
sacrifice partisans and rioters of all nations ... gambling fight ... attack at arbitrary  
intervals ... sacrifice partisans of all nations ... open fire on priest shriek for humans  
(Burroughs, *Soft Machine* 109)

Burroughs presented these composite texts using distinctive punctuation to highlight the physical cuts. This compels the reader to pause at each break, altering the way in which one reads the text, pausing over each phrase. While not necessarily bringing the alternative meanings to the fore, this does create a very different type of reading experience from ‘normal’ prose.<sup>8</sup>

The fragmentary nature of the narrative is also key to its function. The juxtaposed images and disconnected phrases are designed to reflect the way the memory functions, jumping from one thought or recollection to the next on the impulse of random triggers which propel individual, personal associations rarely possible with word-orders carefully selected and imposed by conventional authorship. In doing so,

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forwards on his time track...’ ‘Recontre avec William Burroughs,’ Eric Mottram, 1964. *Conversations with William Burroughs*. p. 15

<sup>8</sup> The mode of presentation also serves the function of differentiating the sections of text, revealing the mechanics of the writing process. Reading a text such as this is akin to seeing the working-out of a mathematical equation, the processes laid bare for all to see. Lydenberg notes that Burroughs as one of the first writers to transgress the unwritten rule of keeping a degree of mysticism around the creative process (Lydenberg 47): *The Third Mind* contains explicit instructions on how to reproduce the cut-up and fold-in methods as used by Burroughs.

the composite text may also fulfil its ultimate objective of re-educating the reading public by compelling readers to unravel its meaning, reading between the intersections to access its cut-through meanings. In between the evocative random images of ‘word falling’ and ‘noon ticker tape,’ the phrases ‘sacrifice partisans and rioters of all nations’ and ‘attack at arbitrary intervals’ do correspond with the trilogy’s overarching science-fiction derived ‘plot,’ detailing the strategies of galactic war. ‘Break through in grey room,’ a frequently recurrent phrase throughout the trilogy, makes reference to Burroughs’ opinion of his cut-up works within the context of the avant-garde breaking new ground and the response innovative art receives prior to its attaining mainstream acceptance: ‘once the breakthrough is made, there is a permanent expansion of awareness, but there’s always a reaction of rage, of outrage, at the first breakthrough... [but] once the breakthrough is made, this becomes part of the general awareness.’<sup>9</sup>

*Nova Express* continues the theme of galactic war while extrapolating the ‘true meanings’ of the source texts.

Now you are asking me whether I want to perpetuate a narcotics problem and I say: “Protect the disease. Must be made criminal protecting society from the disease.”

The problem scheduled in the United States the use of jail, former narcotics plan, addiction and crime for many years - Broad front “Care” of welfare agencies - Narcotics which antedate the use of drugs... Addiction in some form is the basis - must be wholly addicts - Any voluntary capacity subversion of The Will Capital and Treasury Bank - infection dedicated to traffic in exchange narcotics demonstrated a Typhoid Mary who will spread narcotics problem to the United Kingdom - finally in view of the cure - cure of the social problem and as such dangerous to society - (Burroughs, *Nova Express* 52)

This passage can be unravelled to show that it ‘reveals that the anti-drug rhetoric of the fifties and sixties served merely to cover up the real intention of the government agencies assigned to tackle the problem: to “Protect the Disease” of addiction,’ thus

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with William S. Burroughs by Jürgen Ploog, New York, 1986, from the film *Commissioner of Sewers*.

again in Burroughs' eyes exposing the 'true' meanings of the cut texts (Murphy 106). This idea corresponds with the 'algebra of need' principal and Burroughs' suggestion that 'the police have a vested interest in criminality. The narcotics department have a vested interest in addiction. Politicians have a vested interest in nations. Army officers have a vested interest in war...' (Burroughs, *Job* 61).

In his quest to revolutionise the narrative form, Burroughs produced cut-ups prolifically. Paralleling the strategy of his character Willie the Rat against the Nova Mob, whose 'plan called for total exposure' (Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* 108), Burroughs strove to obtain maximum exposure for his revolutionary technique. Oliver Harris observes 'Burroughs' remarkable commitment to small press publications throughout the cut-up decade,' and cites Burroughs' telling Ginsberg in 1960 that 'his best bets were "no-paying far-out experimental magazines... like *Yugen* and *Kulchur*"' (Harris 180). This 'seizing of one's means of literary production' was integral to Burroughs' strategy for the spreading of the virus, so to speak, as it facilitated a wider distribution – albeit at an almost underground level – of cut-up texts to readers (Davidson 179).

In many ways, Burroughs' use of magazines published independently and on a small scale is representative of the cultural backdrop against which these experimental texts were produced. Although seemingly representative of the type of fragmentation critics like Jameson consider to be symptomatic of postmodern culture, many of the small press magazines that were appearing from the mid 1960s onwards were a direct reaction against the logic of late capitalism (Glessing 25). Hallucinogenic drugs were spawning a revolution of sorts, and as a reaction against the rapid expansion of capitalism following the post-war lull, many, particularly those in the US opposed to the Vietnam war, were growing frustrated with mainstream culture and politics and

choosing to protest peacefully and to voice their opinions by alternative means.<sup>10</sup> Literary magazines enabled fledgling writers “to have a voice - and one that allowed a greater freedom of expression than a mainstream publisher would.” (Feldman).

Many critics, from Hutcheon to Jameson, as well as cultural commentators and philosophers, spanning Foucault to Lyotard, emphasise the ‘fragmented’ nature of postmodern society and its associated art and literature.<sup>11</sup> The proliferation of the underground press during the 1960s is not, however, a sign of the ‘false resolution of the dilemmas of modernism’ or the absolute commodification of art Eagleton would suggest (qtd Baker 50). Nor is it a simple cultural reflection of late capital as Jameson identifies.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the underground press functioned as a reaction against all of these things and the control of society and culture by capitalist corporations. Thus, while the cut-ups represent a means of attacking ‘the system,’ their means of distribution signifies another important aspect of their function as a means of undermining the dominant culture and the mechanisms of control embedded therein.

Burroughs distanced himself from the counterculture and shared few of the hippie ideals Ginsberg promoted, but clearly saw the underground press as a vital tool in his own revolutionary endeavours.<sup>13</sup> Supported by his frequent statement that ‘cut-ups are for everyone’ (Burroughs, *The Third Mind* 31), the technique did indeed

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<sup>10</sup> The countercultural zeitgeist was neatly encapsulated by Ed Sanders of psychedelic band The

Fugs, who wrote, ‘I’m thirsting for peace in a raging century.’ Reproduced in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, p. 509 Also ref. Quote in *Underground Press...*

<sup>11</sup> Eagleton suggests that ‘the idea of system or totality can be discredited.’ Eagleton. *Literary Theory*. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> Jameson firmly aligns postmodernism with late capitalism, calling it ‘a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new form of social life and a new economic order – what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism.’ Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society.’ *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> While Ginsberg encouraged people to make peace with his neighbour, and to offer a police officer

a flower, Burroughs countered ‘the only way I’d like to see a policeman given a flower is in a flowerpot from a high window.’ (From an interview with William Burroughs by Jeff Shiro, quoted by Barry Miles in *El Hombre Invisible*, p. 13.)

spread. Due in no small part to Burroughs' active encouragement of the use of the method by other authors, many others would follow his lead, creating their own cut-up texts.<sup>14</sup> Many of these texts would themselves appear in small-press magazines, again highlighting the nature of the 'resistance' network that the method promoted.

### **Claude Pélieu**

As Harris notes, 'Burroughs solicited both correspondence and creative collaborations from his readership and it was... through *The Moving Times* that he began his substantial cut-up collaborations with Claude Pélieu and Carl Weissner...' (Harris 180-181) The first fruits of these collaborations was the pamphlet *So Who Owns Death TV?* (1967) which comprised a short text each by Burroughs, Weissner and Pélieu, all of which centre around the theme of media control through the medium of 'death TV.'

The language of control Burroughs strove to break down permeates Pélieu's 1967 'novel' *With Revolvers Aimed...Finger Bowls*, but by cutting up those phrases and removing them from their original contexts, their power is, by the theory behind the cut-up, negated. The text is littered with the arbitrary yet prevalent facts and figures which are *de rigueur* within the press:

The author of these lines struggles against Mr. Rectal, 680 million old burglaries to his credit. The intersections are slightly dry, lever 754, be careful of the next contractions. The amount of adrenalin has increased about 5% in C.I. Hugh... 30%? we know the score copper!... (40)

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<sup>14</sup> Harris notes, 'Burroughs solicited both correspondence and creative collaborations from his readership and it was... through *The Moving Times* that he began his substantial cut-up collaborations with Claude Pélieu and Carl Weissner... The new channels offered by the alternative press... confirmed the importance of the mode of publication to Burroughs' development and

promotion of cut-up methods – and, hence, their instrumental value for the political goal of recruiting other practitioners.' (Oliver Harris. 'Cutting Up Politics.' *Retaking the Universe*, pp. 180-181)



Here, supposedly orientating figures reach a point of superfluity, to the extent that the effect becomes inverse to their original purpose: figures which denote distance, time, space and volume become blurred and induce a sense not of stability, but disorientating instability. The displacement and juxtaposition of ‘facts’ reaches a level of saturation at which they collapse into meaningless, exposing the way in which names, places and figures can be used as a method to obscure facts by overloading the reader with non-essential and diversionary information. As ‘the author of these lines struggles,’ so a reader of an article in the press may also struggle to unravel the salient points from the smokescreen of myriad ‘facts’ and figures. But through the act of cutting up, Pélieu suggests that the game is up for those agents of control as the truth is cut free from the constraints of those preordained orders selected by the holders of power: ‘we know the score copper!’

### **Carl Weissner**

Weissner is perhaps better known for his translation of the works of Charles Bukowski for the German market than for his own writing. *The Braille Film* (1970) is not immediately recognisable as a ‘novel,’ extending the collage approach to a new level through the incorporation of unconnected fragments of text, and also pages of photographic collages and single-page texts printed in landscape format, and hence at right-angles to the rest of the text. Although such forms of presentation were already long-established in avant-garde magazine-format publications, and newspapers in which photographs had for a long time accompanied and illustrated the stories, this

combination of words and pictures remained quite uncommon within the context of a novel.<sup>15</sup>

*The Braille Film* begins with an account of its function as a text which acts on the subconscious, requiring the reader to ‘make connections’ rather than expect the narrator to provide a readily digestible and sequentialised text, while simultaneously outlining the ‘plot: ‘the passengers of this hopped up mixed media set are on a trip to the end of the nervous system, to the end of the Invisible Environment. There is no guide no voice no word’ (5). Weissner also introduces the idea of the cut-up as a device for attacking the false histories and misinformation propagated by the mass media: ‘Walled in by oscillographs of the past the crew plot a precarious course in dead space of random topographies. Infra-red TV screens, exposed nerve ends, phosphorescent comics, roentgen films & tapes of fictitious events, wind-tunnels of gossip, rigged history’ (5). The language Weissner uses to describe the text is essentially identical to that which forms the very fabric of the novel, by which I mean that *The Braille Film* is intrinsically self-referential with regard to its function while extrinsically detailing within a fictionalised context the same ‘invisible war’ against linguistic tyranny. The ‘films & tapes of fictitious events’ and ‘rigged history’ sees the author grappling directly with issues which were coming to the fore in literary criticism within the body of a work of fiction.

*The Braille Film* embodies the questioning of the formation of history through totalization. which Hutcheon defines as ‘the *process* by which writers of history, fiction or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified – but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials, even at the risk of doing violence to them’ (Hutcheon 59). If postmodern texts challenge ‘this totalizing

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<sup>15</sup> Note on small presses & technological developments from *Underground Press*.

impulse,' (Hutcheon 59) then the cut-ups take this challenging to its highest level. Like Burroughs' *Nova* trilogy, *The Braille Film* functions to obliterate the idea of rendering those primary materials 'coherent, continuous, unified' and is more concerned with 'doing violence to them' than formulating a sense of authorial mastery.

## Conclusion

The question that remains to be addressed is: 'to what extent can the cut-ups be considered successful?' Burroughs would move away from them as he entered the 1970s, and as the decade progressed, few other texts like *The Braille Film* or *With Revolvers Aimed...* would emerge. Burroughs went to far as to ultimately dismiss his cut-up phase a 'failure;' and abandon all types of collage work entirely by the end of the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> Yet in recent years, works which employ variations on the cut-up techniques have proliferated: Irvine Welsh has brought fragmentary narratives into the mainstream, while Stewart Home has forged a substantial career through using cut-and paste techniques, taking them so far as to repeat sections of dialogue and even whole scenes – often plagiarised from other sources – verbatim within a single book and, across several different novels. Graham Rawle's novel, *Women's World* (2006) is composed entirely from words cut and pasted from women's magazines from the 1950s and 1960s. In short, a revolution of sorts did occur, but not as Burroughs had envisaged. That authors ranging from Kathy Acker to Will Self, as well as musicians

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<sup>16</sup> Burroughs commented that "there is a point of diminishing returns," (Oliver Harris. 'Cut-Up Closure. The Return to Narrative' contained in *William S. Burroughs at the Front*, p. 253) and that 'I've done writing that I thought was interesting experimentally, but simply not readable' (*Job* 56).

as diverse as Genesis P Orridge of Industrial innovators Throbbing Gristle, through Ministry's Al Jourgensen to Nirvana's Kurt Cobain have cited Burroughs as a significant influence, is testament to the enormity of his legacy.<sup>17</sup> Burroughs unquestionably instigated the cut-up revolution, and once the breakthrough had been made there followed that 'permanent expansion of awareness.'<sup>18</sup> The ultimate power may still lie with the invisible forces, but now more readers have the capacity to read between the lines and to fight back.

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<sup>17</sup> Murphy devotes significant coverage to this in *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*. David Bowie also famously used the cut-up technique for the formulation of lyrics , and exchanged ideas with Burroughs on multimedia work with Burroughs in a meeting reported by *Rolling Stone* ('Beat Godfather Meets Glitter Mainman' *Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, pp. 193-202).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with William S. Burroughs by Jürgen Ploog, New York, 1986, from the film *Commissioner of Sewers*.

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