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**Language as a Virus of the Mind:
The Thinking and Writing of William. S. Burroughs**

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Mgr. David Vichnar, Ph.D. for a patient, outspoken truly honest and helpful approach of guiding me through the intricate landscapes that is the writing of a thesis. I would also like to thank my parents for their unending support and my friends for helping me to stay mentally stable during the process.

THESIS ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

“The Electronic Revolution” is a collection of essays and articles by W. S. Burroughs, an American writer, artist, and cultural icon. Published in 1970, the texts are a response to the rapid technological advancements of the time, particularly in the field of electronic communication.

One of the central themes of “The Electronic Revolution” is the notion of technology having the power to transform society. Burroughs was fascinated by the possibilities of electronic communication, which he saw as a way to shatter barriers between people and create a more connected, global community. He believed that the rise of electronic media would lead to a new era of human consciousness, one in which people would be able to communicate and exchange ideas on a scale never before seen. Another key theme of “The Electronic Revolution” is Burroughs’ fascination with the human mind and its relationship to technology. He was interested in the way that electronic media could be used to alter human consciousness, and explored the potential of technologies such as brain implants to create new states of consciousness and expand human capabilities.

Burroughs, however, also explored the darker side of the electronic revolution. He was concerned that electronic media could be used as a tool of control and manipulation by governments and corporations. He saw the potential for electronic media to be used to shape public opinion and control the flow of information, leading to a world in which people were not truly free to think and act for themselves. Burroughs was also deeply critical of the mainstream media, which he saw as a tool of propaganda and mind control. He believed that the rise of electronic media would provide an opportunity for alternative voices and viewpoints to be heard, and that this would be essential for the creation of a truly democratic society. In this particular essay, the author came up with a notion that later budded into a statement that is very unique from a linguistic point-of-view. The statement, of course, is: “language is a virus”. On its own, this expression is very vague, unscientific and almost nonsensical. However, when taken into context with the author’s life, works, personal opinions and the situation that was taking place in the USA at the time, the claim begins to unravel. And that, essentially, is the goal of this thesis. According to Burroughs, language is a virus that invades and replicates in the mind, shaping our thoughts and behaviors. He suggests that the use of language can be seen as a form of mind control, with words and phrases acting as programming code to direct

our actions and beliefs. This notion is rooted in Burroughs' own experience of drug addiction and his interest in the nature of control and manipulation. Burroughs' essay touches on a range of topics, from the history of language to the political and social implications of its use. He explores the idea that language is used to construct and maintain power structures, and that it can be used as a tool for both oppression and liberation.

In the first chapters of my thesis, I would like present the theoretical framework of the thesis, that is the theories of the mass media in the sixties, which environment they created and how it all ties to the viral properties of the language. The second chapter will delve more deeply into Burroughs' essays that are paramount for the topic at hand, in particular "The Electronic Revolution" and "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars", with focus on their key concepts, their definition of the electronic revolution and its historical and literary background, as well as an analysis of the significance of Burroughs' ideas in relation to the broader context of the electronic revolution. In the third chapter, the theory of language being a viral force shall be scrutinized, and research as whether it actually could be a credible theory shall be provided. Language and viruses share many similar traits and patterns of behaviour and these patterns and traits shall be the main focus of this chapter. The fourth chapter shall delve into a revolutionary approach to writing – the method of cut-up. Its origins shall be briefly described and the main focus of the chapter shall be the usage of cut-up as an antidote to the virus of language with focus on Burroughs' own works created using this method.

RESUMÉ PRÁCE

“The Electronic Revolution” je sbírka esejů a článků W. S. Burroughse, amerického spisovatele, umělce a kulturní ikony. Texty vydané v roce 1970 jsou reakcí na rychlý technologický pokrok té doby, zejména v oblasti elektronické komunikace.

Jedním z ústředních témat eseje je představa, že technologie má moc proměnit společnost. Burroughs byl fascinován možnostmi elektronické komunikace, v níž viděl způsob, jak zbořit bariéry mezi lidmi a vytvořit propojenější, globální společenství. Věřil, že vzestup elektronických médií povede k nové éře lidského vědomí, v níž budou lidé schopni komunikovat a vyměňovat si myšlenky v dosud nevídaném měřítku. Dalším klíčovým tématem “Elektronické revoluce” je Burroughsova fascinace lidskou myslí a jejím vztahem k technologii. Zajímal se o způsob, jakým lze elektronická média využít ke změně lidského vědomí, a zkoumal potenciál technologií, jako jsou mozkové implantáty, k vytvoření nových stavů vědomí a rozšíření lidských schopností.

Burroughs však zkoumal i temnější stránky elektronické revoluce. Obával se, že média mohou být použita jako nástroj kontroly a manipulace ze strany vlád a korporací. Viděl, že elektronická média mohou být využita k formování veřejného mínění a kontrole toku informací, což povede ke světu, v němž lidé nebudou mít skutečnou svobodu pro vlastní myšlenku a svobodu jednat sami za sebe. Burroughs byl také velmi kritický k mainstreamovým médiím, která považoval za nástroj propagandy a kontroly mysli. Věřil, že vzestup elektronických médií poskytne příležitost k vyjádření alternativních hlasů a názorů, což bude mít zásadní význam pro vytvoření skutečně demokratické společnosti. V této eseji autor přišel s myšlenkou, která později vyústila v tvrzení, jež je z lingvistického hlediska velmi jedinečné. Tento výrok zní: “jazyk je virus”. Samo o sobě je toto vyjádření velmi vágní, nevědecké a téměř nesmyslné. Když se však dá do souvislosti s autorovým životem, dílem, osobními názory a situací, která v té době v USA probíhala, začne se toto tvrzení rozplétat. A to je v podstatě cílem této práce. Podle Burroughse je jazyk virem, který napadá a replikuje se v mysli a formuje naše myšlení a chování. Naznačuje, že používání jazyka lze považovat za formu ovládnutí mysli, kdy slova a fráze fungují jako programový kód, který řídí naše jednání a přesvědčení. Tato představa má kořeny v Burroughsově vlastní zkušenosti s drogovou závislostí a v jeho zájmu o povahu kontroly a manipulace. Burroughsův esej se dotýká řady témat, od historie jazyka až po politické a sociální důsledky jeho používání. Zkoumá myšlenku, že jazyk slouží k vytváření a udržování mocenských struktur a že může být použit jako nástroj útlaku i osvobození.

V prvních kapitolách své práce bych ráda představila teoretický rámec práce, tedy teorie masmédií v šedesátých letech, jaké prostředí vytvářely a jak to vše souvisí s virovými vlastnostmi jazyka. Ve druhé kapitole se hlouběji ponořím do Burroughsových esejí, které jsou pro dané téma prvořadé, zejména “The Electronic Revolution” a “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”, přičemž se zaměřím na jejich klíčové pojmy, definici elektronické revoluce a její historické a literární pozadí, jakož i na analýzu významu Burroughsových myšlenek ve vztahu k širšímu kontextu elektronické revoluce. Ve třetí kapitole bude podrobně rozebrána teorie jazyka jako virální síly a bude proveden výzkum, zda se skutečně může jednat o věrohodnou teorii. Jazyk a viry sdílejí mnoho podobných rysů a vzorců chování a tyto vzorce a rysy budou hlavním předmětem této kapitoly. Čtvrtá kapitola se bude zabývat revolučním přístupem k psaní - metodou cut-up. Stručně budou popsány její počátky a hlavní náplní kapitoly bude využití cut-upu jako protilátky proti viru jazyka se zaměřením na Burroughsova vlastní díla vytvořená touto metodou.

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of electronic communication technologies post-war transformed almost every aspect of modern society, from communication to entertainment to politics. This electronic revolution has had a profound impact on art, culture, and fiction as well, spawning new forms of expression and challenging traditional modes of representation. One of them played an instrumental role within the countercultural movements of the 1960s and beyond. Burroughs became profoundly interested in this sweeping change in the media landscape and gave voice to a range of opinions and thoughts on the matter, which he expressed in his various essays such as “The Electronic Revolution” and “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”. “The Electronic Revolution,” provides a unique perspective on the cultural and social implications of electronic technologies. Here, Burroughs explores the ways in which electronic media have transformed society’s perception of reality, and how this transformation has affected human consciousness and creativity. He also offers a scathing critique of mass media and their impact on life, arguing that electronic technologies have given rise to a “control machine” that manipulates desires and beliefs.

Moreover, Burroughs’ critique of mass media and their role in shaping our desires and beliefs is particularly relevant in today’s context of “fake news” and online disinformation campaigns. His ideas regarding the “control machine” and the ways in which electronic media are used to manipulate public perception have important implications for an understanding of the impact of technology on democracy and social justice.

At the same time, Burroughs also explores the potential of the electronic revolution as a tool for linguistic innovation and subversion. He develops the concept of the cut-up technique, a method of writing that involves disintegrating and rearranging texts in order to create new meanings and associations. This technique challenges traditional notions of authorship and meaning, highlighting the ways in which electronic media have transformed the production and consumption of cultural artefacts.

Burroughs’ essays touch on a range of topics, from the history of language to the political and social implications of its use. He explores the idea that language is used to construct and maintain power structures, and that it can be used as a tool for both oppression and liberation, developing a claim that is also the central focus of this thesis: “Language is a virus”. Burroughs regards language as a powerful force with the ability to infect and control human thought and behaviour, in the same manner a computer virus would infect files and processes on the hard drive. Burroughs argues that language operates like a virus in the sense that it replicates and

spreads from person to person, shaping perceptions and beliefs in ways often beyond control. He suggests that the use of language can be seen as a form of mind control, with words and phrases acting as programming code to direct our actions and beliefs. This notion is rooted in Burroughs' own experience of drug addiction and his interest in the nature of control and manipulation.

"The Electronic Revolution" examines how technology affects human awareness, culture, and society. Burroughs' obsession with technology and his idea that it has the power to change the world are reflected in this 1970 essay. The article "The Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden" was published in response to the American Watergate crisis, and Burroughs utilized it as a springboard for a more comprehensive examination of the nature of power and how it affects society. He also draws parallels between the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s and the story of the Garden of Eden in the Bible. Burroughs suggests that both Watergate and the Garden of Eden represent instances where individuals seek to exert control over others, often through the use of technology or manipulation. Burroughs also examines the role of language in maintaining power structures. He writes that language is used by those who possess the power to create a false sense of reality and to manipulate the masses. Last but not least, Burroughs explores the notion that the written word is a virus.

Burroughs suggests that in the beginning of written history (which as established by medial critics such as Marshall McLuhan, is a medium as well) there was a spoken word and that it was the written word that came after, not vice versa. He compares humans and animals, as they both share information through complex communication devices, with the chief difference being that the written word is absent from animal communication. Burroughs argues that the absence of writing negates the possibility to transfer generational knowledge among themselves. He later presents the idea that language is a virus that has made the spoken word possible, whilst achieving such a perfect benign state of symbiosis with its host that it is not being recognized as one. In the rest of the first part Burroughs elaborates on his theory, contemplating the effects of the virus (such as transforming the throats of apes to make them able to speak, etc.), whilst also acknowledging its effects on society, perception of reality and writing in general.

The second section of the essay, "The Electronic Revolution," is where Burroughs expands on his main points, including the use of alphabetic languages to oppress people. It highlights the harmful implications that the term "virus" has on individuals as well as the potentially fatal benefits of utilizing someone's voice as a weapon. Using the cut-up technique and tape recorders to record speech can easily result in mangled political speeches or misleading

news broadcasts that confuse listeners and exert mental control over them.) Burroughs tries to hint at the potential of manipulation that sound recording possesses. Following this argument, it could be said that any mainstream media could be using the technique of cut-up in their recordings in order to confuse and manipulate the masses. He then explores the ethical question of whether it is acceptable to be unknowingly controlled by an external virus, albeit may act beneficiary to its host. Burroughs then describes the process of infection, essentially claiming that it is possible for a virus to conceal its entry to the host, should it “cooperate” with another virus that would counteract the entering symptoms of the first virus within its host. Burroughs then reinforces his claims with various hypothetical scenarios, such as, for example, a “sex-tape” festival. Burroughs explains how this virus is possibly spread. He says that if one individual is infected with the virus, he/she feels the need to speak about it to another human being. And it is through that act of speech and conversational intercourse the virus is transferred. In his own words, “We now have a new virus that can be communicated and indeed the subject may be desperate to communicate this thing that is bursting inside him. He is heavy with the load.”¹ One might argue that if certain individuals were taken out of society and isolated, they might not get infected and be “safe”. However, Burroughs claims that the word virus is the kind of virus that is passed along genetically, so essentially, nobody is truly protected from the infection. In the closing paragraphs, Burroughs compares his theories to those of L. Ron Hubbard’s and finds certain parallels that reinforce his claims even further (such as, for example, the theory of engrams and the reactive mind). These theories do indeed fit well into the notion of looking at the human mind as a complex system of cybernetic processes that can be affected by outside influences and programming. Yet another feature of the Church of Scientology directly fits the framework of the human mind being a cybernetic process – their usage of electronic devices (E-meters namely) to measure and locate said engrams within the human mind, scanning it like a computer. In the following paragraphs, Burroughs is concerned with the linguistic traits of the English language, that in his opinion should be omitted, however, cannot because they remain in force so long as the unchanged language is spoken. This directly ties to the viral viewpoint of language as these arguments reveal that language is indeed not subjected to society, but vice versa. The more people continue to use language, the more it ultimately infects and reaches beyond society’s reach. What Burroughs is attempting in these paragraphs is to illustrate how this artificial language could be created from English by omitting

¹ William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, (Originally published in 1970 by Expanded Media Editions, reissued by Ubuclassics, 2005), 25, online, https://www.swissinstitute.net/2001-2006/Images/electronic_revolution.pdf

the aforementioned concepts. Burroughs then finishes the argument with the connection of these linguistic concepts to viral infection. He speaks of these conventional linguistic concepts as mechanisms of the virus and connects them to the creation of his new language. He claims that if his new language should be considered free of the virus, it should be devoid of all these aforementioned linguistic concepts.

Among Burroughs' countless short stories and essays, "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars", included in his 1986 collection *The Adding Machine*, is one of the very few that directly discuss and mention his theory of word being a virus. Once again, Burroughs explores such topics as writing, media, journalism, and their effect on language and society in general. This particular essay however, is special in that it presents his arguments and thinking not only in theory, but also in practice. The last part of the essay consists of several digressions and stories that bear no seeming relevance to the subject, however, the closing passage reveals the case to be the opposite.

...cold and windy outside as I enter through the turnstile another guy exits his hair and jowly face a medium gray *la via del tren subterraneo esta peligrosa* obey the police I haven't been in New York long don't touch that cat you'll catch something hey honey want to ditch your wife guess Chinese do like pork look at feet only a good way to travel he holds the images of sterility and puts himself outside of what he wants with a sharp knowing glance and surreptitious eyeballs — I can push him onto the tracks flirting around the horny bastard keeps staring at my face or hair or crotch diamonds are still a girl's best friend can I have a quarter? the film had too much violence stand clear of the moving platform oh yes there's so much to learn in Chinese kitchen next door last gravy running out look they died years ago the coats and people a blur the wind is slamming signs around clattering debris in an empty lot of dusty window pants for sale piss in a black puddle against a stone corner I was embarrassed what if someone sees me blue jeans leering at me intimately you wonder how I can know how you feel perhaps there are no complete strangers ...²

This last paragraph is most likely created by using his famous cut-up technique, as it bears a striking resemblance to texts found within *The Nova Express* or *The Ticket that Exploded*. Yet another feature that hints at the true intention of the text is that Burroughs concludes this essay with a single phrase: "the word is a virus." Burroughs presents his argument in a truly unique and original way. It is the form of the text itself that is paramount and used to demonstrate his claims, while the contents of the text bear only secondary importance, being almost nonsensical. "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars" is not as outspoken as "The Electronic Revolution," however, it deals with the topic of the word virus from a slightly different perspective and introduces themes that will subsequently be part of the whole theory in the bigger picture.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the sweeping changes that were occurring in the 60s, describing their relevance for the chosen topic. This will help to lay the ground for the theoretical framework of the thesis, as the context is necessary when making an argument about

² William S. Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays*, (New York: Seaver Books, 1986), 49.

technologizing language. Furthermore, this chapter shall develop a working definition of the medium and how it creates an environment in which the spreading of the word virus is possible. It shall draw upon works by prominent theorists of the time and explore their connection to the theory and subsequently, Burroughs himself.

The second chapter will delve more deeply into Burroughs' essays that are paramount for the topic at hand, in particular "The Electronic Revolution" and "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars", with focus on their key concepts, their definition of the electronic revolution and its historical and literary background, as well as an analysis of the significance of Burroughs' ideas in relation to the broader context of the electronic revolution.

In the third chapter, the central claim that language is a virus will be addressed from multiple viewpoints (literary, linguistic, and cybernetic). Language permeates all aspects of human existence and shapes our ideas, convictions, and behaviour. In Burroughs' conception, language, like a virus, is able to spread through and change human society, behaviour, and the way of thinking. In order to examine the ways in which language functions as a virus and to assess the ramifications of this approach for comprehending human communication and society, it is necessary to draw upon theoretical frameworks from linguistics, psychology, and sociology, all of which shall be thoroughly analysed. The connection between the written and the spoken word, between the word and the media, how they use the words, the viruses to exert control and manipulation over society shall be examined. The "viral theory" shall be compared to texts of similar linguistic value and focus, in pursuit of highlighting the similarities and distinctions shared by these various texts and theories. The conclusion of this chapter shall deal with the possibility of espousing this theory in the modern times, where the electronic communication media are beyond anything Burroughs could have imagined in his texts. This chapter shall draw upon multiple disciplines to explore the ways in which language operates as a virus, and to evaluate the implications of this perspective for understanding human communication and society.

The fourth chapter shall deal with Burroughs' famous cut-up technique and its application, analysed as closely connected to the previous statement of language being a virus. It shall discuss how the cut-up technique challenges traditional notions of authorship, meaning, and interpretation, while analysing the subversive potential of the cut-up technique as a tool for resisting the viral forces of the language.

Overall, what Burroughs implies is that language is a powerful tool with the ability to infect and alter human thinking, behaviour, and culture, which plays a fundamental role in shaping an understanding of the world and the human place within it. The goal of this thesis

then is to explore these fundamental roles by studying and analysing various essays and related texts, to explain the theory and explore whether it is based in reality or in the field of hypothesis and, last but not least, whether the theory would be able to stand its own in today's world.

1 The Events of the 1960s: A Theoretical Framework

1.1 The Events of the sixties

The 1960s was a decade through which winds of change were blowing. The world had already sobered up after World War II and began its healing process. With the stabilization of most of the Western society, the passion for change grew ever greater.¹ The scope of the change was sweeping, affecting almost every spectrum of social life. As Jeremy Varon states,

This passion for change ranged widely, affecting governance, legal and political rights, and the distribution of wealth and power among and within regions, nations, races, ethnicities, and classes. Yet it extended also to more intimate and abstract realms, calling into question the meaning and identity of the family, education, sex and sexuality, adolescence and adulthood, work, pleasure, art, nature, divinity, the psyche, and the cognitive and sensory frames by which we apprehend “reality.”²

The suggestion here, essentially, is that there was a broad emergence of a new realisation and focus on the connection between human senses and how they use them to perceive their surroundings and subsequently all reality. With this realization, however, several other questions arise. Questions such as how people use the senses to perceive reality; how accurate they really are; can they be manipulated and how, etc. Topics such as these permeated the collective human psyche, giving the “golden 60s” an aftertaste of constant paranoia and unease. This uncertainty of reality combined with the social unrest caused by the various social, racial and political rights movements and the war in Vietnam resulted in a very tense mood. “This sense of tribulation, finally, was global in scope, signalling a new phase of societal interdependence.”³

¹ Jeremy Varon et al., “Time is an Ocean: The Past and the Future of the Sixties,” *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2008, 1.

² Varon et al., “Time is an Ocean,” 1.

³ *Ibid*, 1.

The sixties witnessed yet another happening that further reinforced the rising uneasiness and proved the power of broadcast the new media possessed – the event in question being the assassination of the president J. F. Kennedy, which was, for many people, an act of sobering up and accepting the harsh reality; for many others who were not as personally affected by the killing were, in the very least, subjected to its direct streaming into their own living rooms through the screens of their TV’s. As Jon Margolis states:

From every perspective except the calendar’s, 1964 started forty days early, when John F. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. The wonder is that the belief in American innocence was not murdered that day, too. In retrospect, perhaps it was, but because beliefs do not die as cleanly as people do, their deaths can escape recognition. America spent the months after John Kennedy’s death in denial. A few clung to the idea of an ersatz resurrection by hoping that Kennedy’s successor would choose Robert Kennedy as vice president. Almost everyone tried to tell him- or herself that the assassination, for all its horror, was an aberration, that the country and its culture remained strong, healthy, and essentially unchanged. They were wrong.⁴

The fact that the assassination took place during a live stream suggests the scope of its consequences. Every American with a television set at home was directly cybernetic to the whole event and to all its socio-political consequences. After the assassination, the world stood in shock and awe, with one exception: the media. Only a few hours after the happening, the media had already been under way dedicating themselves to developing the narrative. The constant repetition of this event in all media available at the time indisputably created a certain myth, a certain “collective memory.” However, the ceaseless media coverage resulted in many Americans distrusting the very media, accusing them of altering the truth or even censoring some vital information. The public began to wonder whether this information were the only ones withheld from them by the media, they began to ponder the actual scope of this possible manipulation of truth. In his interviews, Burroughs has this to say on the matter:

R: They can’t force too many lies on people though. There’s a certain point when people begin to realize that it’s not true, that the whole thing is a fucking lie.
(...)
R: ... Sixty percent didn’t believe the official version which was in all the newspapers of Kennedy’s death. That is the majority. That’s a lot of ‘em.
B: (...) It seems to me that the most important point of student revolt should be a demand that all research – the results of all research – be made public with specific reference to so-called top secret government projects.⁵

Yet another question arose: the question of the ongoing repeating coverage of the event. Is it ethically right to be so immersed in a killing of a man, albeit a renowned, well-received politician? Where does this repetition stop and who deems subjects worth repeating? The topic of repetition in writing (and thus subsequently in all media) is touched upon by Jacques Derrida

⁴ Jon Margolis, *The Last Innocent Year: America in 1964: The Beginning of the “Sixties”*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999) viii.

⁵ William S. Burroughs, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*, ed. Allen Hibbard, (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 36.

in his essay, “The Rhetoric of Drugs.” He suggests that constant repetition might dull one’s senses and memory and affect his ability to form his own opinion.

A: Then do you link this modernity to mass production? to repetition? Do we rediscover here a questioning of writing, of the *pharmakon*?

JD: I have indeed attempted to link up the problematic of the *pharmakon* with the very disconcerting “logic” of what we casually call “repetition.” In the *Phaedrus* writing is presented to the king, before the law, before the political authority of power, as a beneficial *pharinakon* because, as Theuth claims, it enables us to repeat, and thus to remember. This then would be a good repetition, in the service of anamnesis. But the king discredits this repetition. This is not good repetition. It is rather the mnemotechnical auxiliary of a bad memory. It has more to do with forgetting, the simulacrum, and bad repetition than it does with anamnesis and truth. This *pharmakon* dulls the spirit and rather than aiding, it wastes the memory. Thus in the name of authentic, living memory and in the name of truth, power accuses this bad drug, writing, of being a drug that leads not only to forgetting, but also to irresponsibility.⁶

The notion of the media altering the narratives to fit their desired truths, or concealing facts in constant repetition of surface-level information is not strange to Burroughs, as he had expressed several opinions and beliefs on the matter. For instance, one of his claims is that the media actually write all of their stories in advance, resulting in them having to issue a copious amount of retractions. Burroughs then very aptly mentions that most people do not read the retractions, only the original story, thus being made to live in a world of fiction created by the media.⁷ He then compares an author of fiction to a journalist, claiming that an author is responsible for the characters he creates, whereas journalists are not, hinting at the irresponsible nature of repetition in writing suggested by Derrida.

This distrust for media, the ever-present looming threat in the form of a mushroom cloud, and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam paved way for numerous counter-culture movements (that are emblematic of the sixties) to arise. In the words of Theodore Roszak:

The prime symptom of that disease is the shadow of thermonuclear annihilation beneath which we cower. The counter culture takes its stand against the background of this absolute evil, an evil which is not defined by the sheer fact of the bomb, but by the total ethos of the bomb, in which our politics, our public morality, our economic life, our intellectual endeavour are now embedded with a wealth of ingenious rationalization. We are a civilization sunk in an unshakeable commitment to genocide, gambling madly with the universal extermination of our species. And how viciously we ravish our sense of humanity to pretend, even for a day, that such horror can be accepted as “normal,” as “necessary” Whenever we feel inclined to qualify, to modify, to offer a cautious “yes . . . but” to the protests of the young, let us return to this fact as the decisive measure of the technocracy’s essential criminality: the extent to which it insists, in the name of progress, in the name of reason, that the unthinkable become thinkable and the intolerable become tolerable.⁸

As suggested by Roszak, the sixties were a period that was full of not only love and peace, but also paranoia and daily fear. During the preceding periods, the people were led to strengthen the bond between them and their leaders who ultimately led them to victory through the horrors

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews, 1974-1994*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), 233-4.

⁷ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 49.

⁸ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 47.

of Second World War. However suddenly, they are presented with a government that seems to be pondering the release of a device that is capable of enormous destruction and subsequently cause the destruction of most of the planet. A government that is not frank and uses all the new blooming forms of media to spread half-truths and propaganda. This uncertainty and ever-present looming threat indeed engraved itself into the minds of the people living in the sixties.

The resulting shape of the sixties can be ascribed to various socio-political processes and incidents. It is suggested, however, that one of the most prominent factors in shaping the sixties was the preceding decade. As Todd Gitlin mentions in his book, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, society of the fifties seemed so content, with “many of the old promises redeemed,”⁹ resulting in the middle-class children of the fifties looking for their role models in all the “strange places”. The strange places in question are revolutionaries, rebels such a Fidel Castro or Che Guevara. Furthermore, the aforementioned unrest and paranoia, only strengthened by the assassination of J. F. Kennedy and the hesitant approach to ending the conflict in Vietnam, resulted a wide dissatisfaction with the system and searching for their own way of life. When their various meetings and/or marches clashed with the police, the participants then recognised that their movements are not approved by the government, essentially marking them as “counter-culture movements.” Gitlin offers his vivid memories on the matter, illustrating the thoughts and opinions of those involved in these blooming movements.

I came to California in the fall of 1967, then shaved it off aiming to ease my way past customs to and from Cuba. I saw a comrade gashed by a chunk of concrete as we integrated an amusement park in 1963, heard a racist mob scream itself shrill surrounding our nonviolent group, until we were rescued — and arrested— by the police. A few years later, I watched police destroy my camera after I snapped them illegally searching my car in Chicago; I saw our organizing office reduced to rubble when Chicago police turned it upside down in a raid for planted drugs. I sat through the conspiracy trials of my friends, watched others try to overturn a police van in the Chicago streets, knew still others were planting stink bombs in the Democratic delegates’ hotel — and admired their courage. I dreaded guns, refused to smash windows — and at the same time learned to scorn nonviolence, which seemed helpless against the juggernaut of the war and the police. From mildly socialist I became “radical,” “anti-imperialist,” a partisan of “resistance,” a half-serious advocate of “destroying America,” and then, gingerly, ambivalently, found myself caught up in the collective hallucination (or was it?) of “the revolution.”¹⁰

By this time, Burroughs had already been established as one of the major figures in the counter-cultural underground. After all, he was present (and actively participating) when the Beat movement had formed almost a decade earlier. Concerning the riotous revolts of the sixties, Burroughs expressed his positive attitude towards the process, even openly showing support and approval of the disgruntled young people. He is on record as saying that “young people in

⁹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York, Bantam Books, 1987), 2.

¹⁰ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 2-3.

the West have been lied to, sold out, and betrayed.”¹¹ He also claims that the dissatisfied young people “pose the only effective challenge to established authority. Established authority is well aware of the challenge. Established authority is moving against young people everywhere.”¹² Following this logic, it could be argued that it was the government itself who was one of the most prominent factors that contributed in creating the counter-culture movements so emblematic of the times. After all, in *The Job*, Burroughs indeed mentions this: “The underground press serves as the only effective counter to a growing power and more sophisticated techniques used by establishment mass media to falsify, misrepresent, misquote...”¹³ This directly suggests that it is mass media and the government that are responsible for these counter-culture underground movements, as without the establishment, there would be no need for them. All these movements were almost all exclusive to the sixties and with the coming of the seventies, they disbanded or broke apart only to be reintroduced to the society and become, once again, part of it.

By the early Seventies the upheaval was over — as mysteriously as it had appeared, and as worldwide. Neoconservatives wobbled between relief and vindication; old radicals felt mixtures of despair, regret, chagrin, pride, resolve, and got on with their lives. “The Sixties” receded into haze and myth: lingering images of nobility and violence, occasional news clips of Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy, Beatles and Bob Dylan retrospectives, the jumble of images this culture shares instead of a sense of continuous, lived history. “The Sixties”: a collage of fragments scooped together as if a whole decade took place in an instant.¹⁴

In conclusion, the various movements and riots that took place in the sixties were iconic, inspiring various artists to express their feelings, whether through writing, music or image (for example, the famous Woodstock festival, where many now famous musicians had their first appearance). It gave voice to a crowd who was desperate to be heard and in the short span of its existence it helped to shape the society as it is known today. This short excerpt from *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* sums the social impact of the sixties quite aptly:

Indeed, because military triumphalism was decisively defeated in Vietnam, it was only in the realm of ideas, knowledge, media and culture that Americanism could prevail. In the era of Vietnam, Americanism shifted across from patriotism to protest; from “the American way” to critique of “Amerika”! — and this conquered the world, through popular music, subcultures, and the “new social movements” of the 1960s.¹⁵

¹¹ Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 81.

¹² Odier, *The Job*, 81.

¹³ Odier, *The Job*, 177.

¹⁴ Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 3.

¹⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), xxii.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The advent of the new media, mainly television and the earliest stages of computers and the internet certainly moved humanity towards a global state of interdependence, however, it also gave rise to fears, negative emotions and made it possible for manipulation to be spread more easily. As Marshall McLuhan has claimed, “We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.”¹⁶

The new media introduced to the public were truly ground-breaking and involved the peak technological appliances of the time, however, the medium itself has existed for much longer and is no feat of modernity. As established by Marshall McLuhan, the medium is essentially a human extension, it is the vessel that carries information, communication, and it makes humans human.¹⁷ The claim is that media were present in the earliest days of man. With the invention of language came the invention of a medium. In his texts, McLuhan describes the phonetic alphabet itself as being a medium, a “medium par-excellence – medium as extension and the basic sense of in-between or go-between.”¹⁸ When considering phonetic alphabet as a medium, one must subsequently view all of the accompanying factors as a medium as well. McLuhan then follows this claim thusly:

The invention of the alphabet, like the invention of the wheel, was the translation or reduction of a complex, organic interplay of spaces into a single space. The phonetic alphabet reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code. Today, such translation can be effected back and forth through a variety of spatial forms which we call the “media of communication.”¹⁹

Subsequently, he elaborates on the notion of phonetic alphabet as a medium even further, when speaking of it almost as a parasite. He claims that the “phonetic alphabet is an aggressive and militant absorber”²⁰, which transforms the cultures with which it comes into contact. Essentially, any society in possession of the alphabet can transform any non-alphabetical culture, but not vice versa.²¹ Examining this claim more closely and observing the manner in which McLuhan describes the alphabet, one may find that in this instance, the alphabet acts

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: an Inventory of Effects*, (Corte Madera CA: Gingko Press, 2001), 63.

¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 7.

¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of a Typographic Man*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), xvii.

¹⁹ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 51-2.

²⁰ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 56.

²¹ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 56.

almost like a virus, infecting the cultures it comes into contact with and transforming them to the needs of the virus.

It is obvious that when considering phonetic alphabet as a medium, the print is the next medium to follow. McLuhan marks the coming of print as one of the most significant milestones of human history. He claims that with the arrival of print, when Europe was becoming what he calls Gutenberg Europe, the change entailed within it becomes the archetypal norm of social life.²² Essentially meaning that the changes occurring with the advent of print were on such a scale that they could no longer be viewed as changes, the change itself became the very norm for society, the need for change came naturally with mass-scale visualization of language. Further reinforcing his theory regarding social change as closely intertwined with the media, McLuhan also claims that “any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments – when media change, men change.”²³

Following his arguments, it is quite clear that evolution of mankind and evolution of the media means essentially the same thing; one cannot evolve without the other, as one cannot exist without the other. The medium essentially creates an environment in which information is conveyed, received, processed, and passed on further. Where, did, however, the need for the printed word originate? Why did was the print actually invented? McLuhan offers a really simple, yet profound answer. He claims that with the increasing quantity of information, it was only natural for visual organisation of language and information to be preferred.²⁴ First, of course, there was the culture of manuscripts, but with the rising quantity of information, there was simply not enough time nor enough men to actually write these scripts in hand, thus the need for print was born. As already said, the print is one of the foundations upon which society stands, and the changes it brought with it were vital for society’s development. One of the many factors that print had highlighted was the vernacular. With the coming of print, literacy essentially became not a luxury, but a commodity. Print essentially reformed the vernacular and transformed it into a medium²⁵ available at every bookshop, thus creating the uniform, centralizing forces of modern nationalism. Literacy – an ability once inconceivable to some now became a need for social involvement, it lost its feeling of privilege and very quickly spread among the common folk (almost like a disease would).

²² McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 177.

²³ McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 26.

²⁴ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 128.

²⁵ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 225.

However, as McLuhan suggests, not every change the print brought was entirely positive. One of his many arguments is that it was actually print, which is responsible for bad grammar – by visualising it.²⁶ He also suggests that print allows for individualism and opposition to the government.²⁷ The last “issue” that came with the introduction of print that are to be mentioned is more recent than the others, however it is closely associated with print nonetheless. The English-speaking countries, through print and subsequently other media and how it exposed their language to the world lost their language in the process. Every other country has its own unique language and then it learns English in order to be a part of this “global village”, except for countries where English is vernacular. They did not dominate the world with their language, they lost it to it.

In conclusion, the media were always present where humankind was involved, as they are inseparably tied together by mutual evolution and dependence. In McLuhan’s opinion, almost everything humans use to convey information, be it spoken word, written word, sound, image or even electronic current is a medium and thus an extension of humanity. One could argue that it IS the medium that makes us human.

The advent of the electronic era, and with it, the new computing technologies with their ability to broadcast everything everywhere at all times opened the doors to a whole plethora of new possibilities and approaches to communication and information. However, it also brought some negative consequences. The 1960s saw a significant rise in communication technologies that transformed the way people interacted with each other and the world around them. Advances in computing, telecommunications, and broadcasting led to the development of new technologies that made communication faster, more efficient, and more accessible than ever before. Society had reached a point where it is considered to live in a state of constant, unceasing contact through the usage of mass media and/or other various communicational media (after all, as was established, a language is a medium as well). Society now lives in a global village, every person on the planet within a reach of one another. The whole plethora of new-age technologies and media may have opened doors to many possibilities beyond count, however, it also brought problems and issues not experienced before. Some go as far as to say that the sole reason for humanity’s demise is the technologies we created ourselves. As Herbert Marcuse believes,

However, intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom. Throughout the world of industrial civilization, the domination of man by man is growing in scope and efficiency. Nor does this trend appear as an incidental, transitory regression on the road to progress. Concentration camps, mass

²⁶ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 263.

²⁷ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 267-9.

exterminations, world wars, and atom bombs are no “relapse into barbarism,” but the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination. And the most effective subjugation and destruction of man by man takes place at the height of civilization when the material and intellectual attainments of mankind seem to allow the creation of a truly free world.²⁸

Although he shared this opinion, Burroughs did show distrust towards those who operate said technologies, essentially claiming that with more power and with more advanced technology comes a greater possibility of corruption and subsequent destruction.²⁹

As already mentioned, one of the most notable changes in the media landscape during the 1960s was the rise of television as a dominant medium. Once again, McLuhan offers an apt insight into the social change brought about the coming of a new medium. As already mentioned, he suggests that social change itself becomes the archetypal norm of social life with the coming of new technology.³⁰ The coming of television has allowed for the widespread dissemination of news and entertainment content and created a shared cultural experience across the country. However, there was also concern with the homogenization of culture and the potential for TV to be used as a tool of propaganda.

McLuhan touched on this topic as well, noticing that raising children is not solitary anymore. He notes that besides his parents, the modern child is shaped by the media, by what it sees on the TV screen.³¹ From their earliest days, children are exposed to a massive scale of information, thus influencing not only the way they and their brains develop but subsequently how they perceive the world around them. McLuhan also notes how important it is for the schools and various education systems of the time to notice and act accordingly. As he says:

It is a matter of the greatest urgency that our educational institutions realize that we now have a civil war among these environments created by media other than the printed word. The classroom is now in a vital struggle for survival with the immensely persuasive “outside” world created by new informational media.³²

McLuhan recognized both the positive forces and possible influences of television, however, he was also wary of the effects it might impose if not on his generation, then on those who would follow. He is aware that, by altering the environment and how they perceive it, media evoke in people a unique sense of perception and comprehension. And when the senses change, he suggests, men also change.³³ Following this logic, it would be possible to say that television allowed manipulation by selective information distribution, as the information was now streamlined to every household in the U. S. (or even the entire world under the right

²⁸ Hebert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 4.

²⁹ Odier, *The Job*, 67-8.

³⁰ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 177.

³¹ McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 14.

³² McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 100.

³³ McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*. 41

circumstances). On the other hand, it is that new technology and its exposure to society that makes society ponder if they ARE in fact, being controlled. In short, television creates space for manipulation, but subsequently creating such a space raises the possibility of it being recognised and discovered by the public. Overall, McLuhan closes his arguments with a sceptical statement about the future generations, for as he says, “the television generation is a grim bunch.”³⁴

The advent of this electronic era was acutely recognized by Burroughs, as he deals with topics that stem from issues associated with the new age. In fact, so acutely so that even McLuhan himself chose to deal with Burroughs’ work as an important document on the “electric age”:

Naked Lunch records private strategies of culture in the electric age. *Nova Express* indicates some of the “corporate” responses and adventures of the Subliminal Kid who is living in a universe which seems to be someone else’s insides. Both books are a kind of engineer’s report of the terrain hazards and mandatory processes, which exist in the new electric environment.³⁵

According to biographical accounts, McLuhan and Burroughs were not personally in contact with each other, they allegedly only met once over an informal dinner, however, the shared areas of interest are beyond dispute. *As described in Call Me Burroughs: A Life*, a certain Panna Grady, a patron and a society hostess once “threw a party for Bill where he met Marshall McLuhan, whose *Understanding Media* was published in 1964; they had many areas of interest in common.”³⁶ McLuhan’s essay, however, suggests that not only did they share common areas of interest, they knew each other at least professionally and reacted to each other’s works. In his collection of interviews, Burroughs mentions McLuhan as well.³⁷ He expresses his disagreement with McLuhan’s belief that print is “on its way out”. McLuhan elaborates on his opinion of Burroughs’ texts even further in the essay, namely regarding the supposed obscenity of his narratives. McLuhan claims that in the electronic age, privacy has almost vanished, and thus there can be no obscenity, but neither can there be decency. As he says, “Such is the law of electric media which stretch the nerves to form a global membrane of enclosure.”³⁸ He even connects his theories to Burroughs’ vision, claiming that the vision of reprogramming the environment the new create is entirely possible, considering the evolution of the electronic media at the time. In his own words,

³⁴ McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 126.

³⁵ Jennie Skerl, Robin Lydenberg et al., *William S. Burroughs At the Front: Critical Reception*, (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 69.

³⁶ Barry Miles, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life*, (New York: Twelve, 2014), 441.

³⁷ Burroughs, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*, 60.

³⁸ Skerl, Lydenberg et al., *William S. Burroughs At the Front*. 72.

To reprogram the cultures of the globe becomes as natural an undertaking as curriculum revision in a university. Since new media are new environments that reprocess psyche and society in successive ways, why not bypass instruction in fragmented subjects meant for fragmented sections of the society and reprogram the environment itself? Such is Burroughs' vision.³⁹

Within the closing paragraphs of his essay, McLuhan suggests that rather than longing for being recognized as a writer, Burroughs tries to point out the issues of living in such an active and lethal environmental process⁴⁰, which directly corresponds to a claim made by Robin Lydenberg and Jennie Skerl in their essay from the same collection, describing Burroughs as more of a social commentator and doomsayer, rather than a "mere" writer.⁴¹

It is apparent that with the coming of new media and communicational technologies, language is influenced as the technologies rely heavily on the usage of one. The 1960s witnessed several significant changes happening to language that reflected the cultural and social upheavals of the era. New linguistic features such as the countercultural hippie slang, the language of the Civil Rights Movement (activists used language to challenge racist attitudes and promote social justice) and of course, the need to create new names for new technologies and phenomena. These changes were, of course, noted and examined by the likes of Marshall McLuhan and his follower, Walter J. Ong, who directly suggests that a certain event took place in the 60s. The event fascinated him in such a way he decided to include it in the title of his book, *Orality and Literacy*. The event in question is the TECHNOLOGIZING OF THE WORD, one of the most central events and claims when concerning this thesis. Ong claims that writing in itself is a technology, harking back to Plato who had considered writing to be an alien technology (just as many people thought about computers in their early days)⁴² He argues that writing is one of the most drastic of the technologies, that it had initiated a metamorphosis of a dynamic sound into a stable, unmoving image of a word.⁴³ He writes that writing is to be considered a technology in that it demands the usage of tools and other equipment. He contrasts the writing to oral speech, which is completely natural and claims that writing is artificial. When writing, one is consciously abiding by a given set of rules (grammar), whereas speech comes naturally, unconsciously⁴⁴. However, by calling writing artificial, Ong does not strive to condemn it, but rather praise it. He argues that in itself, writing is invaluable, however it is essential in the realisation of humanity's full potential.⁴⁵ He elaborates further,

³⁹ Skerl, Lydenberg et al., *William S. Burroughs At the Front*. 73.

⁴⁰ Skerl, Lydenberg et al., *William S. Burroughs At the Front*. 73.

⁴¹ Skerl, Lydenberg et al., *William S. Burroughs At the Front*. 6.

⁴² Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 80.

⁴³ Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 81.

⁴⁴ Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 81.

⁴⁵ Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 81.

Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does.⁴⁶

Ong concludes his argumentation by claiming that albeit writing is an artificial technology, artificiality is natural to human beings and that technology, when properly handled does enhance human life rather than degrade it.

Ong was not the only theorist to notice the effect of the electronic era on the language. Among many others, Noam Chomsky's theory on generative grammar stands tall as a representative of looking at language through a cybernetic lens. Essentially, Chomsky's theory claims that language is not just a set of learned phrases and expressions, but rather a system of rules that can be used to generate new sentences. Chomsky believed that these rules are unconscious and that we are not aware of them when we use language. Following Chomsky's argumentation, the process of generating sentences appears to be very similar to the process of generating a line of computer code, for instance. This is the first of many juxtapositions of the human brain and electric circuitry that are encountered when researching this topic.

Language, as already suggested, however, was not the only aspect of human existence that was subjected to a technological approach. With the new ground-breaking innovations in the field of electrical transmissions, signals and currents, the juxtaposition of the human brain and mind with electric circuitry began to surface. This is a very prominent feature in Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, which shall be used for further reference. Bateson often compares the mind to electric circuitry, such as in the following statement:

The elementary cybernetic system with its messages in circuit is, in fact, the simplest unit of mind; and the transform of a difference traveling in a circuit is the elementary idea. More complicated systems are perhaps more worthy to be called mental systems, but essentially this is what we are talking about.⁴⁷

In the following paragraphs, Bateson even suggests that basic electric circuits possess a memory – not the static, storage memory, but rather memory as experience of the flow of information around and through the circuit. In a way, the human mind works similarly – it stores its information on some kind of a “hard drive”, however, it is the constant flow of information and participation in communication that keeps the stored information relevant and fresh. The notion of memory acting as a hard drive is vital when considering language to be a virus, as hard drives are among the first targets of a virus when a computer is infected. All of the previous claims

⁴⁶ Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 81.

⁴⁷ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 465.

and theories had essentially lead to reinforce the claim that humankind is actually being infected by a word virus transmitted on a daily basis.

The cybernetic outlook on aspects previously thought entirely natural is a theme that is essential to Burroughs' writings – most of his works deal with natural aspects of human nature exposed to cybernetic environment and treatments. Burroughs claims that language is a virus, as it depends on replication.⁴⁸ He also claims that the word virus had reached such a perfect state of symbiosis with its host that it is no longer being recognised as a virus.⁴⁹ Burroughs also describes the process of the infection, claiming that when entering, it is possible for a virus to conceal its entry to the host, should it “cooperate” with another virus that would counteract the entering symptoms of the first virus within its host. “For example, the host is simultaneously attacked by an ally virus who tells him that everything is alright and by a pain and fear virus. So the virus is now using an old method of entry, namely, the tough cop and the con cop.”⁵⁰ This possibility of a “bad” virus concealing its presence using another, “good” one, is also mentioned by Derrida when he speaks about *pharmakons* in his “Rhetoric of Drugs”: “The bad pharmakon can always parasitize the good pharmakon, bad repetition can always parasitize good repetition. This parasitism is at once accidental and essential. Like any good parasite, it is at once inside and outside — the outside feeding on the inside.”⁵¹

As previously stated, one of the main aspects of the word virus is its ability to reproduce. So how does it actually reproduce? As already established in this chapter, language is a medium as well. As Ong claims, “wherever human beings exist they have a language, and in every instance a language that exists basically as spoken and heard, in the world of sound.”⁵² Given the fact that language pursues humankind wherever they go – subsequently, so does the virus. And it is through their day-to-day basic acts of communication and interaction that the virus spreads, infecting all the participants of the conversation. This process is only made easier and faster by the new electronic media, as the environment they created supports favourable aspects for the procreation of said virus – it is able to do so on a massive, global scale, essentially infecting the entire global settlement humankind has constructed with its electronic age and its media.

⁴⁸ Timothy Leary, *Chaos and Cyber Culture*, (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing Inc., 1994), 95.

⁴⁹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 5.

⁵⁰ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 23.

⁵¹ Derrida, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 234.

⁵² Ong. *Orality and Literacy*. 7.

2 Tech, Power, and Language: Burroughs' Reflections in 'The Electronic Revolution' and 'Ten Years and a Billion Dollars'

“The greatest awakening to the contrast between oral modes of thought and expression and written modes took place not in linguistics, descriptive or cultural, but in literary studies”¹

Walter J. Ong

A graduate of Harvard University, W.S. Burroughs spent his life writing, examining and pondering various texts, thus becoming very close with language. As Mottram states in his *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need*:

[H]e was a compelling talker, a teacher with the power of esoteric outlawed experience and, later, a serious writer, dedicated to the truth of his sexual and drug experiences and the nature of space and time in language since Proust, Stein and Joyce.²

However, as Burroughs' own texts suggest, his interest in language lay elsewhere than a linguistic exploration of its inner mechanics as a semantic structure. His theories concerning language focused strongly on such topics as the degree of manipulation that can be achieved using language (Burroughs was mainly accusing the media and various secret services of such practices³), the social impact of language on society, the technological aspect of the word, going as far as speculating whether the sound of language or the very language itself could be weaponized.⁴ Burroughs also views the human brain as an electric circuit of sorts, one that could be easily reprogrammed or infected with a virus. As Marshall McLuhan states in his article “Notes on Burroughs”:

Today men's nerves surround us; they have gone outside as an electrical environment. The human nervous system itself can be reprogrammed biologically as readily as any radio network can alter its fare. Burroughs has dedicated *Naked Lunch* to the first proposition, and *Nova Express* to the second.⁵

The connection between McLuhan's and Burroughs' texts is too important to ignore. Even though there is little to no information on their personal affiliation, their points of interest are highly similar. Both dabble in the world created by modern media, this “global village” where everything is within a hand's reach and everyone is connected and communicating at all times.

¹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 6.

² Eric A. Mottram, *William Burroughs: The Algebra of Need*, (Buffalo: Intrepid Press, 1971), 12.

³ Odier, *The Job*, 138.

⁴ Odier, *The Job*, 199.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication*. (Amsterdam: G&B Arts, 1997), 86.

They both argue that within this electronic space, humans lose their privacy and in the process, concepts such as decency or personal space begin to fade. In McLuhan's words:

All men are totally involved in the insides of all men. There is no privacy and no private parts. In a world in which we are all ingesting and digesting one another there can be no obscenity or pornography or decency. Such is the law of electric media which stretch the nerves to form a global membrane of enclosure.⁶

However, their opinions did not always support each other, and as Eric Mottram points out, McLuhan might have been misinterpreted Burroughs:

Marshall McLuhan is mistaken in his analysis of Burroughs' work because he is obsessed with the reincarnation of universal energy as the Catholic god's web of power. In his Paris Review interview Burroughs corrects McLuhan's opinion that he meant that heroin was needed to turn the body into an environment that includes the universe: "No, junk narrows consciousness". But his books are global in the sense that they envisage a mobile environmental sense of the network of interconnecting power, with the purpose of understanding and then attacking it.⁷

To get his message across, Burroughs produced non-fictional essays to express his opinion in the way with which he was familiar – this "inspired trance of writing," as Derrida⁸ names it. In his essays, Burroughs deals with the technologizing of society, speech, and communication. With each additional essay and piece of non-fictional writing Burroughs produced, his central claim began to surface and take shape more clearly: that language, as we know it, is essentially a virus that infected humankind in its earliest stages, altering its biological structure in order to create a suitable environment for its existence. As he writes in his essay "The Electronic Revolution"

One reason that apes can't talk is because the structure of their inner throats is simply not designed to formulate words. He postulates that alteration in inner throat structure were occasioned by virus illness ... And not occasion ... This illness may well have had a high rate of mortality but some female apes must have survived to give birth to the wunder kindern.⁹

⁶ McLuhan, *Media Research*, 89.

⁷ Mottram, *The Algebra of Need*, 100.

⁸ Derrida, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, 240.

⁹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 6.

2.1 “The Electronic Revolution”

The theory of language being a virus made a first appearance in Burroughs’ essay “The Electronic Revolution”. The text is an exploration of the impact of technology on society, culture, and human consciousness. Published in 1970, the essay reflects Burroughs’ fascination with technology and language and his belief in its potential to transform the world. The essay deals with topics and themes very similar to Burroughs’ works of fiction. John M. Bennett confirms this in his foreword to *The Revised Boy Scout Manual*:

It should be noted that this process could lead to a broader understanding of Burroughs’ work as a whole, since almost all the themes, topics, and “routines” (to use his own term) in *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* appear again and again throughout his work, in which it is helpful to think of Burroughs’ voice as speaking through a constantly shifting set of masks or personae, sometimes changing them in the same sentence.¹⁰

Burroughs often topples the electronic surroundings of his narratives, with the characters not complying or openly facing the environment by themselves. McLuhan points out this feature of Burroughs’ texts in his “Notes on Burroughs”:

The central theme of *Naked Lunch* is the strategy of bypassing the new electric environment by becoming an environment oneself. The moment one achieves this environmental state all things and people are submitted to you to be processed. Whether a man takes the road of junk or the road of art, the entire world must submit to his processing. The world becomes his “content.” He programs the sensory order.¹¹

The essay itself is divided into two parts, the first being “The Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden” and the second being the namesake “The Electronic Revolution”, exploring several themes related to technology, language, and consciousness. It reflects Burroughs’ fascination with electronic communication technology and its potential to transform society, as well as his interest in experimental writing, as he discusses the cut-up technique and its potential to subvert dominant language and create new forms of communication. The conception of language as a cybernetic system was not an uncommon one at the time. Just two years after “The Electronic Revolution”, Gregory Bateson published *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. In this text, Bateson argues that “all biological and evolving systems (i.e. individual organisms, animal and human societies, ecosystems, and the like) consist of complex cybernetic networks and all such systems share certain formal characteristics.”¹² It is obvious that language could definitely be included amongst these biological and evolving systems. However, Burroughs was not the pioneer of such thinking, as “many ideas from ‘The Electronic Revolution’ can be traced back to Korzybski’s ‘General Semantics’ that explain how our knowledge and experience are limited

¹⁰William S. Burroughs, “*The Revised Boy Scout Manual*”: *An Electronic Revolution*, ed. Geoffrey D. Smith et al., (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), xxi.

¹¹ McLuhan, *Media Research*, 87.

¹² Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 441.

both by the structure of our nervous system and by that of our language.”¹³ Burroughs himself confirms his interest in Korzybski in a 1974 press conference: “I was very impressed by what [Korzybski] had to say. I still am. I think that everyone, everyone, particularly all students should read Korzybski. [It would] save them an awful lot of time.”¹⁴

The first part of the essay titled “The Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden” was written in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal in the United States, and Burroughs uses this event as a starting point for a wider discussion about the nature of power and its impact on society. This part of the essay is not as theoretical as the one that follows, as it does not deal with the notion of language virus directly, however, some of its points are still pertinent to the broader concerns of Burroughs’ thinking. One of the central topics of “The Feedback” is the role of language and sound being used as primary tools for manipulation.¹⁵ This is also confirmed by Eric Mottram in his *Algebra of Need*: “Like Marshall McLuhan and Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs realizes that the black magic of mass communications must be counterattacked by white magic of analysis and resistance.”¹⁶ Burroughs writes that language is used by those who possess the power to create a false sense of reality and to manipulate the masses. He argues that the media, in particular, is used to control public opinion and to maintain the status quo. As he states, “illusion is a revolutionary weapon.”¹⁷ Burroughs suggests that the only way to break free from this cycle of control is to become aware of the manipulations of language and to resist them. However, Burroughs also suggests that language is a living organism, a virus, and that it has a will on its own, thus raising the question: Are those in power really in control, or are they controlled by the language as well? In his own words,

Millions of people could nullify the control system which those who are behind Watergate and Nixon are attempting to impose. Like all control systems it depends on maintaining a monopoly position. If anybody can be tape recorder 3 then tape recorder 3 loses power. God must be THE GOD.¹⁸

Last but not least, a prominent theme here is the notion that the written word is a virus: “My basis theory is that the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible.”¹⁹ This unconventional opinion, which is also the topic of this thesis, seemingly goes against all

¹³ Pierre-Louis Patoine, “William S. Burroughs and The Wild Boys Against the Language Virus: A Biosemiotic Guerilla”, *Recherches Sémiotiques Semiotic Inquiries*, 2019, vol. 39, n° 1-2, p. 26 <https://hal.science/hal-02306559/document>

¹⁴ William Burroughs. Press Conference at Berkeley Museum of Art, November 12, 1974. Internet Archive audio. <http://www.archive.org/details/BurroughsPressConf>

¹⁵ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 7-8.

¹⁶ Mottram, *The Algebra of Need*, 26.

¹⁷ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 12.

¹⁸ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 12.

¹⁹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 5.

the traditional linguistic norms. In “The Feedback”, however, this idea is only introduced; Burroughs delves more deeply into it in the second part of the essay.

“The Electronic Revolution” deals with the capacity of alphabetic languages to subjugate individuals. It calls attention to the pernicious effects that the word virus has on people as well as the potentially lethal consequences to weaponizing a person’s voice. Using the cut-up technique and tape recorders to record speech can easily result in mangled political speeches or misleading news broadcasts that confuse listeners and exert mental control over them. The essay is defined as such by Pierre-Louis Patoine:

Burroughs [here] explicitly articulates his theory of the language virus. Although it reads like a scientific or philosophical argument, “The Electronic Revolution” should be understood as an integral part of Burroughs’ artistic oeuvre: its free and energetic style, and its integration of fictional characters (such as Doktor Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz from *The Wild Boys*, who also appears in Burroughs’ interviews in *The Job* 1979) marks it both as a direct appendage of the novels of this period, and as their interpretive key, a manifesto expressing some of their political and aesthetical underpinnings.²⁰

In the very first paragraphs, Burroughs speaks about the power of sound and illusion. “Riot sound effects can produce an actual riot in a riot situation. *Recorded police whistles will draw cops. Recorded gunshots, and their guns are out.*”²¹ Burroughs tries to hint at the manipulative potential possessed by sound recording. As a matter of fact, in the next few lines, Burroughs indeed accuses the media of doing exactly that.²² However, he does not speak only about the media. He goes so far as to accuse federal agencies such as the CIA of manipulating sound recordings to work in their favour.²³ Essentially, Burroughs accuses the media of the time to be “fake news”, which is a term in vogue presently, but its usage was very sparse in the 1970s. Burroughs argues that the only way to battle such medial corruption is with the underground press.²⁴ He goes on to speak of such physiological processes as orgasms, spontaneous defecation, and even death. Essentially, Burroughs is trying to claim that if a sound recording is able to awaken a dormant virus in a human being, then it must mean that there is indeed a possibility of a dormant virus residing within humans only waiting to be awakened. However, Burroughs does not only focus on the negative side of this “sound-mind manipulation” and raises the question of whether it is possible to induce pleasant feelings or spread positive news. Unfortunately, Burroughs does not provide a simple answer, as he does not directly refute the claim, however, he mentions that “the scrambled words and tape act like a virus in that they

²⁰ Patoine, “William S. Burroughs and The Wild Boys Against the Language Virus: A Biosemiotic Guerilla”, 26.

²¹ Odier, *The Job*, 175

²² Odier, *The Job*, 175-6.

²³ Odier, *The Job*, 177.

²⁴ Odier, *The Job*, 177.

force something on the subject against his will.”²⁵ This essentially means that even if it was possible to achieve such a feat, it would not be a positive achievement whatsoever as it would result in the loss of free will.

The following paragraphs contain an overview of various practical research methods one could use to back up the theories presented within his essay. “The possibilities here for research and experiment are virtually unlimited and I have simply made a few very simple suggestions”²⁶ The closing paragraphs of the essay describe the complex mechanism and operation of the word virus, explaining its behaviour and transmission. Burroughs made a decision to include a fictional scientist, namely Doktor Kurt Unruh von Steinplatz, as a point of reference. Considering that both “The Feedback” and “The Electronic Revolution” appear as academic texts both in the form and the discourse, it is highly unusual that Burroughs decided to include fictional characters. However, it fits very well into the framework of Burroughs’ opinions about the media in electronic age. If it is that easy to make a text appear as a trustworthy piece of media based only on its FORM and LANGUAGE, then how easy would it be to fake another, more relevant piece of media? In this particular case, this doctor is a recurring character in Burroughs’ other works, such as *The Wild Boys*.²⁷²⁸ Burroughs once again uses the theories of his mentor (at the time) L. Ron Hubbard, specifically the reactive mind theory, which posits that certain words or phrases are able to induce certain feelings, focusing solely on feelings on the negative scale, such as uneasiness, disturbance or even illness. Burroughs reacts to this theory by claiming that although a writer, he cannot guarantee to “write a passage that will make someone physically ill.”²⁹ Paradoxically, it is due to making the public disgusted and ill by “exposing them” to his book, *Naked Lunch* that he was tried for in 1962, thus unknowingly proving this theory right, to some extent at least. Hubbard’s theory works with the so-called phenomenon of “engrams”: “An engram is defined as word, sound, image recorded by the subject in a period of pain and unconsciousness.”³⁰ According to his theory, there are negative engrams, which directly induce negative feelings and positive, reassuring engrams, which, however, are just as damaging due to their concealed presence. These engrams then affect what Hubbard calls “the reactive mind” and the reaction of this mind is what induces the feelings in the subject. Burroughs proceeds to put Hubbard’s theory to experimental verification. He then

²⁵ Odier, *The Job*, 185.

²⁶ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 22.

²⁷ Patoine, “William S. Burroughs and The Wild Boys Against the Language Virus: A Biosemiotic Guerilla,” 26

²⁸ Unfortunately, there is only one single mention of him in *The Wild Boys*, making this character quite an obscure and underutilized figure.

²⁹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 25-26.

³⁰ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 26.

ties back in on the life circle of the virus (the aforementioned tough cop and con cop method), claiming that the positive engram is ineffective without the negative one, thus once again proving that both of them are to be considered dangerous, negative, and parasitical.

In the few concluding paragraphs, Burroughs elaborates on the phenomenon of the reactive mind and after presenting the reader with a handful of reactive mind screenings, he comes to this conclusion:

The RM then is an artifact designed to limit and stultify on a mass scale. In order to have this effect it must be widely implanted. (...) The RM is a built-in electronic police force armed with hideous threats. You don't want to be a cute little wolf cub? All right, cattle to the slaughter house meat on a hook.³¹

The last theory presented here is the notion of weaponizing sound, specifically the human voice. Firstly, Burroughs poses the question of whether it is possible to duplicate the effects of a tape recorder scrambling with a human voice. He speaks of various feats, such as learning to speak backwards, learning to speak with the mouth shut or even the annoying technique of repeating the words of your opponent back to them in conversation. However, Burroughs does not provide an answer to this question, as he swiftly moves on to the next argument, that a far-reaching biological weapon can indeed be forged from a language and that this has already been done.³² He uses the Chinese language as an example, as he believes it exhibits all the traits of the aforementioned biological weapon. He calls the Chinese language a total language and suggests that it is more of a multilevel structure of experience rather than a language. He points out the fact that the Chinese, wherever they are, always retain their written and spoken language, while other immigrants lose their language in two generations.³³ He then presents the reader with the aim of his whole project: "To build up a language in which certain falsifications inherent in all existing western languages will be made incapable of formulation. The follow-falsifications to be deleted from the proposed language"³⁴ Burroughs is then concerned with the linguistic traits of the English language, which in his opinion should be omitted but cannot be, as they remain in force so long as the unchanged language is spoken. What Burroughs is attempting in these paragraphs is to illustrate how this artificial language could be created from English by omitting the aforementioned concepts.

The concepts in question are for example: The definite article THE and how it singles out the entity it refers to; the existential reference of the verb TO BE (he implies that the verb TO

³¹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 27-31.

³² Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 33.

³³ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 33.

³⁴ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 33

BE contains a precoded message of damage, just the same as any virus would)³⁵; or how the EITHER/OR concept should be deleted and replaced with the juxtaposition of AND. Burroughs then concludes the argument by connecting these linguistic concepts to viral infection. He speaks of these conventional linguistic concepts as mechanisms of the virus and connects to the creation of his new language. Should this new language be considered free of the virus, it should also be devoid of all these aforementioned linguistic concepts. This is how this new language should be:

This language will be a tonal language like Chinese, it will also have a hieroglyphic script as pictorial as possible without being too cumbersome or difficult to write. This language will give one option of silence. When not talking, the user of this language can take in the silent images of the written, pictorial and symbol languages³⁶

Burroughs then concludes by hinting at the revolutionary nature of his texts and just as the engrams induce negative feelings in the reactive mind, the ending passage induces a sense of something big and unfinished, waiting just behind the corner to be grasped, only to be lost in the flow of time: “That is what this revolution is about. End of game. New games? There are no new games from here to eternity. END OF THE WAR GAME.”³⁷

³⁵ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 34.

³⁶ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 35.

³⁷ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 36.

2.2 “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”

Among Burroughs’ stories and essays “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”, from his 1986 essay collection *The Adding Machine*, is one of the very few that directly discuss and mention his theory of the word virus. There is a connection between the title of the book and Burroughs’ personal life, which Burroughs never confirmed or denied, even if the connection is rather obvious to spot. His grandfather, also named William S. Burroughs, received a patent for the adding machine which he helped to invent and to honour his accomplishments, the American Arithmometer company even changed its name to Burroughs Adding Machine Co..³⁸

This essay is quite short and interspersed with various digressions while still remaining crucial for this topic. Burroughs opens the essay by once again presenting his theory of the word virus. He supports the claim by describing the word as an organism that exhibits the major traits of a virus – it has reached a symbiosis with its host and exists only to replicate itself.³⁹ Burroughs then describes the origins of writing, which, as he expounded in “The Electronic Revolution”, he believes made the spoken word possible. He explains the written word was originally pictorial, and thus painting and writing were basically the same activities.⁴⁰ Right after Burroughs presents the history of written language, he assumes that the original purpose of said paintings was ceremonial and/or magical. He immediately follows with a claim that when a work is separated from its original, magical function, it loses its vitality.⁴¹ This fact is also underlined by Walter Benjamin, a literary theorist and a philosopher in *Illuminations*. He writes that “it is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value.”⁴² Burroughs then follows his claim by comparing fiction and journalism and concludes that of the two, journalism is closer to the magical origin of writing (however, as Burroughs satirically points out, in the case of journalism it is the black kind of magic). He then speaks about the media, mostly the press, which ties in with his theories of language being used as an oppressive and manipulative tool by the media (but more on that in later chapters). He mentions that most newspapers write their stories BEFORE they actually happen, which results in their issuing a

³⁸ J. A. V. Turck, *Origin of Modern Calculating Machines*, (Chicago: The Western Society of Engineers, 1921) 95.

³⁹ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 48.

⁴⁰ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 48.

⁴¹ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 48-49.

⁴² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 2015), 217.

copious number of retractions. Given that most people do not read the retractions, only the original story, they are thus made to live in a world of fiction created by the media.⁴³ He then compares an author of fiction to a journalist, claiming that an author is responsible for the characters they create, whereas journalists are not. The rest of the essay consists of several digressions and stories that bear no seeming relevance to the subject; however, the closing passage reveals that it might actually be the opposite. The last paragraph of the essay is an unbroken body of text that seemingly bears little informative value. This last paragraph is created by using his famous cut-up technique, as it bears striking resemblance to texts found within *The Nova Express* or *The Ticket that Exploded*. Yet another feature that hints at the true intention of the text is that Burroughs concludes this essay with a single phrase: “the word is a virus.”⁴⁴

“Ten Years and a Billion Dollars” was not as essential or outspoken as “The Electronic Revolution,” however, it dealt with the topic of the word virus from a slightly different perspective and introduced themes that will subsequently be a part of the whole theory in the bigger picture, which is about to be provided in the following chapter.

⁴³ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 49.

⁴⁴ Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*, 52.

3 Linguistic Contagion: Unravelling the Viral Threads of Language

3.1 Language as a virus of the mind

The idea that language is a virus that has infected humankind was presented by Burroughs in his essays “The Electronic Revolution” and “Ten Years and a Billion Dollars”, proposing that “the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible” and that it “has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host.”¹ This provocative claim views language not merely as a tool for expression but as a contagious force that spreads, mutates, and profoundly influences individuals and societies. The notion that language behaves akin to a virus prompts an inquiry into the various dimensions of this metaphor, encompassing the mutability of language, its impact on thought and behaviour, cultural transmission, power dynamics, and both its positive and negative manifestations. The objective of this chapter is not to reduce the problem of language to a simplistic analogy but rather to unravel the complexity inherent in the many ways language shapes human experience. This chapter shall navigate the realms of linguistics, philosophy, literature, and cultural studies to examine the language as a virus. By delving into historical contexts, philosophical perspectives, and contemporary manifestations, a deeper understanding of how language functions as both a constructive and potentially destructive force in shared human narrative shall hopefully be gained.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Burroughs lays out his theory by claiming that it is generally assumed that the spoken word was first and writing subsequently surfaced later, however, he suggests that the opposite is actually true. As evidence he presents the notion of communication in the animal kingdom and how it relates to human language. He compares humans and animals, as they both share information through complex communicational devices, with the difference of absence of the written word in animal communication. It is the very absence of writing in animal language that shaped Burroughs opinion to be as such: “They cannot make information available to future generations or to animals outside the range of their communication system. This is the crucial distinction between men and other animals.”² Burroughs then writes that it is very doubtful whether the spoken word would ever get past the animal stage without the written one. He also says that “[t]he written word is inferential in HUMAN speech. It would not occur to our wise old rat to assemble the young rats and pass his

¹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 5.

² Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 4.

knowledge along in an aural tradition BECAUSE THE WHOLE CONCEPT OF TIME BINDING COULD NOT OCCUR WITHOUT THE WRITTEN WORD.”³ The concept of time-binding was coined and explored by Alfred Korzybski⁴, essentially the founding father of the General Semantics. The concept means, in Korzybski’s own words: “the capacity by which each generation can start where the former left off.”⁵ In short, the time-binding concept could be explained as the ability to share gained knowledge to younger generation, usually through the usage of written media, be it the primitive symbolic cave paintings or a distinguished, renowned book, the time-binding process has not dwindled in its usefulness even after thousands of years. In his texts, Korzybski also employs ideas that subtly hint at the viral nature of the language. As he writes in *Science and Sanity*:

Identification appears also as something ‘infectious’, for it is transmitted directly or indirectly from parents and teachers to the child by the mechanism and structure of language, by established and inherited ‘habits of thought’, by rules for life-orientation, etc. There are also large numbers of men and women who make a profession of spreading the disease.⁶

According to Richard Brodie’s *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*, this billion-year-old organism called virus exists in three universes.⁷ The first of the universes is the universe of biology. That means a viral living organism, infecting people, animals and plants all alike. They remain to be the cause of some of the most deadly and least curable of understood diseases.⁸ The second universe in question is a universe where viruses were not discovered, but rather invented, programmed by man himself. The second universe is, of course, the world of computers, data and networks. Brodie describes the creation of the computer virus as such:

In one of the best-known incidents of inventing a computer virus, Robert Morris, Jr., a student at Cornell University, tried an unauthorized experiment on a government-funded nationwide computer network in November 1988. He wrote a program designed to make copies of itself and install one on each computer in the network. A small error in the program, however, caused it to keep going after it was supposed to stop, clogging up the entire network with millions of copies of itself and crippling the network for hours. Government officials considered this bit of hacking so serious that they charged the astonished student with federal crimes. His program, which became known as the Internet worm, was a form of computer virus. He had tapped into the almost limitless power a virus has once unleashed, and at the same time experienced the loss of any control over the virus by its creator.⁹

It is clear from the description that both biological and computer viruses share the same modes of behaviour, e.g. an enormous potential for multiplication, and they are both transmitted via contact with an infected entity. The last of the universes—and the most crucial one to this

³ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 4.

⁴ Whom, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Burroughs admired greatly.

⁵ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: an Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. (New York City: The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1933) 239.

⁶ Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, lxiii.

⁷ Richard Brodie, *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*, (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2009), 35-36.

⁸ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 36.

⁹ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 36.

thesis—is the universe of mind, culture and thought. As Brodie claims, the viruses of the mind are both discovered and invented, they can either evolve naturally or be created consciously.¹⁰ He also claims that this universe in particular is the one undergoing a paradigm shift.¹¹ From an old model of cultural evolution that revolved around innovation and conquest, the world has now shifted to a new model based on memetics and viruses of the mind. Brodie also makes a distinction between the discovered¹² and invented¹³ viruses of the mind. However, despite the difference in name, origin, and perception, the effects of these two kinds of virus are essentially the same: distracting oneself from one's personal development in favour of obeying the needs of the virus. From this listing, it is quite clear that Burroughs' language virus indeed fits into the universe of the mind, as it directly affects human brain, their consciousness, behaviour and perception, whilst also expressing the qualities of a virus: mutability, fast spreading, and a relationship with its host.

When creating this theory, Burroughs, of course, realized that there is a potentially beneficial side to certain viruses and thought to apply this feature in his own thesis. Burroughs seemingly realizes that language as such is not “evil”, as it can be used to convey good messages and describe beautiful things, however, he argues that the virus enters its host by fraud in order to multiply parasitically, and that any “unwanted guest who makes you sick to look at is never good or beautiful. It is moreover a guest who always repeats itself word for word take for take.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 37.

¹¹ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 37.

¹² He calls this type of mind virus a cultural virus.

¹³ He calls this type of mind virus a designer virus.

¹⁴ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, 25.

3.2 Language as a Contagious Force

As seen in the previous chapter, Burroughs makes the claim that the virus had infected mankind in its earliest stages of development and changed their biological structure to create an environment suitable for its survival. It essentially transformed the throats of the apes so that they would be biologically able to speak. In the earliest stages of their development, humans were indeed susceptible to such an infection, as their minds were almost like a child's: a *tabula rasa*, waiting to be written on. Richard Dawkins, a prominent British evolutionary biologist, has this to say in his essay "Viruses of the Mind":

A human child is shaped by evolution to soak up the culture of her people. Most obviously, she learns the essentials of their language in a matter of months. A large dictionary of words to speak, an encyclopaedia of information to speak about, complicated syntactic and semantic rules to order the speaking, all are transferred from older brains into hers well before she reaches half her adult size. When you are preprogrammed to absorb useful information at a high rate, it is hard to shut out pernicious or damaging information at the same time. With so many mindbytes to be downloaded, so many mental codons to be duplicated, it is no wonder that child brains are gullible, open to almost any suggestion, vulnerable to subversion.¹⁵

As suggested by Dawkins, early humans, susceptible to various modes of outside influence, were infected by the virus, and through time formed a bond of perfect symbiosis. It was critical for the virus to reach such a perfect state of symbiosis for it to survive and multiply. As Dawkins states:

A virus that is too virulent will be rapidly detected and scotched. A virus that instantly and catastrophically sabotages every computer in which it finds itself will not find itself in many computers. It may have a most amusing effect on one computer - erase an entire doctoral thesis or something equally side-splitting - but it won't spread as an epidemic. Some viruses, therefore, are designed to have an effect that is small enough to be difficult to detect.¹⁶

The human mind is a perfect environment for the virus to thrive. As Dawkins writes, the two qualities that a parasitic virus demands of a friendly host are: first, a readiness to replicate information accurately and second, a readiness to obey instructions encoded in the replicated information.¹⁷ And as Dawkins observes a few lines later, the human brain does indeed fit such characteristics.¹⁸ Once safe and sound, embedded within a host's brain, the virus begins to seek a way to multiply. As Burroughs states, "We now have a new virus that can be communicated and indeed the subject may be desperate to communicate this thing that is bursting inside him.

¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Essays*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) 128-129.

¹⁶ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*. 131.

¹⁷ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*. 135.

¹⁸ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*. 135-136.

He is heavy with the load.”¹⁹ Being of a linguistic nature, it is logical that this virus spreads via communication. The communication itself, the very process of the spreading of the virus could be understood as a process initiated by the virus, for without the language virus, the possibility for communication would be greatly decreased. Communication exists on a different plane than language, so its existence is not determined by the existence of the virus, after all, animals communicate without utilizing language. It is clear that language has more functions than just being a means of communication in Burroughs’ conception, it changes into a contagious energy that alters reality, perception, and thinking by infecting consciousness. This makes one consider the possibility that language may exist—or at least develop—even in the absence of a clear necessity for communication. Thinking about it makes one imagine language as an autonomous living thing that develops on its own inside the mind. In this case, language turns into a kind of internal communication that helps people absorb ideas, feelings, and experiences—even when they are alone. The virus then parasites on the human need for communication and uses it as a medium for subsequent infections. Dawkins describes the process of infection as such:

More generally, we all exchange information with one another. We don’t exactly plug floppy disks into slots in one another’s skulls, but we exchange sentences, both through our ears and through our eyes. We notice each other’s styles of moving and of dressing, and are influenced. We take in advertising jingles, and are presumably persuaded by them, otherwise hard-headed businessmen would not spend so much money polluting the air with them.²⁰

The ever-increasing self-replicating qualities of the virus are what makes such a strong force, one of the most powerful forces in the universe, actually.²¹ By infecting a host, the virus presents the environment with new information (albeit biological, computer or mind universe) and the respective systems responsible for copying fail to identify the new information as something alien, given by the virus, and copy it along with all the other, already existing information. In this way, the new information actually gets copied into the genetic system of the host, and thus ensures other following generations are already born with the new information in their genes.

Brodie presents three possible outcomes of this situation:

1. The information may be unintelligible to the rest of the cell and have minimal effect on its workings other than perhaps to decrease its efficiency at all the other work it has to do.
2. The information may confuse or sabotage the workings of the cell and cause it to malfunction, at least from some point of view. (From the virus’s point of view, the new functioning may be fine.)
3. The information may improve the cell’s functioning by giving it some kind of new ability or defense mechanism.²²

¹⁹ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*. 25.

²⁰ Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain*. 135.

²¹ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 39.

²² Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 41.

The language virus in question seems to fit all the variants presented, as it has not expressed any violent or damaging properties to its host, whilst also altering the bodies of the host over time to fit its needs (the transformation of the throats mentioned earlier), however, also providing humankind with a completely new way to communicate and evolve even further.

The fact also remains that unlike other, truly parasitic viruses, the language virus has achieved a perfect state of symbiosis with its host, as already mentioned. Burroughs acknowledges this fact, even if he mentions it paradoxically, even though viruses are dependent on the host for their existence, they usually destroy the host, or at the very least, render him almost useless for further usage.²³ Burroughs then asks rhetorical questions whether the language virus is actually the very same, a ticking time-bomb, a certain extermination programme of some sort. This claim seems very unlikely, however, as the language virus mostly fits the category of the mind virus, which is not directly responsible for the bodily functions and thus it is useless as a biological weapon or an extermination programme. Brodie also explains that a successful virus must allow its host to be alive long enough to spread it.²⁴ And without hosts, there would be no environment for the language virus to thrive, spread and multiply, so it had created this perfect state of symbiosis that is beneficial for both parties involved.

As for the actual contagious force the language virus possesses, a real-world happening shall serve as an example. In the year 2023, a new word had entered into public consciousness: the noun “rizz”, which could also be subjected to conversion, thus creating a verb “to rizz” or in passive voice “be rizzed by somebody”, going as far as gaining a phrasal-verb status as in “rizz up”. This word is fairly new, its coinage credited to a certain social platform streamer in the early 2023²⁵ and its meaning being essentially style, charm, attractiveness or the ability to attract a romantic or sexual partner.²⁶ The social media and all the other various viral media platforms helped to spread the usage of this word, so its popularity grew ever more. Essentially, the more people use the word, the more it is likely to spread as it permeates day-to-day communication and affects human thought and behaviour. If a person desires to keep “up with the times”, the more they are likely to use new, social media specific words and vocabulary and thus invertedly spreading it among more people of their demographic category (just like a virus is transmitted – the more people have it, the more people get infected). The popularity of the

²³ Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*. 5.

²⁴ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 43.

²⁵ Christopher Brito, “Oxford picks “rizz” as the word of the year,” *CBS News*, accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rizz-oxford-dictionary-word-of-the-year-2023/>

²⁶ Brito, “Oxford picks rizz”

word grew so much that it was subsequently included in Oxford's dictionaries. Eventually, the word gained the status of the word of the year. Casper Grathwohl, President of Oxford Languages, commented:

Rizz is a term that has boomed on social media and speaks to how language that enjoys intense popularity and currency within particular social communities—and even in some cases lose their popularity and become passé—can bleed into the mainstream. This is a story as old as language itself, but stories of linguistic evolution and expansion that used to take years can now take weeks or months. The spike in usage data for rizz goes to prove that words and phrases that evolve from internet culture are increasingly becoming part of day-to-day vernacular and will continue to shape language trends in the future.²⁷

This potential for the fast spreading of words and other linguistic features is a dazzling example of how language behaves in a viral pattern. For example, when one should compare the fast-spreading usage and distribution of the word “rizz” with the recent COVID-19 outbreaks, both of whose speed with which they dominate the world is staggering. On the basis of this example, it can be clearly seen how far the contagious force of the language virus actually reaches, and that the new-age media are a perfect environment for the language virus to thrive and spreading its mutations further and further

²⁷ Oxford University Press Collective, “Rizz crowned Oxford Word of the Year 2023,” *Oxford University Press*, accessed December 5, 2023. <https://corp.oup.com/news/rizz-crowned-oxford-word-of-the-year-2023/>

3.3 The Mutability of Language

Language and viral forces share more than just their potential for fast spreading. As Dawkins envisioned the mind virus as a replicating idea, this metaphor shall be extended to scrutinize the mutability of language itself—a contagion that perpetually transforms, adapts, and influences the human experience. As he claims:

Progressive evolution of more effective mind-parasites will have two aspects. New ‘mutants’ (either random or designed by humans) that are better at spreading will become more numerous. And there will be a ganging up of ideas that flourish in one another’s presence, ideas that mutually support one another just as genes do and, as I have speculated, computer viruses may one day do. We expect that replicators will go around together from brain to brain in mutually compatible gangs.²⁸

One of the other traits is the capability of language to mutate, resulting in many slang words, regional variations and sub-branching of the linguistic tree. Much like a virus, whose inner mutational capabilities seem almost endless. Once again, the reference to endless new mutations of the SARS-CoV-2 in recent history begs to be mentioned. Language is also a perpetually evolving entity. The parable of the mutation of language and viral mutations is even more relevant when examining this article from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: “The small genetic changes that occur in influenza viruses over time usually produce viruses that are closely related to one another, which can be illustrated by their location close together on a phylogenetic tree.”²⁹ Both language and viruses have their respective trees, which are branching, depending on the similarity of the various inner mutations. Take for example the branch of Germanic languages. In this case, the viral counterpart on the phylogenetic tree would be the influenza type. Over time, the people infected with this particular variation of the language virus spread out, communicate, and pass the virus of Germanic language further. In the process, some other, less potent or relevant mutations of language go extinct, making way for the strongest and most replicated variety of the virus. When the Germanic language virus finds enough hosts and an environment suitable for reproduction and mutation, it begins to branch out, thus resulting in various sub-types of Germanic languages, just as influenza is able to mutate within its host and gaining various new traits and defence mechanisms. In this case, the various regional dialects and the slight differences between the various Germanic languages could be seen as the various symptoms of all the various mutations of the superordinate

²⁸ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*. 137.

²⁹Centres for Disease Control and Prevention Collective “How Viruses Can Change: Drift and Shift, ” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, accessed December 6, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/viruses/change.htm>

GERMANIC LANGUAGE VIRUS. John McWhorter makes the following comment in *The Power of Babel*:

This book has been dedicated to an analogy between biological evolution and human language. Like animals and plants, languages change, split into subvarieties, hybridize, revivify, evolve functionless features, and can even be genetically altered. The analogy continues in that languages, like animals and plants, can go extinct. As animals and plants drive one another to extinction by nosing one another out of ecological niches in competition for sustenance, in the past languages have usually gone extinct when one group conquers another or when a group opts for a language that it perceives as affording it greater access to resources it perceives as necessary to survival.³⁰

The relationship between humans and the language virus is truly symbiotic, as people have learned to choose a variation most suitable for their own survival whilst not recognizing they are, in fact, infected, and that their desire for survival is closely intertwined with the virus' own desire.

Not all linguistic changes and mutations are as swift as the aforementioned rizz case, however. Most of the linguistic mutations and changes take place over long periods of time, sometimes even hundreds of years, whilst some tend to be fast-paced and swift. However, the more modern the times are, the speedier the mutations of the language virus have to be, as its exposure to new hosts and possible points of entry are multiplied by millions in this age of social media. As John McWhorter states:

The transformative nature of language is as difficult to perceive as the fact that the mountains that look so indestructible to us are gradually eroding, to be replaced by new ones “thrown up” by geological collisions we never seem to see. We can only perceive the changes that occur quickly and frequently enough to fall within a human life span, and thus, just as we are aware of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, we are all aware that languages change, but mainly on the level of slang.³¹

Yet another example of inner linguistic mutation would be the vowel mutation in Germanic languages. Vowel mutation, often known as umlaut, is a linguistic phenomenon seen in Germanic languages. Over the course of these languages' history, the complex evolution of vowels has significantly shaped the phonological environment. Originating from the earliest phases of Proto-Indo-European roots and impacted by past linguistic changes, umlaut is characterized by systematic patterns of fronting and rising of vowels. Its influence may be seen most clearly in noun declension and plural forms, but it also affects related linguistic phenomena like vowel harmony and ablaut. This particular case of mutation of the language virus is a case of the slow mutation, as this process took years and years to finish, and arguably, as language is a living force, never finished mutating. As established in this chapter, language is indeed subjected to countless inner mutations and variations, giving the parable of language

³⁰ John H. McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*, (Perennial, 2003), 253.

³¹ McWhorter, *The Power of Babel*. 16-17.

and virus even more resonance and credibility. After all, as McWhorter shows, it was a mutation that created the concept of language:

In regard to dating human language, what is important here is that if this genetic instruction or predisposition for language is real, then it must have been created by a mutation. In this light, it is more economical to reconstruct that such a mutation occurred once in the stem population of *Homo sapiens* 150,000-odd years ago and was then passed on to all descendants, rather than emerging at various later times in separate offshoot populations. Indeed, some traits can mutate into existence separately throughout the world, such as the development of eyes or the power of flight.³²

The tie to Burroughs' thinking and his theory of how the virus mutated early humans to create a suitable environment is subtle, yet very clear once this connection is made.

³² McWhorter, *The Power of Babel*. 8.

3.4 Influence on Thought and Behaviour

Language thus shares almost the same *modus operandi* and patterns of behaviour as a virus in such an extent it is possible to call language itself a virus of the mind. The mind, of course, is responsible for the way humankind perceives the world, reacts to all the various stimuli and creates reactions accordingly. Simply said, the human mind is responsible for human behaviour, and if that mind should be infected with a virus whose entire existence is based upon copying information and multiplying, it is inevitable that the mind gets influenced by the virus, at least to some extent. As Richard Brodie says,

The memes you are personally programmed with, even without considering the culture around you, affect your life in almost every conceivable way. That's why a virus of the mind is something to be taken seriously. These viruses fill your mind up with memes — ideas, attitudes, and beliefs — that make the results you get in life very different from the results you may want.³³

Brodie argues that once the mind gets infected by the virus, the virus spreads its influence using its physical manifestations, the previously mentioned memes. The memes are used to program a human mind, shape it to fit the needs of the source entity.³⁴ Of course, memes are not only of biological, viral origin. They can be recognized for what they are and their manipulative effect can be exploited to influence the minds of the populace. A clear example of such artificial, human-made memetic influence is advertisement, which is present in every form of media the modern world has to offer (platforms far beyond imagination of Burroughs, McLuhan and their contemporaries). The memes work as a sort of “prompt” for the system of the human mind to read, and subconsciously or consciously alter itself according to the information the meme provides. Brodie argues that the human mind, stripped to its barest form, is a complex system of primal, original programming, the instincts.³⁵ Instincts are then surrounded by a layer of conscious mind that ultimately decides what to do, and is able to override instinctual programming. Memes work with the idea of the conscious mind overriding the instincts and directly affecting consciousness (and subsequently, subconsciousness), whilst also directly appealing to instincts, as the memes which do appeal to it are far more likely to spread than those which do not.³⁶ Memetic programming can also be realized while the individual is fully aware of it. Brodie, once again, supplies an example:

Everything you do that is not instinctual is the result of programming. You are programmed by memes. If you went to college, you probably did so to get educated, which is to say, to get programmed with a set of

³³ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 28.

³⁴ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 17.

³⁵ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 18.

³⁶ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 18.

memes that would support your success in life. Having been to college, you have thoughts and behaviors you wouldn't have had if you were just going on instinct.³⁷

The language virus, however, programs the human mind without the host realizing such an event is transpiring (the previously mentioned perfect state of symbiosis is the cause of the host's ignorance).

Brodie argues that there are three ways in which the human mind can get infected by memes.³⁸ The first one is conditioning (also known as repetition). The language virus memes are most likely to be transferred by this particular way, as repetition in language and mirroring one's surroundings is the most common way the dominant mutation of language virus spreads. This one is also very popular in marketing and advertisement, as constant repetition of a certain catchphrase or name of the product infects the human mind and elicits a response – essentially the base of Pavlov's research.

The second infection is cognitive dissonance. This kind of reaction of the mind happens when two conflicting memes collide within one mind. Often, the memes are of opposite polarity. For example, *parents* and *divorce* in the mind of a child. According to Brodie³⁹, the child then creates a completely new meme to actually mend the previous ones together so they would make sense, and in the process influences their future thought and behaviour.

The third way of infection is by influencing our instinctive programming and using it to enter like a Trojan horse. In this type of infection, the virus uses the pre-coded prompts, such as sexual attraction, fear of darkness, or motherly instincts, essentially triggering a response out of these instincts and using the distracted mind to sneak its way into it. As Brodie argues: “Simply getting programmed by new memes isn't the same as catching a full-blown mind virus, but viruses of the mind take advantage of one or all of these methods to make their initial inroads into our minds.”⁴⁰

Arguably, the language virus spreads the most by using the first of the types listed above. Through constant repetition and contact with other infected individuals do the memes of the language spread and infect more minds. Brodie even provides an example⁴¹: When one should desire to learn French, one gets exposed to the memetics of French language constantly and on repeat. . At first, the memetics of the language make no sense, however, after time the mind gets programmed by the very same French memetics, resulting, in time, in fully understanding

³⁷ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 18 – 19.

³⁸ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 126.

³⁹ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 126.

⁴⁰ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 127.

⁴¹ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 127.

the language. This process, of course, is voluntary and self-imposed, but in the case of the viral infection of the mind, the mind experiences this process subconsciously, prompted by the memetics and the desires of the virus. Another example of how the mind virus of language influences human thought and behaviour is the phenomenon of word parasites. Words that bear no informative value whatsoever, used only to prolong and tie in sentences and conversations. It could be argued that word parasites serve as programming memes for the various mutations of the language virus, as one mutation battles the other in an evolutionary race, trying to be the one on top and infect the most minds with its specific variant, with its own set of word parasites. Yet another real-world example of how language works as a virus is the concept of prescribed English spelling (and arguably, any other language). Brodie argues that the spelling of the English language is relevant only because of a pervasive meme. It is actually not relevant, as there is no right or wrong way to spell words, it is only a meme that has programmed our minds to think that way.⁴² The virus, desiring for clarity and unity of form, so it could be spread with less effort, has infected humankind with a meme of prescribed grammar. As Brodie states:

Any beliefs you have about there being a right way and a wrong way to do things can and will be co-opted by mind viruses as part of their faithful-reproduction machinery. Remember “a foolish consistency”! Consistency for its own sake is meaningless. Ask yourself if being consistent serves your underlying purpose, such as effective communication, or if you’ve just been programmed with a *Be consistent meme*, leaving you open to mind-virus infections.⁴³

As the originator of this theory, Burroughs seemingly recognized these features of the language virus and offered a way to battle the manipulative and parasitic viral force of language – the cut-up technique, to be scrutinized in the following sub-chapter.

⁴² Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 145.

⁴³ Brodie, *Virus of the Mind*, 145.

4 The cut-up technique: resisting the virus

4.1 The origin

Burroughs described and subsequently used several approaches to battle the influence (and inevitably, control) of the media and the language. The most important one is the method of cut-up, an approach to writing subverting some of the conventional norms of textual production, while still retaining some of the text's informative, symbolic and artistic value. In practice, the author would write a page of his own text or use an already existing one and later cut the page up and scramble the words around to create a new, seemingly nonsensical text. As Pierre-Louis Patoine writes in his essay concerning Burroughs' writing:

This rearrangement generates or accompanies numerous repetitions and variations of images and passages. Through these variations, things are rarely assigned permanent condition: characters are never quite definite, they inhabit spaces that are both past AND present, both mythical AND realist; episodes are not cause OR consequence, they are cause AND consequence, and so on. Thus, Burroughs' writing embraces contradiction and simultaneity, refusing the coherence imperative and laws of non-contradiction.¹

As stated by Robin Lydenberg,² the famous cut-up technique was introduced to Burroughs in 1959 by his friend, poet and painter Brian Gysin. At first, it was a result of an accident, however Burroughs immediately recognized its potential as a revolutionary writing method. In Lydenberg's words: "What struck both Gysin and Burroughs about the cut-up method was the possibility of using this technique to make the writer's medium tangible—to make the word an object detached from its context, its author, its signifying function. They wanted to bring, as they put it, the collage to writing."³ What began only as an experiment later blossomed into a systematic method of writing. Burroughs perfected the cut-up method while expanding from simple scissors and paper to recorded speech and even images on film.⁴

Although widely recognized as the originators of the cut-up method, neither Burroughs nor Gysin were, in fact, its creators. As Burroughs himself openly admits,⁵ there were other pioneers of experimental writing that had used this technique before. For example, the poet Tristan Tzara, one of the founders of Dada movement, toyed with the idea of cut-up poems and pursued his vision to a bitter end. At a certain surrealist rally in the 1920s, Tzara proposed to

¹ Patoine, "William S. Burroughs and The Wild Boys Against the Language Virus", 31.

² Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 44.

³ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 44.

⁴ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 44-45.

⁵ William S. Burroughs, *A William Burroughs Reader*, (London: Pan, 1982), 264.

create a poem on the spot – achieved by pulling words out of a hat. Subsequently, a riot broke out, resulting in Tzara being expelled from the movement and the cut-up technique with him.⁶ Another prominent user of the cut-up method is T. S. Eliot in his poem *The Waste Land*, which Burroughs calls “the first great cut-up collage.”⁷

Burroughs, however, expanded the method of cut-up beyond the borders of his own texts. As noted by Lydenberg:

Every phrase, in Burroughs’ view, has a similarly checkered history of incarnations and migrations. The production of the cut-up text thus raises the question of who is speaking in a given phrase or fragment. Like the deconstructionists, the writer of cut-ups implies that it is always language that speaks within a network of infinite and anonymous citations. (...) In his theoretical explorations of the nature of cut-up writing, Burroughs comes to assert finally that all literature is cut-up. “What is any writing but a cut-up?” he asks⁸

Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction shares many similarities with Burroughs’ own visions. In his interview named “The Rhetoric of Drugs”, Derrida speaks about deconstruction’s close ties with parasitism. He argues that “as a discourse, deconstruction is always a discourse about the parasite, itself a device parasitic on the subject of the parasite, a discourse ‘on parasite’ and in the logic of the ‘super-parasite.’”⁹ As Lydenberg mentions,¹⁰ once again, the viewing of a text as an “intersecting network of many of many texts spliced, crossed and merged”¹¹ is not held exclusive to Burroughs, but one shared by many literary theorists such as Derrida, Bakhtin, Kristeva and Barthes. They believe that every writer uses the method of cut-up either consciously or subconsciously, as they draw from the register of language and rearrange the words to fit their needs. Lydenberg argues that every writer acts upon a certain relationship between the body of text and literary tradition: “For Burroughs, the cut-up is merely a device for making this relationship explicit.”¹²

⁶ Burroughs, *A William Burroughs Reader*, 268.

⁷ Burroughs, *A William Burroughs Reader*, 263.

⁸ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 45.

⁹ Derrida, *Points...: Interviews*, 234.

¹⁰ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 46.

¹¹ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 46.

¹² Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 46.

4.2 The cut-up as a possible antidote

One of the negative traits of the virus recognized by Burroughs is its potential to alter the perception and behaviour of the populace, exerting control over them – language in all of its manipulative uses. Burroughs claims that one of the many utilities the cut-up method possesses is that it puts the writer in a “tactile communication with his medium”¹³ and that it is able to demonstrate how certain word combinations “produce certain effects on the human nervous system.”¹⁴

Burroughs believed that by cutting up and rearranging the words, one is able to resist the control language inevitably imposes. As he says:

The word of course is one of the powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers... Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system.¹⁵

When employing the cut-up technique, one inevitably taps into the planes of intertextuality. Intertextuality is a concept which does not define literary works as autonomous and complete, but rather as ensembles of elements systematically related to other texts.¹⁶ The intertextuality of cut-up is however, is only temporary and constantly shifting. By employing the cut-up technique, one should be liberated from the manipulative tendencies of the language or, at the very least, one resists the controlling urge of the language virus, thus making themselves an imperfect host. A host who is not able to spread the language virus further, as they do not concede to the inner systems the virus had implanted in their brain. Even if it is still possible to find meaning in a cut-up text, the fragmented and rearranged nature of cut-up texts invites readers to engage in a more dynamic and associative mode of understanding. Meaning in these texts often emerges through the juxtaposition of disparate elements, inviting readers to discern connections, themes, or emotions that transcend the original source material. The act of interpreting cut-up texts becomes a subjective and participatory experience, where readers contribute to the construction of meaning through their own associations and perspectives. During this process, the reader might realize the actual scope of control the language virus exerts, and then subsequently act in defiance, producing more cut-up texts themselves. Burroughs believes that cut-up can be used by anyone,¹⁷ thus making it a perfect remedy for

¹³ Odier, *The Job*, 28.

¹⁴ Odier, *The Job*, 28.

¹⁵ Odier, *The Job*, 33.

¹⁶ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 46.

¹⁷ Burroughs, *A William Burroughs Reader*, 269.

the outbreak of the language virus. In the words of Robin Lydenberg: “In the cacophony of the intertext which is constantly swirling around us, we are liberated from the sentence, from grammar and logic, from our roles as speakers or listeners, from the opposition of inside and outside.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 47.

4.3 The cut -up as a possible antidote: a case study

In Burroughs' literary world, the cut-up approach becomes a remedy against the impact of what he called the "word virus." Originating from his partnership with Brion Gysin, this method offers a revolutionary perspective on language and a means of destroying the linguistic structures that Burroughs perceived as agents of social and cultural control. "The cut-up texts offer an antidote to this terminal paralysis in metonymic condensations that always lead to explosion, dissemination, expansion. The cycle is always recharged."¹⁹

When creating his texts, Burroughs sought to dispel "the illusion of the referential function of language"²⁰ and create a text which would possess the same qualities as the viral forces of the language do, such as the never-ending potential for mutation and innovation. With such qualities, the text and subsequently, the reader, is able to adapt to the ever-shifting manipulative forces of the virus, while also being liberated from the stasis of meaning, as words produced by the cut-up method lose their former meaning and referential capabilities and open the mind to create its own. By employing this method in his texts, Burroughs hoped to spread the cut-up among the readers, "to make accessible to them the liberating effects of his techniques for manipulating language."²¹ However, the cut-up method offers resistance against not only the word-virus, but against all who search to use language as a tool for manipulation and control, such as the mass media. By employing the method on a newspaper, the reader is able to deconstruct the text, thus liberating it from the oppressive control of language and media and then analyse and create their own narratives based on symbols and patterns that are completely personal and individual, thus making them unalterable. As Eric Mottram states: "Like Marshall McLuhan and Allen Ginsberg, Burroughs realizes that the black magic of mass communications must be counterattacked by white magic of analysis and resistance."²² This effect can be produced by applying the method on any text to create one free of the virus and all of side-effects. As Lydenberg claims:

In response to language's imposition of the deadly stasis of definitions, "the assignment of permanent condition," Burroughs proposes a negative strategy of resistance in which identity continually shifts, eluding any definitive form. With his own analytical scalpel, Burroughs will dissect and dismantle the most powerful weapons used by language to channel, control, and repress this evolutionary flux.²³

¹⁹ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 52.

²⁰ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 33.

²¹ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, xi.

²² Mottram, *The Algebra of Need*, 26.

²³ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 39.

4.3.1 The antidote in practice: *The Soft Machine*

The Soft Machine is one of the three books that make up “The Nova Trilogy,” a tercet of Burroughs’ fictions that are created mostly using the cut-up method. A revolutionary trilogy that topples the literary norms while also retaining most of the qualities a text should possess. Meaning and definition are completely deconstructed along with the text and then scrambled in order to produce a text liberated from all the oppressive tools of language, mainstream media and censorship. Using excerpts from *The Soft Machine*, this sub-chapter shall present an explanation of how exactly did Burroughs achieve his resistance against the word-virus and control using this very method.

The Soft Machine was published in 1961 and it was one of the very first attempts Burroughs made to incorporate the cut-up method in a full-length narrative.²⁴ The second chapter of the book, “Who Am I to Be Critical” chapter shall serve as a base for the analysis. The first cut-up of the chapter is found on page sixteen, and it is “quite short and relatively accessible; it is closer to the montage and mosaic style of *Naked Lunch* than to the radical cut-up of the trilogy.”²⁵ Here is the passage in question:

Well we come to this village and found the magic man in a little hut on the outskirts — An evil old character with sugary eyes that stuck to you — We told him what we wanted and he nodded and looked at both of us and smiled and said he would have to cook up the medicine we should come back next day at sundown — So we came back and he gave us the bitter medicine in clay pots — And I hadn’t put the pot down before the pictures started coming in sharp and clear: the hanged boy pulling his legs up to the chin and pumping out the spurts by the irrigation ditch, the soldiers swinging me around in the harness, the burned man screaming away like a good one and that heart just pulsing and throwing off spurts of blood in the rising sun.²⁶

In this passage, the cut-up method completely obliterates the feeling of time and temporal orientation the text should provide. It is a collage of moments that are thrown together, scrambled into confusing simultaneity with a same thematic base – death, blood and semen. This, at first, might confuse the reader, as his infected mind struggles to decode the scrambled text. The language virus is trying to find ground, to find a way how to implement this peculiar text into its structure and work with it to stay undetected. However, the cut-up text requires the reader to open his mind and analyse, to fragment their self just as the text is fragmented and find their own meaning in the deconstructed landscape. As Lydenberg claims:

The logic behind Burroughs’ cut-up effects in this chapter and in *The Soft Machine* in general is that if the self is sufficiently fragmented, emptied out, and dispersed, one will no longer fear its loss. Beyond this shifting of identities, then, the cut-up also offers the possibility of a more radical dissolution of identity.²⁷

²⁴ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 56.

²⁵ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 61.

²⁶ William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 16.

²⁷ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 63.

In a text devoid of classical notions such as meaning, definition and temporal frame, the virus struggles to latch on and integrate it – the text simply does not fit its inner mechanisms of reference by name or association. This passage essentially distorts notions of time and identity; however, it also opens the mind for new possible approaches to the text, thinking and seeing the text with a newfound clarity and understanding, possibly free of the control of the virus. For as already established, the language virus thrives because of the lack of awareness and the cut-up method exposes the virus present in writing and makes the human mind aware of its influence. The texts produced by cut-up may seem disorienting at first – that would be the initial reaction of the infected mind to a text that bears no reproductive value to the virus. After close inspection and analysis, the text begins to make sense, as the mind decodes and liberates itself.

The second cut-up of the chapter, which also serves as a conclusion to the chapter, focuses “not merely on the confusion, but on the explosion of identity, of linear sequence, of conventional syntax and semantics.”²⁸ Here is the passage in question:

Rats was running all over the morning — Somewhere North of Monterrey went into the cocaine business — By this time fish tail Cadillac — people — civilians — So we score for some business and get rich over the warring powers — shady or legitimate the same fuck of a different color and the general on about the treasure — We rigged their stupid tree limb and drop the alien corn — spot of business to Walgreen’s — So we organize this 8267 kicked in level on average ape — Melodious gimmick to keep the boys in line — I had learned to control Law 334 procuring an orgasm by any image, Mary sucking him and running the outfield — Static was taken care of that way — what you might call a vending machine and boys dropping to Walgreens — We are not locals. We sniff the losers and cut their balls off chewing all kinds masturbation and self-abuse like a cow with the aftosa — Young junkies return it to the white reader and one day I would wake up as Bill covered with ice and burning crotch — drop my shorts and comes gibbering up me with a corkscrew motion — We both come right away standing and trying to say something — I see other marks are coming on with the mother tincture — The dogs of Harry J. Anslinger sprouted all over me — By now we had word dust stirring the 1920’s, maze of dirty pictures and the house hooked for generations — We all fucked the boy burglar feeling it right down to our toes — Spanish cock flipped out spurting old Montgomery Ward catalogues — So we stripped a young Dane and rigged the Yankee dollar — Pants down to the ankle, a barefoot Indian stood there watching and feeling his friend — Others had shot their load too over a broken chair through the tool heap — Tasty spurts of jissom across the dusty floor — Sunrise and I said here we go again with the knife — My cock pulsed right with it and trousers fell in the dust and dead leaves — Return it to the white reader in stink of sewage looking at open shirt flapping and comes maybe five times his ass fluttering like — We sniff what we wanted pumping out the spurts open shirt flapping — What used to be me in my eyes like a flash bulb, spilled adolescent jissom in the bath cubicle — Next thing I was Danny Deever in Maya drag — That night we requisitioned a Peruvian boy — I would pass into his body — What an awful place it is — most advanced stage — foreigner too — They rotate the symbols around IBM machine with cocaine — fun and games what?²⁹

Unlike the first cut-up, this one seemingly bears more informative value, as there are cases of temporal referents such as “by now” or “by this time”. What it achieves, however, is the complete deconstruction of identity based on nationality. By deleting any given names and describing only their nationality and sexual acts, Burroughs liberates the characters from being manipulated by language and further reference, their identities are stripped to bare bone and

²⁸ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 64.

²⁹ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 24-5.

only their nationality is given and a common theme is provided: various acts of sexual perversion. This is a reoccurring theme in cut-ups, as Burroughs often deconstructs the texts and its contents while only providing a theme that is subtly interspersed throughout the cut lines. The theme however, is not presented on a silver plate to the reader, they are required to navigate the deconstructed narrative and find create their own meaning therein. The other feature this cut-up possesses is the complete disregard for correct verb tenses. The tenses are ever-shifting, making the reader uncertain about temporal reference of the text. As Lydenberg states: “Believing that word controls time, Burroughs is able to dislocate linear sequence by dislocating grammar. Thus the cut-up offers a reading experience without limits, without orientation. Burroughs deliberately redirects the very process of reading away from any expectation of continued action.”³⁰ The expectations that the reader has from a text are based on millennia of preconceived notions that abide by the laws of the virus. Thus, by omitting them, the control of the virus is lessened within the mind of the reader, making it easier to recognize the infection.

With the usage of intertextuality, Burroughs is able to employ characters without given names, and yet the characters are possible to be recognized by the reader with the usage of various hints and similarities Burroughs had left in his texts. For example, the reader should be wary of the text and always be searching for similar words and their patterns of appearance. For example, hypothetically, let’s say Burroughs is writing about an Indian in one of his stories and he describes the purple head of his penis glistening in the sunrise. The reader should then focus on the words PURPLE, GLISTENING and SUNRISE. Once these words are recognized as the theme-bearers, the reader should search the text (and other ones from the same author, too) for these words and look for association through intertext, not through reference or image. For example, Burroughs makes the association between DEATH and SEX in “Who Am I to Be Critical” based on intertext, not on association or symbolism. On page fourteen, Burroughs provides a visual scene of hanging and uses this particular word formation: “We all stood there watching and feeling it right **down to our toes** and the others who were waiting to be hanged felt it too.”³¹ The phrase “down to our toes” is critical, as it should be recognized as one of the theme-bearers (or theme indicators). Several pages later, an observant reader might spot the phrase recycled: “I got a whiff of ozone and penny arcades and then I felt it start **way down in my toes** these bone wrenching spasms emptied me and everything spilled out shit running down

³⁰ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 67.

³¹ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 14.

the back of my thighs and no control in my body paralyzed (...)”³² Once again, the reader should be able to recognize that both scenes vividly describe hanging not because the hanging is openly mentioned, the primary source of association should be usage of the same phrases in the cut-up. The phrase is used once again several pages later, in the closing paragraph of the story: “We all fucked the boy burglar feeling it right **down to our toes.**”³³ Here, it serves as an association for connection between death and sex, as Burroughs intended. An association that is free from infection, based only on the amount of attention the reader approaches the text with. As Lydenberg states:

In the cut-ups, the thematic connection between sex and death is not established through a fictional situation—as when spectators of an execution dissolve in orgasms—but in the simple migration of a phrase.³⁴

This association through intertext, however, does not carry over only within the border of one book, it is used to refer to texts found in completely different narratives. As would be the case with this passage found within the pages of *The Soft Machine*:

Photo falling — Word falling — Use partisans of all nations — Target Orgasm Ray Installations — Gothenburg Sweden — Coordinates 8 2 7 6 — Take Studio — Take Board Books — Take Death Dwarfs — Towers, open fire.³⁵

The theme-bearer in this passage is the motion of cutting, which is presented not by theme-bearing words, but by theme-bearing sentence markers – in this case, the dashes create a cutting effect, dividing the sentences into single units of imagery devoid of context on its own. When removed from their surroundings, these images acquire independence and power. Here, we see that dashes are utilized to produce a syncopated pattern in both syntactical units and narrative sequences where cutting is implemented. However, larger elements—such as scenes, images, or narrative conceits—are also split apart, relocated, and placed in different settings and creating a completely new meanings using already existing imagery.³⁶ This particular passage is then recycled and used again in his other famous cut-up novel, *Nova Express*: “Calling partisans of all nations—Cut word lines— Shift linguals—Vibrate tourists—Free doorways— Word falling—Photo falling—Break through in Grey Room”³⁷ In this case, the cutting is clearly expressed with the theme-bearing word cut, however, the intended way of reference is through the migration of the phrase, not the expressive mention of the theme. As Patoine states:

³² Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 17.

³³ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 25.

³⁴ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 65.

³⁵ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 152.

³⁶ This feature is also advocated by Burroughs himself, as he claims that if anybody should cut-up some of the poems by Rimbaud, one should be able to create a completely new Rimbaud poem using already existing images and tropes (Burroughs, *A William Burroughs Reader*; 269.)

³⁷ William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 65.

The repetition of a limited number of similar images, often surreal and erotic, disrupts narrative progression, while intensifying these images. Thus freed from the chains of narrative syntax, they become alive, materially dense, physically present through embodied interpretation, resonating in the reader's brain, muscles, viscera and loins, replacing the viral structures of logical thought and stereotypical narrative sequences by psychedelic images, acting like drugs able to "clean the doors of perception" (to use Wordsworth's phrase after Aldous Huxley and Jim Morrison).³⁸

Last of the examples taken from *The Soft Machine* is the two-word sequence "heart pulsing." In this case, Burroughs chooses the verb **pulsing** combined with the noun **heart** as the theme-bearers and assigns to them different positions in the story. The first case of appearance is as follows: "That **heart pulsing** in the sun and my cock pulsed right with it and jissom seeped through my thin cotton trousers and fell in the dust and shit of the street."³⁹ The second case of appearance is found just a few pages later, still within the borders of one story: "The burned man screaming away like a good one and that heart just pulsing and throwing off spurts of blood in the rising sun."⁴⁰ The connection in question is that the theme-bearing pulsing of the heart is connected to actions of spurting and spontaneously expelling liquids from one's body, as in the first case the narrator uncontrollably spurts out semen out of excitement and in the second case, the affected person is spurting blood from his body. The second connection that is expressed by this virus-free metaphor is the connection between something exciting and the act of dying. Burroughs often takes interest in last breaths before death, often describing these moments with a sexual undertone (hanged men and their last orgasms before death etc.). The heart pulses once it finds itself in an exciting situation, however, it pulses just as much when faced with its last living moments. Once again, by shifting the phrase, Burroughs subtly hints at the intended analogy expressed without the need for symbolic language, and other expressive qualities of the virus. Burroughs essentially believes that the reader is able to draw the connection within his mind, create their own pathways by carefully navigating through the text and approaching it with an analytic lens.

4.3.2 The antidote in practice: *Nova Express*

Nova Express is the last book of the "cut-up trilogy." Unlike the previous entries, it is far more outspoken in its social, cultural and political commentary. The story takes place against the backdrop of a conflict between the resistance forces of the Nova Police, commanded by the mysterious Inspector Lee (who serves as the representation of Burroughs' own thoughts and

³⁸ Patoine, "William S. Burroughs and The Wild Boys Against the Language Virus", 34.

³⁹ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 15.

⁴⁰ Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*. 16.

beliefs), and the Nova Mob, a metaphoric personification of manipulation and control. Like a contagious force, the Nova Mob aims to control people's thoughts and impose its own language order. But the disruptive power of the cut-up method fuels opposition against this language monopoly. The narrative however, brings many paradoxes to light, when considering its nature. A critique of language, written in language. A text designed around the death of the author, (for as established, cut-up is to be used by anyone), yet the author's presence in the text is unmistakable. A narrative that strives for destruction of the word, but would not exist without it. Lydenberg describes the intricate paradoxes of *Nova Express* as such:

Despite this radical distrust of language, Burroughs must still use it in *Nova Express* to clarify the theoretical intentions which have motivated his experimental works. Like all of Burroughs' writing, however, *Nova Express* is fraught with paradox: although the narrative perspective tends to externalize and dissect all human responses, it is also marked by a painfully human and urgent appeal to the reader. This narrative insistence reflects Burroughs' desperate desire to make contact with someone or something outside the text, to be understood by his audience. While the actual reading difficulty posed by the cut-up style would seem to defeat the author's desire to make contact, Burroughs' development of the cut-up in *Nova Express* is aimed, at least in theory, at precisely this goal.⁴¹

In *Nova Express*, Burroughs explicitly draws a parallel between his cut-up method and the content of the narrative, thus creating a book that is able to function as a resistance to the virus in itself. Burroughs essentially narrates all the processes the text undergoes when subjected to the method and creates a story out of the process. For as Lydenberg mentions⁴², the revolutionary Nova Police consists mostly of writers and other wordsmiths of similar occupation. Their acts of resistance are most often based on appropriating the enemy's writing machines which "regulate external patterns of the culture and internal patterns of thought and sensation."⁴³ The primary objective of the Nova Police is to destroy language weapons and words themselves, which is a direct parallel to the cut-up method, which operates along very similar lines to the Nova Police.

Nova Express is perhaps the most refined cut-up narrative Burroughs had ever produced and it indeed is a very strong proclamation of war against the control of language and media. As established by the previous subchapter, the cut-up method offers a resistance to the language virus via features such as creating new associations based on shifting phrases, not meaning; disruption of conventional meaning and breaking the linguistic conditioning, however, there is yet another feature that is yet to be discussed. The feature is **the exposure of the original texts' true intention via cut-up.**

The case to be included is found on page fifty-two of the narrative, and it goes as follows:

⁴¹ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 95.

⁴² Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 96.

⁴³ Lydenberg, *Word Cultures*, 96.

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—The fact is noteworthy—48 stages—prisoner was delayed—has been separated—was required— 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— Maintaining addict cancers to our profit—pernicious personal contact—Market increase— Release The Prosecutor to try any holes⁴⁴

This particular cut-up was created by using an existing newspaper article by former Assistant U. S. Attorney General Malcolm Monroe. The article in question is called “Fighting Drug Addiction: The ‘Clinic Plan,’” and it mostly criticizes a British programme that offered cheap heroin to addicts in order to keep them from committing crimes in order to fund their addictions. As Timothy Murphy claims in *his Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, Burroughs believed that by cutting up a text that is openly dedicated to a specific objective (just like newspaper articles, magazine articles etc.) will disclose underlying intents of the author, a concept he tests repeatedly on mass media texts, which figure frequently in the trilogy.⁴⁵ By cutting up this particular article, Burroughs reveals the anti-drug rhetoric of his times and also exposes the true intention of the government in his newly formed text free of media manipulation. This particular cut-up reveals that the government agencies tasked with dealing with the problem: to “protect the disease” of addiction that was the source or “basis” of their existence, to keep the “addict cancers” from which they drew their “profit.” A real “cure of the social problem” would actually be “dangerous to society.” This passage essentially summarizes the entire conflict within the book, as the Nova Mob essentially prolongs its existence artificially, by creating problems and conflicts only they can solve and thus justify their existence.⁴⁶

Reassembling language through cutting and pasting creates a kind of linguistic vaccination that gives the narrative a subversive and unpredictable quality. By encouraging the reader to piece together the puzzle of interrupted syntax and fractured semantics, this fragmentation heightens the reader’s attention rather than undermining the meaning. The result is a text that resists categorical interpretation, a living, breathing language organism that questions the static character of conventional language. Burroughs attacks the word virus’s hold on language by using the cut-up method, but he also provides an antidote—an alternate manner

⁴⁴ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 52.

⁴⁵ Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs*, (California: University of California Press, 1997), 105.

⁴⁶ Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 53.

of verbal expression that goes beyond the bounds of linguistic conformity. By demonstrating how the cut-up approach functions as a disruptor, a liberator, and a creative force that counteracts the infectious tendencies of the word virus, the trilogy turns into a literary laboratory where the antidote is administered. In Burroughs' own words: "inoculation is the weapon of choice against virus and inoculation can only be effected through exposure . . ."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 8.

CONCLUSION

William S. Burroughs presented a claim that was the central theme of this thesis – that language is a virus that infected humankind. This claim saw the light of day in the sixties, at a time when society was undergoing a critical shift in communication and media. The first part of this thesis presented the cultural and medial background of the sixties, and how these changed produced a perfect environment for the language virus to thrive and spread among the people. Texts of primary medial theorists of the sixties are dissected and their theories are explained in order to understand the behaviour of the virus and the circumstances of infection. The second part of the thesis explored Burroughs' essays that feature the theory of language being a virus. This chapter helps understanding Burroughs' background as a writer and a revolutionary thinker, while also shedding light at the critical parts of these essays, highlighting the crucial parts and discussing their meaning. Burroughs' texts reveal a profound and provocative exploration of the linguistic contagion. Examining Burroughs' works, the third chapter of this thesis has illuminated the transformative and infectious nature of language, contemplating its role as a viral force that permeates the fabric of human consciousness, while also exploring its effect on human thought and behaviour. The last chapter also concerns Burroughs' method of the cut-up. The cut-up approach, a linguistic laboratory that demonstrates the viral infection of language, was a focus of the latter part of the chapter. Burroughs created a contagious web of meanings that surpassed conventional narrative bounds by breaking and reassembling words into new arrangements. The cut-up technique turned into a mirror reflecting the fragmented character of modern consciousness, a weapon for linguistic insurrection.

This thesis concludes not with definitive answers but with an acknowledgment of the complexity inherent in language's contagious nature. It serves as a basis, a theoretical framework, it opens the discussion of the possibility of language being a virus. It neither confirms nor refutes this claim, it only explores how is it possible to think of a language as a virus, in which conditions is this virus theoretically able to survive, spread and function. This thesis had indeed marked out all the similarities between a language and a virus, highlighting them and describing their possible differences and connections and presenting why it is actually not nonsensical to think of a language as a viral force.

In these modern times, where everybody is surrounded with social media, all the various forms of entertainment and constantly exposed to the ever-shifting global village this network had created, Burroughs' texts and thoughts have gained a completely new meaning and have

shown their true potential – their timelessness. For whatever visions of dystopic future Burroughs may have had, the modern age seems to possess many more – be it the control of the media using the manipulative forces of language algorithms or the ever-present Big Brother, lurking behind every screen of every phone and the memes, serving as a medium for the transmission of the viruses of the mind. In the words of American neuro-anthropologist Terrence Deacon: “From this perspective it is not so far-fetched to think of languages a bit as we think of viruses, neglecting the difference in constructive versus destructive effects.”¹

There is a complex paradox in the process of expression that is revealed by the irony of writing an essay using language to examine the idea that language is a virus. This meta-narrative creates a self-referential loop by making the very tool that is being scrutinized the subject as well as the medium. It is through the very vehicle under analysis that the viral properties of language and its capacity to contaminate cognition and perception are examined. This self-aware irony highlights how difficult and unavoidable language is, showing that even when one tries to understand all of its complexities, they still find themselves ensnared in its web. It encourages reflection on the underlying duality of language, which serves as both a tool for investigation and a force that shapes the structure of thought, thereby sustaining a conversation on the nature of communication and its viral aspects. One could say that after reading Burroughs’ works, his concepts and ideas infected my mind in such a way that made me decide to write a thesis on the subject.

¹ Terrence William Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 112.

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