

David Vichnar, PhD  
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:  
re "*Language as a Virus of the Mind:*  
*The Thinking and Writing of William S. Burroughs*"  
by Ondřej Polák (BA dissertation, 2024)

Mr Polák's BA project ekes out the consequences of William Burroughs' radical claim that "the word is a virus" (12). It is a statement rich and strange, and so it is no wonder Mr Polák needs no fewer than six sections of a nuanced argument to trace its ramifications for both Burroughs' essays and fiction.

In his first chapter, Mr Polák cannily surveys the historical-critical context of "the sweeping changes in the media landscape" and in "the understanding of language" (12) as a cybernetic system occurring in the 60s, pertaining to the chosen topic. The theoretical framework employed by Mr Polák covers the work of Jacques Derrida ("The Rhetoric of Drugs"), Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* but also an essay directly on Burroughs), Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*), Gregory Bateson (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*), and Walter J. Ong (*Orality and Literacy*), among others. Its particular forte is that Mr Polák manages to treat Burroughs himself as a "thinking writer" in his own right, avoiding the pitfalls of subjecting him to any sort of "applied theory" exercise.

The thesis comes into its own in the three main chapters, dealing with Burroughs' seminal late-60s / early-70s essays, "The Electronic Revolution" and "Ten Years and a Billion Dollars" (chapter 2), linguistic contagion as theme of Burroughs' fiction (chapter 3), and his famous cut-up technique, invented by Brion Gysin, as a mode of resistance to the language virus (chapter 4). In his conclusion, Mr Polák suggests ways in which our 2024 media-inf(l)ected reality might cast an illuminating light back on what, in the 60s, seemed radical or outlandish claims. In Mr Polák's own words, "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" (64-5).

Mr Polák's argumentation is competent and coherent. His close readings throughout are detailed, complex and well-argued, apt at synthesising or drawing parallels between concepts whose connections are far from self-evident. Although (or maybe since) a labour of love on the candidate's part, the production of the thesis was a lengthy process of search and discovery, for both the candidate and his supervisor. The supervisor is happy to state that Mr Polák took to heart most if not all of his misgivings and criticisms levied during the research and writing process and addressed them in the final product. What still remains somewhat less than ideal is the slavish way in which Mr Polák deems it necessary to follow Burroughs' argumentation page-by-page if not paragraph-by-paragraph. The thesis would also have benefited from one extra proofreading job (why, e.g. is there a full-stop after "William" in the title of the thesis?). Still, Mr Polák's language and style remain up to par throughout his work.

Given the above, the supervisor shall constrain himself to raising four questions of a general nature (leaving it up to the opponent's report to raise more detailed critical points pertaining to the thesis argumentation, should he have any). The first two have to do with the Derridean interplay between the singularity and the exemplar, the latter two with the dialectical relationship between subversion and confirmation, the avant-garde and institutionalisation:

1. What makes Burroughs unique as a writer? What constitutes his writerly "signature" and why/how does Mr Polák seek to "countersign" this signature in his thesis?
2. What makes Burroughs' case general? In what ways can he serve as a good "example" of a broader tendency within post-war/postmodern experimental fiction?
3. How does Burroughs' by now cult status reinforce and possibly undermine his radically "subversive" message? Time and again, Burroughs is painted as a figure of the "countercultural underground" (18) while also functioning as a cultural icon; how do these two radically different statuses interact and work with/against each other?
4. How does the cutting-up of a message serve to undermine that message while still adhering to its very words and modes of operation? Chapter 4.2 treats of the cut-up as a "possible antidote" but doesn't its working resemble the undecidably paradoxical operations of the *pharmakon*, i.e. poison and remedy?

Having raised these minor issues, I am still positive that Mr Polák's thesis presents a well-researched work on a still undertreated and underrepresented writer. The theoretical savviness and argumentative skills of his MA thesis exceed the usual departmental requirements pertaining to the genre. Therefore, I have no qualms in recommending it for the defence and propose a grade between **excellent – výborně** and **very good – velmi dobře**, depending on the candidate's performance at the thesis defence.

***Práci doporučuji k obhajobě.***



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