

Faculty of Arts
Charles University
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

-Mr. Ondřej Polák
-“Language as a Virus of the Mind: The Thinking and Writing of William. S. Burroughs”
-BA thesis
-Opponent’s Report

Brief summary of subject: As the candidate puts it himself in his Introduction:

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 [14] 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 (13–14).

Moreover, the candidate deploys such authors and theorists as Marshall McLuhan, Herbert Marcuse, Noam Chomsky, Walter T. Ong, Richard Brodie and Gregory Bateson to explore the topic of the technology of writing and related matters.

Methodology and structure: The thesis contains an Introduction, four principal chapters, a Conclusion, and a Bibliography. The study combines close reading with broader theoretical contexts and concerns.

Achievements: The thesis profiles technological change in such statements as

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. (29)

We also learn that ““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” (37). Not only this but we learn that: “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” (48). Moreover, crucially:

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. (51)

Shortcomings: The candidate might have pursued some of the writings of Bernard Stiegler to highlight the problem of the technology of writing. But that remains only a suggestion.

Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): The formal features to this text are very good; on p. 11 “albeit may act” should be something like “albeit it may act”; on p. 16 “a certain a myth” should be “a certain myth”; on p. 18 “such a” should be “such as”; there is one space too many between two of your Burroughs cited texts on p. 66 and also one space too many between Murphy and Odier texts on p. 68.

Questions: Consider this passage:

As Lydenberg mentions, [fn.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.”[fn.12] (52)

In this light, I ask the candidate if he could expand upon the idea that Derrida, Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Barthes embody the practices you describe above? Can you articulate examples from the four writers mentioned in my question?

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defense and propose a preliminary grade of 1.

Seattle, 17 i 24,
doc. Erik S. Roraback,
(D.Phil. Oxon.)