Biopoetics of Control and Resistance in William Burroughs’ The *Nova* Trilogy¹

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The question I wish to answer, through a reading of William Burroughs’ *Nova* trilogy, is how language takes control of the human and how technics take part in what Gilles Deleuze has called societies of control. In order to do so, I wish to take seriously William Burroughs’ oft-quoted idea that language is a virus. While this idea of language as virus has been behind many information theoretical readings of Burroughs’ works, it is clear that Burroughs’ poetics is as much a poetics of embodiment, or what I will call a biopoetics.² A biopoetical reading is relevant due to the highly affective experience of reading Burroughs. Often disturbing and unsettling, Burroughs’ prose is mostly a matter of ruptures and non-sequiturs, rather than a narratively driven story. By paying attention to the corporeal impact of Burroughs’ writing, we get a better sense of how writing and language exert control over human beings.

A traditional definition of biopoetics is that it is the study of “biological influences on the composition and consumption of the arts, including literature” (Cooke, “Literary Biopoetics” 1). I wish, however, to suggest that we may productively reverse this formulation in the study of William Burroughs’ literary output. That is to say, how does the composition of literature influence our human biology? This may seem positively perverse, since literature is surely a subset of the human, considering that only human beings produce literature. However, reading Burroughs’ *Nova* trilogy, it becomes evident how much of a corporeal impact language has on human beings. This happens in two ways. The first is the thematic con-
cern of the trilogy and arguably Burroughs’ entire oeuvre. Burroughs has consistently discussed how language becomes a technology of control that warps human bodies. The second impact is the experience of reading Burroughs’ cut-up prose. Especially in the *Nova* trilogy are we exposed to the non-sequitur shifts of this technique, while Burroughs also employs scatological and other offensive words and phrasings. All in all, Burroughs’ writing produces transgressive writing both at the level of form, content, and theme.

I will approach Burroughs’ writing first from the perspective of contagion. Words transfer between bodies and adapt in the process, and we must understand how Burroughs conceives of such transfer. Outlining Gilles Deleuze’s concept of societies of control, I then turn to how societies of control work on human bodies through code and modulation. Particularly language as modulated code becomes central to understand Burroughs’ dystopic vision of the world. In this way, affect, control, and language all tie together to modulate human bodies.

In order to develop this notion of biopoetics, I will draw on Eugene Thacker’s argument about biomedia as the conflation of information and body (Thacker 2004), or what we can call bioinformatics. However, this leaves unanswered the question of bioenergetics, or the question of the felt intensities of Burroughs’ writing. I propose that biopoetics is as much a matter of energetics as opposed to informatics, what is usually referred to today as literature’s affective dimension. As such, the question becomes one of transfer and dispersal instead of transmission and parsing. To develop this affective dimension of literature, I draw on Tony Sampson’s concept of virality (2012), the way energetics and not only information is shared and transferred between bodies by way of media.

The *Nova* trilogy is comprised of *The Soft Machine* (1966), *The Ticket That Exploded* (1967), and *Nova Express* (1964). The trilogy stands as a work, which centers squarely on the bodily effects of language and writing, insisting that language alters the human body as much as the human mind. Thematically and narratively, the novels are filled with brief blitzes on time travel, interplanetary travel, tape recorders as part of a large techno-conspiracy, and a galactic organization known as the Nova Mob.

Biopoetics is the analysis of biological influences on aesthetics, to rephrase Cooke’s argument slightly. Our need for entertainment, sensation, and sociality are all biological needs, prior to any specific cultural formation and modulation of these needs. Art and literature become ways
of adapting to cultural environments, providing biological needs in whatever form is necessary. Art and literature therefore adapt to our needs, prompting an evolutionary understanding of art and literature. Any study of culture or art must therefore be biocultural, as a kind of synthesis between biology and culture (Nordlund 316). Brett Cooke therefore proposes the term biothematics as an attempt to theorize human concerns (Cooke, “The Promise of a Biothematics”). Yet these approaches to literature all extend from a communications theory, or better, an information theory based in the transmission of meaning from text to reader. Meaning emerges from the interface of text, reader, nature, and culture.

The limitation of this argument is that it produces a view of the reader as outside the text. I do not mean this in a Derridean sense but an affective sense. Rather than an outside observer, I am actively produced by the text. This argument is (non-)phenomenological rather than epistemological, insisting that we come away changed from our encounter with the text. Another way of phrasing this is to say that biothematics is about informatics, whereas my interest is in energetics. Rather than the transmission of thematics, I am interested in the transfer of energies – how are we affected by the text? The purpose for this focus is that in order to fully appreciate Burroughs’ poetics, we must go beyond seeing his writing as simply a cultural critique of issues of control, and understand that his writing is a full-blown assault on technologies of control; an attempt at destroying or at least challenging societies of control. Such an approach has its precedence in for instance Robin Lydenberg’s Word Cultures (1987) and Steven Shaviro’s “Two Lessons from Burroughs” (1995), although I emphasize the transformative aspects of Burroughs’ trilogy more.

Eugene Thacker makes an interesting argument in his book Biomedia, where he points to how new technologies shape our understanding of the body. He traces how recent developments in biotechnology and informatics have conflated the body with information. DNA code is seen as similar to computer code and therefore the biological and digital domains collapse and become the same domain (Thacker 5). As Thierry Bardini phrases it,

For a part at least, the biological understanding of life has become a software problem. By this I do not mean that the understanding of life required the right software, but rather that life itself had become equated with a software problem. (Bardini ch. 2, emphasis in original)
Manipulate the code and you manipulate the body. Exactly this notion of code lies behind Gilles Deleuze’s concept of societies of control. Code is something to be manipulated in order to control biopolitical subjects. Burroughs’ works are of vital importance here, because he shows us that the code does not emerge with computers but with language. In *Nova Express*, there is a section titled “Technical Deposition of the Virus Power” that details how the human could be coded in binary systems, even at the molecular level. And yet, “it was found that these information molecules were not dead matter but exhibited a capacity for life which is found elsewhere in the form of virus” (William S Burroughs, *Nova Express* 49). Deeply embedded in the human are the code and the virus; there is no easy distinction between the two. Furthermore, Burroughs also shows that control is not only a matter of manipulating and modulating code but also a matter of amplification. This is why language is a virus; it transfers energy as much as it transmits information.

*Word Contagion*

When we take William Burroughs’ dictum that language is a virus at face value, we open up to a nonhuman understanding of human life. No longer is the human privileged as the carrier of language, a typical definition of the human, but rather we move along a poststructuralist trajectory, which regards language as the carrier of the human. Yet this does not explain how language maintains a level of control over the human, nor how or why language would be a virus. In order to understand the controlling and viral aspects of language, we need to turn to the virality thesis developed by Tony D. Sampson, based on the social epidemiology of Gabriel Tarde. The similarities between Burroughs, Tarde, and Sampson come primarily in their non-anthropocentric worldview. As Sampson explicates, Tarde makes “no distinctions between individual persons, animals, insects, bacteria, atoms, cells, or larger societies of events like markets, nations, and cities” (Sampson 7).

Burroughs’ poetics has always emphasized such assemblages of different scales as the human, for Burroughs, is rarely in control but rather the subject of control ranging from insects, mugwumps and junk to intergalactic conspiracies and tape recorders. Both Burroughs and Tarde question the divide between nature and culture, both regarding each as the
articulation of the other in a constant struggle. In *The Ticket That Exploded*, we hear that “The ‘Other Half’ is the word. The ‘Other Half’ is an organism. Word is an organism. The presence of the ‘Other Half’ a separate organism attached to your nervous system on an air line of word” (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 49). Not simply the carrier of the human, language and the word for Burroughs is not even human in origin, but rather something nonhuman, even inhuman in its violence. That language is nonhuman should not surprise us, considering Burroughs’ conception of the word as alien. What is necessary to emphasize is the way that human beings become articulated through the encounter with language. We are not separate from language but programmed into an absolute need for body and word, the two inseparable and intertwined. Part of the human being is therefore nonhuman, even as language makes the human being into something specific. Tarde’s flat ontology allows for a view of language as one part of an assemblage of the human, where the body becomes another part; the human is thus both body and word as interwoven being. We might in fact argue that the human emerges from the constant tension between body and word, configured in *The Ticket That Exploded* as two organisms: “The body is two halves stuck together like a mold – That is, it consists of two organisms” (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 159).

The word remains the medium of connectivity that binds human society together, but this connectivity comes at the price of parasitism: “The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word.” (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 49-50) Tarde phrases the same understanding differently, arguing that society holds together through micro-relational forces of imitative encounters — in other words, through the figure of a virus (Sampson 19). While the word enables structure and social cohesion, this comes at the price of feeding much of our consciousness to the word virus, thus producing a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Repetition and the spread of this repetition is what make society into a coherent assemblage. These viral forces follow, according to Tarde, three laws: imitative repetition, opposition, and adaptation (Sampson 20). These
three laws of repetition, opposition, and adaptation together make up the important fact that “the social is not given, it is made” (Sampson 21). Different objects radiate imitative repetition that other objects will begin to imitate based on either opposition or adaptation. Neither opposition nor adaptation should be understood in a Darwinian fashion, emphasizes Sampson, but are rather antagonistic forces that arouse inventiveness and stimulate adaptation. Both forms of modified imitation are located in desire, whether that desire is biological or cultural (Sampson 23).

In this way, we can see how technology and cultural techniques easily become part of the assemblage that makes up the social. Technics participates in desire because it modulates and amplifies desire in specific ways, and so technics become indissoluble from desire; they exist in a feedback loop. Imitation is inherently biocultural. Burroughs regards viral imitation in much the same way, although with a definite pessimistic slant:

Virus defined as the three-dimensional coordinate point of a controller – Transparent sheets with virus perforations like punch cards passed through the host on the soft machine feeling for a point of intersection – The virus attack is primarily directed against affective animal life – Virus of rage hate fear ugliness swirling round you waiting for a point of intersection and once in immediately perpetrates in your name some ugly noxious or disgusting act sharply photographed and recorded becomes now part of the virus sheets constantly presented and represented before your mind screen to produce more virus word and image around and around it’s all around you the invisible hail of bring down word and image. (William S Burroughs, Nova Express 72-73)

Burroughs emphasizes how the word (and image) control affects and emotions, which we can correlate with the bodily aspects of the human (“affective animal life”) and we see how Burroughs regards all human affects as tied to negative aspects and issues of control. These negative affects, for Burroughs, become how we are controlled. This view of human society here is not far from Tarde’s vision, except that Tarde also allows for positive affects, such as love, which is a non-entity in Burroughs’ writings. What Burroughs would substitute for love is the algebra of need, in other words desire. Because of the word virus, the human has two main desires, which Tarde describes as the continuum of biological need and cultural need. In the Nova Trilogy, this continuum consists of two parasites:
Well these are the simple facts of the case and I guess I ought to know – There were at least two parasites one sexual the other cerebral working together the way parasites will – That is the cerebral parasite kept you from wising up to the sexual parasite – Why has no one ever asked the question: ‘What is sex?’ – Or made any precise scientific investigation of sexual phenomena? – The cerebral parasite prevented this – And why has no one ever asked: ‘What is word?’ – Why do you talk to yourself all the time? – Are you talking to yourself? – Isn’t there someone or something else there when you talk? (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 144-145)

We immediately see how the sex parasite equals the body and thus the nature pole for Tarde, while the cerebral parasite equals the word and thus the culture pole. We can also recognize how language maintains control over the body. This is emphasized by Burroughs in *Nova Express*: “What scared you all into time? Into body? Into shit? I will tell you: ‘the word.’ Alien Word ‘the.’ ‘The’ word of Alien Enemy imprisons ‘thee’ in Time. In Body. In Shit. Prisoner, come out. The great skies are open” (William S Burroughs, *Nova Express* 4). In Burroughs’ paranoid fantasies, the Cartesian split of mind and body not only becomes a prison, but ironically the cerebral parasite, becomes the evil demon whom Descartes was so afraid of – Descartes’ evil demon is the cogito in Burroughs’ worldview.

The evil demon of the word becomes the central enemy for Burroughs, and can be seen in the *Nova* trilogy as the cause of the interplanetary war that is waged cross the wounded galaxies. The human emerges as an assemblage of the two virus parasites, cerebral and sex. As we are told in *Nova Express*: “These colorless sheets are what flesh is made from – Becomes flesh when it has color and writing – That is Word And Image write the message that is you on colorless sheets determine all flesh” (William S Burroughs, *Nova Express* 28). ‘Determine all flesh’ reveals the control aspect inherent in the word, that way that we are formed by the word, made in its image, so to speak.

The insight that Burroughs brings to the entanglement of word and body is that this contagion is not only what Sampson calls affective contagion, although certainly Burroughs emphasizes the negative affects as part of this bodily control. Burroughs highlights that this affective contagion is also one of affective control; the word spreads through affective contagion, following the three laws set forth by Tarde (imitative repetition, opposition, and adaptation), and exerts control in this manner. Control and
affect are inextricably linked for Burroughs and linked precisely through technologies, language being the primary technology.

To briefly sketch how Tarde’s three laws work according to Burroughs’ worldview, language and writing enforces imitative repetition through its viral nature. Even something as simple as grammar reinforces and reproduces certain structures and ways of thinking, correlating with imitative repetition. Successful modes of writing are the adaptations, such as Burroughs’ algebra of need, one successful iteration of control. Opposition, then, is not a struggle of negations with the purpose of winning, but rather something like Burroughs’ sex parasite and cerebral parasite. Constantly challenging each other, they also make each other stronger and more capable along the way. Opposition is challenge but not eradication.

Control and Affect

In “Postscript to Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze traces the origins of a new kind of society superseding Foucault’s disciplinary society. Deleuze explicitly draws the term ‘control’ from Burroughs and views Burroughs as the first theorist of this new society. In a brief outline, Deleuze emphasizes two aspects of control societies: code and modulation. Modulation first: “Enclosures are molds, distinct casting, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.” (Deleuze 4) Once again, Sampson’s virality thesis is evident in the transmutation and continuous change of a control society. Modulation is therefore close to the adaptive law of virality. None of this is exactly surprising, since Deleuze (both alone and in his collaborations with Guattari) drew on Tarde, while Sampson, in his turn, often reads Tarde alongside Deleuze. However, it makes explicit the relation between affective contagion as a means of control, in how affect is modulated. Brian Massumi remains one of the main authorities of modulated affect; so let us turn to him to get a sense of how modulation works.

In his dense Parables for the Virtual, Massumi argues “Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power after ideology.” (Massumi 42) Postmodern power is for Massumi equal to Deleuze’s notion of societies of control, and we can easily see how Sampson’s virality thesis connects to societies of control in the emphasis on affective contagion as the diffu-
sion of postmodern power. Through imitative repetition, power is diffused into every aspect of the social field. No place is free from the impact of imitation, everything is modulated. When one level of the social field begins adapting to another level, the virus spreads. Massumi argues that affect plays a part in how ideology is internalized and naturalized and emphasizes the way that non-signifying practices still exert power of individuation. Burroughs, never one to mince words, has the appropriate response:

I would like to sound a word of warning – To speak is to lie – To live is to collaborate – Anybody is a coward when faced with by the nova ovens – There are degrees of lying collaboration and cowardice – That is to say degrees of intoxication – It is precisely a question of regulation. (William S Burroughs, *Nova Express* 7)

As long as we are caught in the webs of signification, we are exposed to the cerebral parasite; we are still part of the control society. Language, of course, is much older than control societies, and here we should stress that Burroughs’ concept of control is almost ahistorical. As soon as we have language, control follows. Language, for Burroughs, does not simply mean spoken language, but all forms of written codes across time. Control is a deeper, much more ancient effect: “I have explained that the Mayan control system depends on the calendar and the codices which contain symbols representing all states of thought and feeling possible to human animals living under such limited circumstances – These are the instruments with which they rotate and control units of thought” (William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* 91) Here we see code entering the discussion, which is Deleuze’s second characteristic of a control society.

In the societies of control, on the other hand, what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code: the code is a password, while on the other hand the disciplinary societies are regulated by watchwords (as much from the point of view of integration as from that of resistance). The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. (Deleuze 5)

For Deleuze, the emphasis on code, password, and access to information correlates with information society and the computer. Burroughs, indifferent to the constraints of history and time, is clearly of the same opinion that code (for him that equates language), passwords and access to information are the tools of control. He simply projects this perspective
back through time as a case of control always already having existed (since the Mayans). The word was the first method of control.

While there have been many different views of how the control society has been brought about and maintained, the role of media has always been prominent. As Richard Grusin points out, “media practices [...] are techniques of power in a control society.” (Grusin 76) Burroughs reveals exactly the same position, with his interest in how language is used “to discipline, control, contain, manage, or govern” the human animal. (Grusin 79) Burroughs’ writing is thus a modulation that attacks the code, while at the same time employing the code of language. Burroughs’ prose is itself a forceful modulation of affect; its semantic shocks and grammatical inconsistencies generate run-away feelings uncontainable as merely literary prose. There is wildness, randomness, chaos at work as a kind of splicing in itself, evident in passages like this from *The Soft Machine*:

Uranian Willy the Heavy Metal Kid, also known as Willy the Rat – He wised up the marks. ‘This is war to extermination – Fight cell by cell through bodies and mind screens of the earth – Souls rotten from the Orgasm Drug – Flesh shuddering from the Ovens – Prisoners of the earth, come out – Storm the studio.’ His plan called for total exposure – Wise up all the marks everywhere Show them the rigged wheel – Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe – The plan shifted and reformed as reports came in from his electric patrols sniffing quivering down streets of the earth – the reality film giving and buckling like a bulkhead under pressure – burned metal smell of interplanetary war in the raw noon streets swept by screaming glass blizzards of enemy flak. (151-152)

Here we also find the common theme of resistance and rejection of power in Burroughs, which is what Grusin refers to as biopower from below and connects to Sampson’s virality thesis in the dispersal of power’s direction – no longer does power flow only from the top down, it also pushes up from below. What acts as the means of dispersal here, are of course media. While the word is Burroughs’ primordial medium, we can take the tape recorder to be a metonymic image for all forms of technological media:

Get it out of your head and into the machines. Stop talking stop arguing. Let the machines talk and argue. A tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system. You can find out more about the nervous system and gain more control over your reaction by using a tape recorder than you could find out sitting twenty years in the lotus posture. Whatever your problem is just throw it into the
machines and let them chew around it a while. (William S Burroughs, The Ticket That Exploded 163)

The human nervous system, the human sensorium, or our embodied selves are all words for the same thing and peculiarly something overlooked in much work on control societies. While Deleuze has always been attentive to bodies, they are peculiarly missing in his essay on control societies. There is even a tendency in Burroughs studies to understand Burroughs’ writing and his concern with language as an immaterial concern with information, which ignores the body. Yet, no one who really reads Burroughs can believe that the body – or the sex parasite, more properly – is ignored. It is the locus of control, the host of the word virus, and the subject of the algebra of need. Deleuze’s concept of modulation and code must therefore be read in terms of corporeality to properly explain Burroughs’ insights. Modulation, then, stops being merely the manipulation of a signal but a matter of transforming bodies. Constantly in Burroughs, we find bodies that transform under pressures from language.

With Eugene Thacker’s, Gabriel Tarde’s, and Tony Sampson’s arguments in mind, we need to realize that there is no meaningful distinction between human bodies and the bodies of media. Instead, all bodies intersect and influence each other, energies flowing between them. Burroughs never believed that language was incorporeal, but insisted that language has a body, however small it might be. In fact, the word virus is inherently physical since Burroughs uses the metaphor of parasite and in The Ticket That Exploded, B.J. realizes what he (and the rest of humanity) is up against: “I know now when it is too late what we are up against: a biologic weapon that reduces healthy clean-minded men to abject slobbering inhuman things undoubtedly of virus origins.” (William S Burroughs, The Ticket That Exploded 5) Word is virus, but it is not an immaterial, intangible thing because its effects are real, physical and material, in other words affective and corporeal.

Word Bodies

What Burroughs insists on is the bodily aspect of the word. When the word is a virus, it is a physical being with physical effects, what Rotman has called the “ongoing bio-cultural-technological ‘writing’ of the body’s
meanings, expressions, affects, and mobilities.” (Rotman 4) We are written by the word, as long as ‘written’ is understood to mean ‘produced’ and ‘word’ as the assemblage of language, alphabet, and subsequent media. That is the truth of the control society as presented by Burroughs: it is not only a matter of access or non-access to information but also a complete wiring of our biology. Writing is a remediation of speech, although words must take the place of gestures, intonation and other emotive expressions. Writing, for Burroughs, repurposes the human but in the same movement constitutes and produces the human. The sex parasite and the cerebral parasite is what make the human animal, meaning that we are splicings of technology and nature.

The human-media symbiosis is not a new argument as such. What is significant about Burroughs’ word virus is the fact that control is integral to this assemblage. As Burroughs puts it: “look around you look at a control machine programmed to select the ugliest stupidest most vulgar and degraded sounds for recording and playback which provokes uglier stupider more vulgar and degraded sounds to be recorded and play back inexorable degradation look forward to dead end” (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 215)

The challenge we face when confronted with the control machine is that of imitative repetition. As Burroughs sees it, language and writing join forces to produce imitative repetition as a form of control, a control that is exceedingly difficult to escape or resist. At the same time, Burroughs’ own poetics emphasize the concept of resistance as a thematic undercurrent to his entire output, whether in his literary or other artistic pursuits. As we hear in *The Soft Machine*: “Cut word lines – cut music lines – smash the control images – smash the control machine – burn the books – kill the priests- kill! Kill! Kill!” (William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* 92-93) Smashing and cutting are weapons in this fight against control. As I see it, cutting up words, music, and images become a resistant technique against the control technology of language and writing.

Burroughs’ poetics on a formal level becomes a matter of oppositional inventiveness against imitative repetition, or phrased a different way: biopolitical strategies of social power, that Sampson terms molar virality, versus accident and spontaneity, that Sampson terms molecular virality (Sampson 5-6). Language is a molar virus that exerts control through its spread and contagious control, by enforcing certain ways of thinking and feeling. This notion that words enforce social order is not in
itself a new or even recent thought, but what makes Burroughs’ vision so revealing is that he emphasizes the nonhuman aspects of language as control. There is no distinct agency at work, other than the inherent force of language as a system. No one is in control, in effect, although control is at work. No intentionality, no direction, only a forceful flow that limits and inhibits what can be said and thought and felt. Burroughs often emphasizes this lack of agency of control, such as the Trak police and the Trak Reservation:

The Trak Reservation so-called includes almost all areas in and about the United Republics of Freelandt and, since the Trak Police process all matters occurring in Trak Reservation and no one knows that is and is not Reservation cases, civil and criminal are summarily removed from civilian courts with the single word TRAK to unknown sanctions. (William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* 43)

Control is thus not a matter of knowledge or agency, but appears more like a nonhuman force suffusing everything. Therefore, Burroughs proposes to introduce accident and spontaneity into language, but in a radically different way from the other Beat writers. Just as language is a nonhuman force of control, so must the accident be nonhuman, outside human intentionality and control. Only in this way can the lines of flight emerge, for as long as a human being remains in control of the word, the word is in fact in control of the human being. Arguing that the cut-up techniques may interrupt consciousness as Richard Doyle has suggested (Doyle 186) is not radical enough. I do not dispute Doyle’s claim but wish to extend it to include a disruption of bodies.

Lydenberg has suggested that the materiality of language must be taken seriously, and not only as a sensuous surface but as an “exploration of the physical universe of the body” (Lydenberg 138). There is, for Lydenberg as for Burroughs, a clear connection between the body of language and the human body; word is not, not immaterial. Similarly, Shaviro points out that to search for meaning in language is to ask the wrong question. Language works primarily through the imperative function, it is power as action (Shaviro 42). Cutting up words and jarring them together produces an unusual imperative that comes not form a sender in the traditional sense, but from the body of language itself. While the meaning may be garbled, the impact is not.

In a later piece, Doyle further argues that a “recognizable ‘subjective correlative’ to the emerging informatics vision of living systems can be per-
ceived” (Doyle “Naked Life”, 240). This correlative emerges from the blurring of machines and living systems, although again only in the direction of information. Doyle is right to suggest that the living systems can be mutated, but they can also be overloaded through catastrophic expenditure of energy, which the cut-up technique can also be seen as. Shaviro’s argument, after all, insists that it is not the meaning of an utterance that matters, but its imperative function: any response to an utterance is the meaning of the utterance, even if the response is purely bodily, i.e. affective.

On the one hand, the Nova trilogy and most of Burroughs’ other works include mutating bodies. In The Soft Machine, an example is Clem Snide who introduces himself like this: “I am a Private Ass Hole – I will take on any job any identity any body” (William S. Burroughs, The Soft Machine 67), or Johnny Yen, whose face is cut into fragments of light (William S. Burroughs, The Soft Machine 74). On the other hand, Burroughs constantly insists that cut-up techniques may induce corporeal sensations and bodily reactions, this is also why Burroughs insists that word is flesh; writing has corporeal effects on us for language encourages imitative repetition, the rhythms and pleasures of reading. While I would not go so far as to suggest that our bodies mutate while reading literature, even a literature as radical as Burroughs’, I do believe that we experience sensations that go beyond meaning and signification.

The stutter and clack of Burroughs’ cut-ups generate an intense rhythm, which is both enticing and infuriating. The lack of punctuation, the grammatical errors, the peculiar extra spaces between words, all these and more make reading Burroughs a process of estranging us from written language. Along with non-sensical sentences such as “Naked youths bathed in blue against the pinball machine danced and clicked” (William S Burroughs, The Ticket That Exploded 63), we come away with the realization that Burroughs’ prose carries more than information. There is a tactile, crackling energy that sparks sensations in the reader, but which cannot be recuperated into meaning or significance without doing violence to their affective qualities.

These affective qualities are not lodged in the narratives Burroughs constructs. While affective and emotional responses to the narrative are often the case, Burroughs’ writing, especially in the Nova trilogy, is far more choppy and nonlinear than narratives usually are. Clearly Burroughs’ employs recognizable narratives, most famously his routines, but his Nova trilogy novels are more situational and episodic. Characters,
locations, and events all feel disjointed even as they morph and change with no warning. Reading Burroughs’ prose is filled with ruptures, wrenching us away from narrative goals and expectations. There are no clear narrative set-ups and pay-offs, no clear turning-points, but rather a charged mood of constant tension. It is through this mood that control becomes a matter of which (negative) affects are played back by the assemblage; modulation and code, in other words. This playback is the affective contagion of the word virus and it is why the future bleeds out of old recordings and why we can program our own playback:

listen to your present time tapes and you will begin to see who you are and what you are doing here mix yesterday in with today and hear tomorrow your future rising out of old recordings you are a programmed tape recorder set to record and play back / who programs you / who decides what tapes play back in present time / who plays back your old humiliations and defeats holding you in prerecorded preset time / you dont have to listen to that sound you can program your own playback you can decide what tapes you want played back in present time. (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 213)

Splicing, mixing, and cutting-up are all methods of attacking the word virus by forcing it to mutate. Burroughs does not offer an escape from the word virus, there is no such thing, there is only the Tardean opposition, which simply introduces new organizing principles added to the repetitions of the existing playbacks. Wising up the marks is a strategy based on complicity, because there is no other option. Jason Morelyle draws on Foucault’s conception of power as always producing its own resistance (Morelyle 84). Morelyle points out that Burroughs himself has argued for a distinction between control and use, insisting that all “control systems try to make control as tight as possible, but at the same time, if they succeeded completely, there would be nothing left to control” (William S. Burroughs, *The Adding Machine*). However, Morelyle goes on to argue that

It is crucial to understand that Burroughs’s work in no way represents a literal moving ‘beyond’ or standing ‘beside’ oneself, but an interrogation of the limits of the self that points to the possibility of sociopolitical transformation within a society of control. (Morelyle 85)

As Burroughs would say, to speak is to lie but to keep silent is impossible. We can therefore use language and writing against itself, as it were,
even as this embeds us deeper in the word virus. Contesting biopower from below becomes a matter of creating a new, different strain of virus: the physiological liberation achieved as word lines of controlled association are cut and will make you more efficient in reaching your objectives whatever you do you will do it better record your boss and co-workers analyze their associational patterns learn to imitate their voices oh you'll be a popular man around the office but not easy to compete with the usual procedure record their body sounds from concealed mikes the rhythm of breathing the movements of after-lunch intestines the beating of hearts now impose your own body sounds and become the breathing word and the beating heart of that organization become that organization (William S Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 208-209)

As Burroughs’ scathingly affective prose proves, meaning and sense always emerge from whatever is cut up and spliced together. If we are machines, playing back recordings, then splicing and cutting up media are techniques of power from below. There is therefore a distinctly nonhuman component in Burroughs’ concept of the human: we are a viral assemblage of language and media, cerebral and sex parasites, but there is no doubt that there is a strong sense of the physical body and the control media may have on the human body. As Rotman points out, technology does not represent an escape from embodiment. (Rotman 103) Instead, the implicit and subliminal effects of technology’s material effect cannot be separated from human bodies. To argue that we can move beyond corporeality, that language, writing, or even thought could be immaterial, is wrong.

Lydenberg points to Burroughs’ interest in developing a resistance strategy against the word, “if the word traps us in a body, writs us into the body’s needs and fears, we must learn to ‘leave the body behind.’ If the power of the word depends on its invisibility we must make it visible, force it to take on the body we have cast off” (Lydenberg 187, 137). It is in this light that I believe we should see Burroughs’ interest in astral bodies. Alex Houen discusses this fascination in *Powers of Possibility*, arguing that Burroughs explored astral bodies in the *Cities of the Red Night* trilogy (Houen 124). However, as Houen also suggests, these astral bodies were inspired by space travel research suggesting the development of genetic viruses for astronauts. Viruses, of course, need hosts and so these new bodies might be astral, but they are not immaterial.

Burroughs’ literary output is anything but pleasant. Not pleasant to read, not full of pleasant ideas. Instead, as I have attempted to show, read-
ing Burroughs is a jarring experience. The cut-up techniques throw us outside of ourselves, outside of our normal experience, but do so in a way that makes it possible to see things differently. Not in some transcendent way, Burroughs would have no truck with that, but a shocking revelation of the vapidity and imitative repetition of most prose.

Reading Burroughs is a corporeal experience, a shock to our senses and sensibilities. His stories are gross, extreme, laughable, boring, and his prose can often feel like a dull murmur of insects: unintelligible, vaguely creepy and unsettling. It is for this reason, that I believe that at least to some extent, the cut-up technique should be regarded also as a way of dispersing energy. While energy is certainly transferred in terms of the jarring prose, the tenuous grasping for meaning represents an expenditure of energy that we are not compensated for. In the same way, rejecting and refusing transfer of energy, making the energy dissipate, becomes simply a strategy of resisting the negative affects that language attempts to transfer to us, as modes of control. A rejection of modulation can be done through dispersal, not only noise, but the amplification and subtraction of energy.

By extending biopoetics to include consideration not only of the informatic level of literature, but also including the sensuous, corporeal aspect of language’s materiality and its formal impact on our bodies in terms of modulation, we are able to answer a range of different questions. An affective biopoetics reveals the intensities of writing, the way that writing and literature become techniques of control from the outside. Ideology’s corporeal effects are made evident: not only does ideology limit what we can think, but it also limits how we can feel. Furthermore, at least in the case of Burroughs, but I believe also for other writers, we find a way of articulating a resistance to ideology that goes beyond the simply cultural, but actively engages with our biocultural bodies.
In the following quotes from the three books that make up the *Nova* trilogy, I have attempted to reproduce Burroughs’ typographical use. This means that some words have multiple spacings between them, punctuation is inconsistent and often erroneous, as is the case with capitalization. I have maintained this unusual form of writing, not only because it is conventional in Burroughs studies, but also because this unconventional way of writing is significant to my argument.


For more on non-phenomenology, see Steven Shaviro, “Non-Phenomenological Thought”. *Speculations* V, 2014, 40-56.

Especially Thierry Bardini’s deployment of Burroughs as *patient 0* of the hypervirus in his book *Junkware* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP. 2011), 179ff.
