

# William S. Burroughs: Pictographic Coordinates

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## **Abstract**

La apropiación y reorganización de contenidos audiovisuales preexistentes es un hecho cotidiano en las actuales tecnologías de la información. El objetivo de esta comunicación es trazar dichas estrategias en los métodos de producción del escritor William S. Burroughs, que durante los años 60 produce seis mil páginas de escritura experimental mediante el método cut-up.

Burroughs cuestiona el concepto de autor cuando se apropia de textos de otros escritores y los recorta, reordena, y combina con su propia escritura en un nuevo contexto, reintroduciendo una aleatoriedad estancada hasta entonces en automatismos y cadáveres exquisitos. Con Burroughs, la palabra pasa a ser un material tangible y táctil, mientras que el texto deviene algo contingente y múltiple. Burroughs produce diferentes versiones de sus textos integrándolos en un archivo multimedia, al que recurre para alterar radicalmente posteriores reediciones de sus obras. En la intertextualidad del archivo y sus subproductos descubrimos frecuentes reflexiones sobre la construcción de unos textos que son accesibles desde cualquier punto de entrada.

Hay tres factores cruciales en las tácticas interdisciplinarias de Burroughs: los procesos de percepción, cognición y recepción. Burroughs extiende su sistema nervioso a través de mecanismos de grabación y reproducción para expresar la simultaneidad de estímulos que asedian al sujeto cotidianamente. También se apropia de imágenes y textos que reordena en retículas y columnas triples, legibles en cualquier dirección y sentido. La parataxis es una táctica recurrente en su particular sistema semiótico, que compromete al lector como productor de sentido. Los cuadernos y collages resultantes erosionan el límite entre literatura y artes plásticas. La suya es una escritura en imágenes, que invita a cierto nomadismo psíquico, y anticipa el hipertexto.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Everything will blossom beside a deconsecrated tomb*

—Jacques Derrida. «The Parergon».

The first question that crossed my mind when I opened my copy of «Nova Express» back in 1993 was: what kind of writing is this? At that time I was already familiar with the styles of Joyce and Woolf, the Surrealist Lorca, and the cinematic Dalí, but trying to analyse the text I had in front of me was as fruitless as trying to keep a handful of water in my pocket. I simply could not make the right connections, because the arts were kept in separate kernels in my mind, and I positively had the feeling that I was missing some important data. Moreover, my training in philology was not being as helpful as expected. After a few months of struggle with Burroughs's works, I put his books aside and set out to get a degree in Fine Arts. It was through confronting process and conceptual art that I started to get an idea of what was Burroughs about to me, and why Kathy Acker said «Burroughs was the only prose writer I could find who was a conceptualist» (Acker 1991: 4).

This paper will propose that William Burroughs wrote by process and that a good portion of his production could be interpreted as a gargantuan conceptual/process artwork, the result of a complex *ad hoc* semiotic system that comprised collage, cinema, performance art, audio, and painting. Moreover, it is my intention to stress the role of the visual in his writing with one very brief anecdote: back in the fifties, as Brion Gysin remembers in *The Third Mind*, while Burroughs's friends are engaged in the collaborative editing process of *Naked Lunch*, he is working in a photocollage, «more intent on Scotch-taping his photos together into one great continuum on the wall, where scenes faded and slipped into one another, than occupied with editing the monster manuscript» (Gysin 1978: 43).

In 1959 painter Brion Gysin declared that writing had a fifty years' delay compared to painting and presented the cut-up technique, which involved cutting up written pages from diverse sources, and rearranging them to obtain aleatoric texts. Gysin gave away the method as a present to Burroughs, who improved it and produced some six thousand pages of experimental writing with it. Strategies as appropriation and redistribution of pre-existent audiovisual contents, sampling, and cultural and media hybridization are *fait accompli* within our current mediascape. To make sense of the current radical semiurgy it is necessary to trace and analyze the aforementioned strategies, retrace our steps and go back to the time when they were *tactics* in the sense Michel de Certeau spoke about. A good point to start with could be the literary heritage of William S. Burroughs, who during the sixties produced a massive body of work putting forward a «do it yourself» philosophy that inspired several generations of artists and cultural engineers. Burroughs's archives are important because they are heavily connected with many recurrent issues in contemporary literature as intertextuality, hypertextuality, and hybridization. They also deal with a common ground in contemporary literature and art as they explore the concepts of author, text, and identity. More importantly his texts (and here I include sounds, pictures, collages, movies) provide the receiver with something to do: they are how-to manuals.

In March 2006, The New York Public Library announced the purchase of the Burroughs's «Vaduz» archive for its Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American

Literature: this offered scholars the possibility to access for the first time many manuscripts that were in the hands of a private collector. It also opened up a dialogue about what is stored in the library: looking at Burroughs's cut-up experiments, it is not strange to be besieged by an eerie feeling of displacement given the similarities in their form and content with conceptual works of art by Marcel Duchamp (see «Rendez-vous du dimanche 6 février à 1 h.  $\frac{3}{4}$  après-midi»). 1916. Philadelphia Museum of Art), John Baldessari («Blasted Allegories», 1971.), or those by Glenn Ligon, Richard Prince, etc. This feeling sparked many questions, so I decided to interview one of the most respected scholars on the subject of William S. Burroughs, Professor Oliver Harris in February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

In our brief interview, Oliver Harris addressed two very important issues: «*when* it becomes possible to see Burroughs as more than (other than) a “writer” and *in what context* his work should therefore be considered». Not until recently there has been so much information available on Burroughs' cut-up archives. The possibility for scholars today to have access to the thousands of textual experiments from which works as the *Nova Trilogy* and later productions resulted changes the picture completely, and this might be because of the following reasons:

1. William S. Burroughs worked as process and conceptual artists did; he many times explained that what remained out of his books and in the archives was many times as good if not better than what found its way into the printing press. During the 1960s, it was process what interested him most.

2. The fact that, as Alan Ansen thought, and Oliver Harris very rightly mentioned in our interview, there was a line of thought in Burroughs' work in such a way that writing «was only the by-product» as a film, or an audio recording might be, prompts the question: was William Burroughs a conceptual artist/writer? Kathy Acker states so in *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, and this is probably also the area where Acker worked.

3. The catalogue *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts*, by Robert Sobieszek, is also a very revealing example since it devotes great attention to connect samples of Burroughs' cut-ups, collages, scrapbooks, grids, and audiovisual production with the works of international contemporary and avant-garde fine artists.

4. Last but not least, the archives show the existence of a complex semiotic system at work that this author produced in order to make his narrative evolve, and whose analysis demands the insights of several disciplines.

The problem generated by this author's process-based cut-up production is its refusal to «remain» in the final product of a book, and the changes the product operates over the categorization of the producer, whose ontological status as a writer is destabilized, and could very well be substituted by that of *expanded literature producer*. If we try to make an analogy between visual process-based artworks and the cut-ups process work, we might conclude that the novels are analogous to the photographs or videos that usually record such art forms, a document that proves its existence, while the process itself of producing *all* the cut-ups is the

work. Also, as process-based art, these books raise some questions on the nature of a finished artwork, but this time the questions affect the whole literary field: should the book be considered the documentation of the cut up process, and if so, where does this place the process itself in literature?

Finally, the fact that the cut-ups are also visual productions prompts issues about which ones should be showed, and the most adequate place for exhibition: should they be displayed in a library or in a gallery or museum? These are not only relevant questions regarding the field of art preservation and exhibition, but they also connect with the state of affairs concerning internet art and cyberliterature.

## 2. A FIFTY YEARS' DELAY

The word «conceptual» came to prominence in the art *milieu* around 1967, even though there are many works prior to those years that could be considered protoconceptual, as for instance many by Marcel Duchamp. Sol LeWitt wrote for Artforum the following definition of conceptual art: «In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...]» (LeWitt 1967: 79–83).

Joseph Kosuth favoured a different definition of the term in his article from 1969 «Art after Philosophy»: «The ‘purest’ definition of conceptual art would be that it is inquiry into the foundations of the concept ‘art,’ as it has come to mean» (Kosuth 1969: 134-37). Burroughs’s writing shares with this description of conceptual art a penchant for reflexivity; he is constantly questioning perception and how to work with it through signs.

Conceptual art is a violent reaction to Modernism. It celebrates cognition, and finds delight in complex thoughts. Like Burroughs’s writing, it reflects on the impossibility of believing neither in enlightened society nor in art as a social institution. There is little doubt that during the sixties (and even before) Burroughs worked in the same line as conceptual/process artists did. As many visual artists in those decades, Burroughs scrutinized the impact of language, image, and sound in cognition, reflecting upon the time when writing and painting were the same activity, and immersing himself extensively in the study of Mayan anthropology, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Alfred Korzybski’s General Semantics, psychoanalysis, etc., endeavouring to find an artistic tool that cut word/image lines of control. It was his intention to be understood, so he expressed his theories and main intentions in many interviews and books like *The Job* or *The Third Mind*.

Intimately connected with conceptualism, process art conferred more relevance to the procedures involving art than to the final results achieved by the artist. The Guggenheim Museum webpage defines process artists as «involved in issues attendant to the body, random occurrences, improvisation, and the liberating qualities of non-traditional materials such as wax, felt, and latex [...]» Burroughs transposed this kind of spirit to his writing and there are a number of sources that support this thesis. The first impression upon accessing the Berg Collection at New York Public Library, where Burroughs’s and Kerouac’s archives are kept, is that Burroughs kept a huge file system he often used in his visual and written works. How he used this archive is what makes Burroughs’s an interesting semiotic case study, since it

shows that the activities Burroughs carried in his workshop were not separate at all, but they nurtured each other in a fluid way.

The complexity of what Burroughs was trying to do evinces the need for an interdisciplinary framework to approach so much his work as many other contemporary aesthetic artefacts, given that applying only the tools of close reading to his more experimental work can lead to reductive — even if interesting — conclusions. The fact that he treated the printed page as a process sculptor approached his wax, felt, or ice, and focused on the material aspect of a writing that grew, froze, decomposed, condensed, evaporated, and spilled — a writing cut and rearranged time and again — should be enough to consider criteria other than literary when analysing his production or posterior multimodal creations. David Banash has written tangentially about the role of collage in Burroughs's work in his article «From Advertising to the Avant-Garde: Rethinking the Invention of Collage», but not surprisingly, it has been an art curator, Robert A. Sobieszek, who has insisted on the visual relevance of Burroughs's scrapbooks and collages and how they influenced his writing.

### 3. A NEW WAY TO WRITE AND READ

Burroughs' writing from the 60s is highly paratactic. There are a number of reasons for this, but the most obvious is that he was determined to portray the cognitive experiences of his contemporaries, which were anything but linear, Aristotelian, or hypotactic. As any visual artist who must locate the materials and techniques that suit the best one given project, he found out that an experimental practice with collage, montage, scrapbooking, three-column typesetting, grids and any recording technology available at the time could be useful to express the different things he had to say.

Frequent refrains in Burroughs's writing often evoke a saccadic recurrence, which is probably the consequence of trying to write in images through his scrapbook experiments. Scientists worried by cognition have analyzed the movements of the eye when looking. Peripheral vision works as a blind man's stick, coupled with the saccadic movement, which is a brisk aleatoric unidirectional motion our eyes perform to search and inspect interesting objects. To the previous we must add macular (also known as focal) vision, which we use to concentrate in one point. Recent studies show that short term memory aids the visual cortex in generating a complex spatial image whose fragments are perceived (but not imagined) as a simultaneous present. On one hand, we perceive objects in a similar fashion as we read: in a consecutive way. But language is consecutive *and* sequential, which means — in principle — order is relevant as languages are concerned. Painting has evolved from the representation of a frozen moment in time to an explosion of the fragmentary, simultaneous, and paratactic. Writing (and reading) is getting very close to that saccadic, simultaneous way of perception. Jacques Lacan said that the unconscious is structured like a language. This probably means that we can analyze the subconscious *as if* it were a language. Burroughs sheds light over this idea when he states: «I am quite deliberately addressing myself to the whole area of what we call dreams. Precisely what is a dream? A certain juxtaposition of word and image» (Burroughs 1978: 1). In the twentieth century image and word are relating in very complex lines, and this is the territory Burroughs will explore.

In «The Literary Techniques of Lady Sutton-Smith», Burroughs writes:

Sit down in a café somewhere drink a coffee read the papers and *listen* don't *talk* to yourself [...] Note what you see and hear as you read what words and look at what picture. These are *intersection* points. Note these intersection points in the margin of your paper. Listen to what is being said around you and look at what is going on around you (Berner 1966: 28-9).

Burroughs' intersection points deal with the *umlaut* of semiotic stimuli we may be processing as we try to read a newspaper. His intention was to find coordinate points that take the writer back and forth to moments in chronos, so he devised a number of artefacts or «writing machines» (grids, scrapbooks, etc.) that work in a kairotic way. These coordinate points are very important in the cognitive mapping Burroughs depicts of the the creative act and his own surroundings.

Besides the scrapbooks he used to write «in images», Burroughs worked with newspaper layouts and 3-column typesettings. An explanation of the 3 column system appears on *The Third Mind*

For exercise, when I make a trip, such as from Tangier to Gibraltar, I will record this in three columns in a notebook I always take with me. One column will contain simply an account of the trip, what happened: I arrived at the air terminal, what was said by the clerks, what I overheard on the plane, what hotel I checked into. The next column presents my memories: that is, what I was thinking of at the time, the memories that were activated by my encounters. And the third column, which I call my reading column, gives quotations from any book that I take with me. (*The Third Mind*: 6)

The reference to *hearing* is very important here: in an interview with Victor Bockris the issue of writing being behind painting comes up again; Burroughs explains why: there has not been any invention that forced writers to move in the similar way that photography forced painters. To him, «an invention that would eradicate 'representational' writing would be a recorder able to register subvocal speech, as writers are constantly interpreting, or guessing at what people thinks» (Bockris 1996: 4). **Only much later the NASA did achieve reasonable results in computerizing silent speech, and Burroughs did not achieve his goal of recording subvocal speech, but he did something almost as good: he worked as if this was already accomplished; «representational» writing was unnecessary and he could go for the next step, which was applying the collage techniques to writing.** He worked in a systematic way through «writing machines» that rendered juxtapositions of places visited, words read, sounds overheard, and images and objects seen, which allowed him to work out his cognitive system. These exercises proved useful during his entire career, and what resulted from them is very interesting from an artistic and literary point of view.

Hearing is not so suspect of being consecutive and sequential as sight is. N. Katherine Hayles examines the impact of media on subjectivity in Burroughs' *The Ticket That Exploded* in her excellent *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and*



*Informatics*. In *The Ticket That Exploded* Burroughs proposes a number of experiments with sound recording and playback. Hayles argues that the novel presents the tape recorder as a metaphor of the human body, programmed with linguistic «prerecordings» that work as parasites. (Hayles 1999: 211). Burroughs's experiments with tape recorders attempt to subvert the disciplinary control of language through an exteriorization of the mind's internal dialogue. His main goal was to reach inner silence through tampering with the prerecordings. Disembodiment through machinery was one possible answer, as the mind cannot work at chopping and reassembling the parasitic messages in our internal dialogues. The electric media can be insidious invaders as Baudrillard thinks, but they can also be put to work against totalitarian and dehumanizing messages. In her book, Hayles mentions some of the experiments Burroughs carried away and described in *The Ticket That Exploded*, as recording the two sides of an argument in two separate recorders and playing one recorder against each other, which in itself would be a good piece of installation art. The possibility to stop internal dialogue through hieroglyphs was also in Burroughs agenda, as his scrapbooking and painting activities confirm.

The main target of the cut-ups was to by-pass the alphabetized mind and use «writing machines» (grids, 3-column settings, scrapbooks, audio recorders, etc.) to achieve a raw state of conscience. This method would probably allow entering the acoustic space, a space that according to Marshall McLuhan dominates television, radio, and newspapers because of simultaneity. Following McLuhan, newspapers are aural mosaics, because of their attack to sequential order. Burroughs's use of recording and reproduction devices to express simultaneity erases the limit that separates literature and the fine arts, as the typesetting experiments he combined with grids and photomontages.

What is fascinating about Burroughs's semiotic system is how text came out of a tape recorder and then passed through a typesetting format, a grid, or was transformed into images for a scrapbook in a mutant feedback loop. The results of typesetting experiments can be seen in Burroughs's script *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz* (1975), heavily influenced by the films he did in collaboration with Antony Balch and the attention-grabbing experiments he did with Ian Sommerville and Brion Gysin with image projection and aural permutations. In *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz*, he uses columns to describe the sound and image tracks of a fictitious film about Dutch Schultz, an old time real gangster. The script is illuminated by press clippings and photographs of the real gangster, and some others that do not correspond to the people mentioned, a tactic that erodes the limits of fiction and reality and work as an exposé of how the media create the news. Sounds and images are set in different columns, upsetting traditional script formats. It is like a contemporary artistic intervention on a common genre, a pastiche: columns isolate sound and image tracks reflecting the media as a construct. The idea was to subvert newspaper format through replication and radical transmogrification. The use of several writing columns is directly connected to the tape recorder test where he suggested feeding the machines with internal dialogues and let them alone to chew obnoxious monologues or arguments. The purpose of this experiments was to externalize (once more) language, remove it from the body, so as to deflate the supremacy of words through their simultaneous and overlapping diffusion in an irrational cacophony of sound.

In his typesetting experiments, the three columns of text contain different voices concomitantly vying for the reader's interest. The receiver will decide whether to read the columns

in sequence from beginning to end, read across the page from left to right, or skip columns on every line. These compositions thus represent a radically new way to read, and let's not forget that photographs (coming from different contexts and adding new angles to signification) are also attached to many pages: a proto/hypertext in which the role of the author is displaced and linear structure is disrupted. In some of these compositions, such as 'Who is the Third That Walks Beside You' (Burroughs File: 50-2), Burroughs defiles his own authority by combining found documents with excerpts from his novels. Thus, authorship and identity are questioned as much as the concept of a fixed text.

Grids are also attached to the previous devices. They follow a similar pattern as Burroughs' three-column cut-ups, although the vertical columns are also divided horizontally into a series of boxes, thus multiplying the number of potential relations the reader is able to make between the chunks of text. They also illustrate a crisis of the author as a controlling consciousness over the work: other than choosing which texts to use, the author has little to nil control over the eventual arrangement. Burroughs explains his use of grids in *The Third Mind*:

I selected mostly unfavorable criticism with a special attention to meaningless machine-turned phrases such as 'irrelevant honesty of hysteria,' 'the pocked dishonored flesh,' 'ironically the format is banal,' etc. Then ruled off a grid (Grid I) and wove the prose into it like start a sentence from J.Wain in square 1, continue in squares 3, 5 and 7. Now a sentence from Toynbee started in squares 2, 4 and 6. The reading of the grid back to straight prose can be done say one across and one down. Of course there are many numbers of ways in which the grid can be read off. (*The Third Mind*: 27).

Grids were generally used as a means of orientation, or to analyze data in math. They were instruments of rationality. Even if the resulting texts from a Burroughsian grid trespass order and collide among themselves generating random combinations, grids in Burroughs can be seen as a means of orientation in inner space.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Burroughs' semiotic system comprises a number of devices that operate over different media producing text. Gerard-Georges Lemaire called this battery of devices called «writing machines». These machines have a number of features:

1. They externalise the writer's consciousness.
2. They allow collaboration with other artists dead and alive.
3. They turn any kind of text into fiction.
4. They are pierced by a mutant textual flux that links them.
5. They erode the concepts of author, text, and identity.



The text resulting from these machines is open and fluid, it circulates through them constantly evolving and often carrying the key of its own construction. Most importantly, this new textuality included word, image, and sound, a pioneering vision that preceded and influenced that of the *Tel Quel* group. Disembodiment through technology was the strategy to follow in order to work with a volume of data unmanageable by other means as free association or the Surrealist exquisite corpse. The sole act of using a typewriter has very definite effect on subjectivity, since it unlinks eye, hand, and writing. It is a proto-cyberspace. Burroughs upped the ante and tried to map mental landscapes, dreams, and future dystopias away from chronos and into kairos.

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