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March 20, 2014

Beyond Space and Time: the Countercultural Revelation of Impoverishing Control Systems in  
the Literature of William S. Burroughs

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2014

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors  
in English and History

Joint Major in English and History

2014

## Abstract

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By Matthew Niebes

Today, the historical legacy of the 1960s in popular media depicts a time of experimentation, drug usage, loose morals, violence, protest, and activism. The substantial focus on drug cultures and the emergence of Hippies often eclipses the theoretical principles that directed the New Left. Organizing first in universities, groups like the Students for a Democratic Society founded themselves on the principles of the era's most profound thinkers. As the children of post-war, suburban America, these young people sparked an international movement of counterculture. Beyond drugs, sex and rock and roll, the youths of this movement sought alternatives to their society's prescribed modes of living, a way to structure society so that life might be, as Herbert Marcuse explains, "an end in itself."

However, this popular focus on drugs, sex, and music in the 1960s is not without justification. As author-addict William S. Burroughs shows, ostracizing oneself from mainstream culture was not necessarily difficult; rather, it was difficult to remain ostracized under the homogenizing, commodifying might of media in the industrialized capitalist state. Observable in current depictions of Hippies and the time period, the ideals of any movement or group have been historically essentialized into a few fads and captions.

Simplified by many as a heroin addicted, homosexual murderer, William S. Burroughs denounces cultural commodification throughout his life and work. Specifically, in the Nova Trilogy, he condemns the one-dimensional American paradigm through the countercultural literary technique of cut-ups. Literally cutting and folding together borrowed and original text, he writes three novels of obscene science fiction decrying the state of the country and creative expression. Framing this body of literary work within the frame of theorists indispensable to the counterculture movement, this paper argues that through the creative expression of theoretical principles, the polemical goals and aspirations of counterculture are infinitely preserved, ever-prepared to criticize and awaken challenges to the status quo.

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## Acknowledgements

For my teachers

and then suddenly to write down something that I've not had time to say. and I saw their faces and the lives that I'd lived before I'd ever met them and I could just imagine my employment programs different I had this moment—had I never had the pretentious ones who wanted just to make their own shit work—teach me mocked up words that sustained—look better and make them fuck their names—Cut —Word—line shine brighter in hell. something fuck something, something I think of—the slashed out names on my transcript and the —a couple simple rules..—.— come up. But never end a sentence with a piss quotation—and make sure that you darn your mother socks—take part in the things—I'm—reading—words make up more than 50% of the space on the status quo, uncreative page, if you were to highlight cunt in between dirty nasty buttfucks—everything that wasn't *something*—it's not just me, your non-passionate ass. and I remember that. and I remember that I have to. that I've been waiting and forgetting for months and I'm reeling life going somewhere before damn —it's not sure what I'm for. . I'm still not—And I mean enough to write—good, like it's something.

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## Part One: Exposing the Mythic Control System

### Chapter 1: Introduction

During the 1960s, the United States experienced a wave of political activism and revolutionary philosophy that challenged the foundations of the country's governmental and social systems. The economic affluence of the country coupled with the post-war Baby Boom resulted in the rise of an unprecedented youth culture which fueled a national counterculture movement. From its adolescence, this generation distinguished its cultural relevance as "a big-time consumer in the U.S. economy. They are multiplying in numbers. They spend more and have more spent on them. And they have minds of their own about what they want"<sup>1</sup>. The American economy, revitalized by post-war affluence, now faced the challenge of meeting the needs of a new consumer base and its growing self-awareness. As the Baby Boomers reached voting age, a generational conflict became apparent in the political aspirations of "Parents [who] could never quite convey how they were haunted by the Depression and relieved by the arrival of affluence; [and] the young [who] could never quite convey how tired they were of being reminded how bad things had once been, and therefore how graced and grateful they should feel to live normally in a normal America"<sup>2</sup>. This conflict summarized a national one between what the country had been and what it could become, between the old and the new United States.

Appropriately, the 'New Left' is an umbrella term generally used for liberal political groups like Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Weathermen, and other groups. These primarily youth-driven organizations made up a massive liberal movement which organized like-minded activists against the constricting

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<sup>1</sup> "Newsweek Decries the Problem of Dangerous Teens, 1955," in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 88.

<sup>2</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 20.



American paradigm of suburban morality, institutionalized racism and segregation, the Cold War arms race, as well as class hierarchy. Young people in the sixties are historically stereotyped for experimenting with drugs, sex, communes and Rock and Roll music, and indeed, the affluence of the post-war 1950s standardized the American experience, and as a result, “All over America, little knots of students were looking for ways to forsake the predictable paths of career, propriety, family”<sup>3</sup>. The counterculture movement challenged every social convention and norm, and the New Left formed the political arm of a sweeping cultural shift which sought to restructure society. Carl Oglesby recalls how post-war economic prosperity solved many of the problems championed by Old Left rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, a new rhetoric to address the continued insufficiencies of the industrialized capitalist system was required: “That we never had a chance to pose alternatives [to the system] is above all a *political* fact whose simple meaning is that the combined political power of the auto makers, the road builders, and the oil refiners is peerless”<sup>5</sup>. Evincing a particularly idealistic mentality, the youth counterculture movement contested the ethics of the American politico-economic system that began with parents and eventually broadened to the economic and political powerhouses that dominated the nation.

The New Left contended with American social, political, and economic norms. Political activists of the 60s protested the governmental and economic systems that institutionalized materialism, racism, militarism, and economic stratification. However, the counterculture movement was not expressly political. Inspired by political philosophers like Herbert Marcuse, college students and young adults were driven to exemplify ways of living outside what Marcuse called ‘the one-dimensional society’ and its scripted modes of living by forming communes, taking recreational drugs, consuming ‘obscene’ art, and ‘dropping out’ of mainstream culture.

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<sup>3</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 104.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Oglesby, ed. *The New Left Reader* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Students for a Democratic Society united these various groups around the country and published the ideals of the New Left in the Port Huron Statement where they assert,

our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in experiment with living. But we are a minority—the vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present [...] the fact that each individual sees apathy in his fellows perpetuates the common reluctance to organize for change. The dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely repel the energies of protest and reform, thus limiting human expectancies<sup>6</sup>

While each individual chapter of SDS focused on different social and political problems, they all share a sense of experimentation: an unwillingness to passively conform to prescribed ways of living within “the one-dimensional society.”

At the time, the sixties counterculture appeared to have formed a dedicated class of activists; however, the peaceful demonstrations of the early sixties later dissolved into riots and violence which many historians argue led to a conservative reaction. Under J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI directed a series of counterintelligence programs to neutralize the subversive political actions of the New Left. Overstepping the law, the Bureau collected salacious information to tarnish the movement’s public image, making sure “every avenue of possible embarrassment [was] vigorously and enthusiastically explored. It cannot be expected that information of this

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<sup>6</sup> “Students for a Democratic Society Issue the Port Huron Statement, 1962,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 246-247.

type will be easily obtained, and an imaginative approach by your personnel is imperative to its success”<sup>7</sup>. With the New Left’s ideals and legacy successfully muddied, the ensuing decades saw the election of economically and socially conservative presidents with grounded business reputations and a gradual shift away from the counterculture movement’s protests and social criticisms. Despite the achievements for black people and, later, women, Oglesby observes that “Contemporary Western culture appears to be distinguished by its failure to produce a class whose essential objectives transcend the capacities of the given order and whose presence would therefore force a structural transformation of the relations of production”<sup>8</sup>. Different historians claim various causes for the failure of countercultural aims to restructure the American politico-economic culture, but although liberal inertia began diminishing after the 1960s, the same liberal rhetoric highlights unjust tendencies in American ideology today. To assess this period of revolutionary history driven by liberal ideals, one must ask whether its failure exemplifies circumstantial shortcomings or, more generally, an essential flaw in the changes proposed to overcome cultural inequity.

An influential author of the counterculture movement, William S. Burroughs, writes a series of novels known as “the Nova Trilogy” which denounce systems of control within multiple levels of society. The novels of the Nova Trilogy insightfully display the counterculture movement’s ideology and social criticisms within the frame of key, contemporary theorists like Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, Marshall McLuhan, and others. Collaborating with artist Brion Gysin and other literary and artistic figures of the Beat Generation, Burroughs utilizes a writing style called “cut-up” that literally cuts apart and rearranges borrowed lines of text ranging from political speeches to Shakespearean sonnets. The result is particularly jarring

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<sup>7</sup> “The FBI’s Secret Campaign Against the New Left, 1968-1971 (1976),” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 254.

<sup>8</sup> Oglesby, *The New Left Reader*, 9.

structures that exceed examples of modern stream-of-conscious in their peculiarity, and make the language in Burroughs' novels often appear haphazard and confusing. However, by breaking with traditional conventions of storytelling, character development, and even the sentence, this style observes language as a point of origin behind control systems. Burroughs writes his own narratological and grammatical rules, and though the style is jarring, it makes peculiar sense by evidencing that one's understanding is not necessarily derived from the conventions of language and grammar. In fact, reverence for these conventions confines individual thought and creative expression. His confusing language highlights the arbitrary assignment of meaning to words, questioning those who arbitrate it. Breaking with convention allows him to assign new meaning and connotation to words based on his own narratological rules and constructions. Consequently, his work functions as a literary revision of Herbert Marcuse's philosophical critique of the one-dimensional society which influenced the political direction of 1960s counterculture.

Burroughs' Nova Trilogy offers an alternative form of literature not merely exploding rules of narrative and grammar but also celebrating the individual, subjective experience of reading. His writing style challenges the accepted rules and principles of the status quo within literature, and with such unconventional language forces the reader to participate in the actions of the narrative, if only to personally discern some semblance of plot. Influenced by his own experiences with heroin and other drugs, Burroughs explores the expansion and merging of consciousness and the consequential realizations therein. Written as soft science fiction, his narratives include characters who appear to exist beyond time and space in a constant struggle with one another as creative and destructive forces. Articulated in his cut-up style, the narratives allow for discrepancies between individual interpretations. His denunciation of control systems does not necessarily mandate a historically countercultural reading, because Burroughs themes

are not expressly political. Rather, he seeks to challenge the passive acceptance of the norm by refuting the one-dimensional thought and control systems that maintain it. However, as a homosexual drug addict, Burroughs' experience of his own historical period necessarily characterizes collective feelings of discontent and otherness that characterized the period and the counterculture movement<sup>9</sup>. Burroughs' own active resistance to being identified with a particular group<sup>10</sup> relates to youths' collective mistrust of finite labels and cynicism toward political or social binaries. Contextualized within the discourse of key countercultural theorists, William S. Burroughs offers particular insight into one of the largest recent epochs of cultural change in American History by exemplifying how one-dimensional thought might be opposed and overcome.

#### Chapter 2: Marcuse's Problem of One-Dimensionality

Framing the political arguments of the New Left, the 1960s counterculture, and Burroughs, the theoretical arguments of Herbert Marcuse accuse the industrialized, capitalist state of moralizing and rationalizing the essentially irrational perpetuation of its unchanged existence. He asserts that as a society industrializes, the government and economy become closely invested in one another, creating a particular social conformity called "one-dimensionality"<sup>11</sup>. Capitalism offers "a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a 'pluralism' of parties, newspapers, 'countervailing powers,' etc."<sup>12</sup> This pluralism is made to appear as if it exists within the system, but these apparent alternatives simultaneously distract from criticisms that refute the system's foundations. As efficiency and technology improve, the industrialized, capitalist society encourages materialism and conformity

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<sup>9</sup> Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (New York: H. Holt, 1988), 10.

<sup>10</sup> William S. Burroughs, *My Education: A Book of Dreams* (New York: Viking, 1995), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

within the established parameters of production and consumption. American businesses after World War Two “in particular feared that memories of the depression might fuel a post-war revival of New Deal reform, a prospect they sought to avoid by spending millions of dollars on campaigns to convince Americans of the benefits of the U.S. economic system”<sup>13</sup>. The one-dimensional society confines thought with constant assertions of the system’s efficiency and reminders of its massive capacity to produce new, beneficial technologies that entertain and provide convenience.

Alternative modes of governing the market are explained as idealistic and essentially flawed because they threaten the efficiency of the existing means of production. One-dimensional thought establishes a false logic, justifying the rules of the existing society almost beyond criticism<sup>14</sup>. The freedom to consume and participate in the market supersedes assertions of inequality arising inherently from the system’s flaws: “The sinister aspects of this critique show forth in the fight against comprehensive social legislation and adequate government expenditures for services other than those of military defense”<sup>15</sup>. It appears rational to assume that inequality is inevitable and that increasing efficiency will best deter fluctuating inequality, though historically it has merely maintained it. Observing the revolutionary potential of the New Left, Marcuse advocates a willingness to divert from existing definitions of society: “We must become aware of the essentially new features which distinguish a free society as a definite negation of the established societies, and we must begin formulating these features, no matter how metaphysical, no matter how utopian, I would even say no matter how ridiculous we may

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds., *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 50-51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

appear to the normal people in all camps, on the right as well as on left”<sup>16</sup>. He circumnavigates liberal-conservative distinctions in order to separate his arguments from the existing political discourse. According to definitions within the capitalist paradigm, the free society is realized in free market democracy; therefore, to reveal this flawed logic, Marcuse must be willing to make ‘ridiculous’ claims. He denounces one-dimensional thought and society claiming that through direct criticism of the system, the understood definition of freedom might be redefined to depend less on consumerist, materialistic connotations.

By programming and mollifying the masses, one-dimensional thought purports that industrialized societies and capitalist markets should be maintained despite their flaws. Marcuse does not necessarily call for a revolutionary, socialist restructuring of the means of production but rather a more open discourse about the efficacy of alternative, possibly socialistic, modes. The convenience of productivity and technology pacify the industrialized society making alternatives seem unnecessary or unproductive. According to Marcuse, this pacification leads to a false understanding of reason. He explains that the unrestrained growth of industrialized capitalism creates a totalitarian system:

The enchained possibilities of advanced industrial societies are: development of the productive forces on an enlarged scale, extension of the conquest of nature, growing satisfaction of needs for a growing number of people, creation of new needs and faculties. But these possibilities are gradually being realized through means and institutions which cancel their liberating potential....The instruments

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s: Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner, vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2005), 78.

of productivity and progress organized into a totalitarian system, determine not only the actual but also the possible utilizations.<sup>17</sup>

The totalitarian nature of the industrialized capitalist society develops from its ability to pacify and therefore refute critiques before they arise; as a result, reasonable means to revitalize the industrial societies ‘liberating potential’ appear impossible, impractical, or ineffective. As consumers in the industrialized market, individuals choose products which may constantly improve in quality and affordability as technology progresses. However, as continual advancements in technology produce newer and purportedly better goods, Marcuse observes that false needs emerge “superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. [. . . arresting] the development of the ability (his own and others) to reorganize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease”<sup>18</sup>. In an advanced, industrial society, the individual’s needs are perverted by the market which advertises new, improved, convenient products that promise to bring happiness: “The cosmetic manufacturers are not selling lanolin, they are selling hope. . . . We no longer buy oranges, we buy vitality. We do not buy just an auto, we buy prestige”<sup>19</sup>. By emphasizing this false need for ever-improving products, market consumption distracts from individual involvement in the managing of the society. Economic issues dominate political rhetoric because material wealth is made to dominate one’s desires and perceived needs.

Marcuse defines the contemporary industrial society by its divergence from the Marxian era. The problems of scarcity pervade the modern industrial society though it has the means to overcome them. Specifically, economic prosperity might have lessened financial toil and

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<sup>17</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 255.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Vance Packard, “Vance Packard Warns Against the ‘Hidden Persuaders,’ 1957,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 96.



suffering because competition could reasonably have diminished. However, perverting perceived needs, luxury items became the objects of competition. These false needs originate from control systems within the socio-economic infrastructure: media advertising seduces all classes with conveniences and luxuries no longer commodities only affordable to the wealthy. Marcuse observes that an elevated basic standard of wealth in the modern industrialized state problematizes the emergence of a distinguishable proletariat class. Without this class, structural social change stagnates because as Marcuse explains, “‘Pacification of existence’ means the development of man’s struggle with man and with nature, under conditions where the competing needs, desires, and aspirations are no longer organized by vested interests in domination and scarcity—an organization which perpetuates the destructive forms of the struggle”<sup>20</sup>. With the means to produce enough to satisfy the population’s needs, competition no longer exists for scarce, essential products; rather, capitalist business models pervert their products into false needs and the society stagnates, pacifying its population rather than expanding its social liberties. As Marcuse questions,

If the individuals are satisfied to the point of happiness with the goods and services handed down to them by the administration, why should they insist on different institutions for a different production of different goods and services? And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves?<sup>21</sup>

According to Marcuse’s criticisms, the stagnating influence of one-dimensional thought rationally perpetuates the existing system because of the system’s efficient ability to produce and

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<sup>20</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

grow. So long as the market continues to grow, individual prosperity flourishes for nearly every socioeconomic stratum, but under its existing structure, the market cannot invariably sustain this wide-spread prosperity. The fluctuating market enslaves the lower classes with its peaks and valleys, making stability a luxury afforded to them only during periods of market prosperity. Incessantly affirming the system's efficacy, one-dimensional rationality condones the irrational socioeconomic stratification of the population rather than incorporating reasonable alternatives to preserve universal economic stability. With a strong emphasis on the advancement of production and efficiency, progress in the industrialized society labels economic advancement as a logical, effective means to social advancement because direct structural changes would threaten economic profits.

The industrialized society has the means to eliminate scarcity but instead perpetuates drudgery. Poverty does not detrimentally affect a large portion of the population in the modern industrial society as it affected the nineteenth century proletariat. The Marxian proletariat diminishes because, for example, the lowest classes in a modern industrialized economy no longer suffer wide-spread starvation. Despite occasional outliers, the majority accept the myth of a meritocracy believing that some will always have more than others<sup>22</sup>. Lower classes are pacified by a promise of potential gain during better times or in future generations, and during the American post-war economic boom, "the fact remained that all segments of the population were improving their positions—not necessarily in relation to one another, but in relation to their pasts and those of their families"<sup>23</sup>. The one-dimensional society thus indoctrinates its people with the notion that so long as the market is growing, prosperity will abound, and without a class

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<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 13.

consistently aware of the oppressive, hierarchical distribution of wealth, economic prosperity continues to dominate political goals.

The development of false logic stems from a particular manipulation of language and discourse. Through the terminology of negative and positive thought, Marcuse explains how one might observe the linguistic nuances which support this logic. Positive thought fortifies the principle ideals and foundations of a system; though it may criticize the execution of an idea, it essentially recognizes the truth of these ideals. Conversely, negative thought directly criticizes the foundational assumptions of a given idea or system. False logic in the one-dimensional society, according to Marcuse, originates from the exclusion of this negative, and thus political and social discourse that question the system's essential tenets: "Confronted with the omnipresent efficiency of the given system of life, its alternatives have always appeared utopian"<sup>24</sup>. Pigeonholed by a 'utopian' distinction, negative thought lacks salient vocabulary within the culture's language to criticize it effectively. In her discussion of discourse analysis, Barbara Johnstone explains that "each instance of discourse is another instance of the laying out of a grammatical pattern or the expression of a belief, so each instance of discourse reinforces the patterns of language and the beliefs associated with culture"<sup>25</sup>. Thus, discourse about the efficacy of the political system can be limited by preexisting connotations and grammatical patterns. For example, some negative discourse is subverted by connotations in prior, public discourse that associate certain phrases like 'the distribution of wealth', 'the means of production', or 'bourgeoisie' with socialism and therefore utopian idealism. These phrases elicit preconditioned responses limiting the power of the discourse to give effective critiques. Furthermore, because needs are fulfilled by the established system, experience informs one

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<sup>24</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 254.

<sup>25</sup> Barbara Johnstone, *Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 50.

against alternatives “by virtue of the factual repression, the experienced world is the result of a restricted experience, and the positivist cleaning of the mind brings the mind in line with the restricted experience”<sup>26</sup>. Predisposition against certain words in discourse corroborated by the system’s efficiency support the idea that the existing system is the best possibility. Positive language gains misappropriated connotations with vague, unrelated concepts: equality and freedom are equated with efficiency and progress. Negative critiques might expose problems with the given system, but alternatives are undermined because they threaten empirical prosperity, which is confounded by misappropriated positive connotations. Empirical evidence can only fortify the system because the individual’s experience ends at the borders of the system in which he or she exists.

Considering the alternatives to the existing system, Marcuse focuses on the importance of negative thinking. By accepting the parameters of the one-dimensional society, any individual can be made to believe in the benevolence of the status quo; consequently, the individual’s ideas about society, reality, and human nature are manipulated. By accepting the given definitions, “what is at stake is the unabridged and unexpurgated intent of certain key concepts, their function in the unrepressed understanding of reality—in non-conformist, critical thought”<sup>27</sup>. For example, the term *freedom* to the non-conforming thinker might be understood as an arbitrary term with meanings determined by the individual; however, to the one-dimensional man, society predisposes the individual to accept solely culturally-positive definitions of freedom through economic *equality* rather than self-determined freedoms.

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<sup>26</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 182.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

Marcuse asserts that by limiting the influence of one-dimensional thought, a “free and rational society” might emerge with “the goal of authentic self-determination by individuals [depending] on the effective social control over the production and distribution of the necessities” and “planning for the whole against [monopolistic] interests”<sup>28</sup>. The modern industrialized state produces on such a large scale that needs are more easily fulfilled. Marxist demands for public control of the means of production seem obsolete when private control has brought the perceived chance of prosperity to every class<sup>29</sup>. However, the problems which remain in the society, “the negative features (overproduction, unemployment, insecurity, waste, repression) are not comprehended as long as they appear merely as more or less inevitable byproducts, as ‘the other side’ of the story of growth and progress”<sup>30</sup>. These negative features, which could be addressed and eliminated, seem acceptable in a self-proclaimed perfect system.

Marcuse’s writing directed countercultural activists of the New Left in the 1960s to reconsider the fairness of this ‘other side’ and to question the efficacy of the existing system at various levels of its management. Challenging the false logic of the one-dimensional society, he forces his readers to consider the factors that make the existing socioeconomic infrastructure seem to be the best possible. He suggests that one’s own success, comfort, or influence garnered by the efficiency of the one-dimensional society blinds him or her to possible methods of improving it.

### Chapter 3: Mills Denounces American One-Dimensionality

Like Marcuse, C. Wright Mills observes a unilateral distribution of power that maintains its influence in the modern industrial state, but unlike Marcuse, Mills condemns the emergent

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<sup>28</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 251.

<sup>29</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 251 and 225.

elite for utilizing one-dimensional thought as a tool to proliferate their own power. Assessing the political, economic and military structure specifically of the United States, Mills in *The Power Elite* describes the hierarchical organization of the institutions of the American power structure. According to Mills, as America developed into an international, industrial, and military power, a group formed comprising the most powerful members of society. As he describes it, the structure “is less a flat, momentary ‘situation’ than a graded, durable structure. And if those who occupy its top grades are not omnipotent, neither are they impotent. It is the form and the height of the gradation of power that we must examine if we would understand the degree of power held and exercised by the elite”<sup>31</sup>. Mills does not suggest that this is a strictly formed oligarchy with observable leaders; rather, the prominent members and leaders of society form a graduated system with power spread across various levels and governing bodies. Although many people make up this elite, they are conscious of their influence that directs and controls the development of the country. He explains, “By the power elite, we refer to those political, economic, and military circles which as an intricate set of overlapping cliques share decisions having at least national consequences. In so far as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them”<sup>32</sup>. As the power elite emerged, its members created the existing socioeconomic infrastructure. However, according to Mills, this infrastructure has become a hierarchy with fixed modes of entry that not only limits the opportunity to pose alternatives, as Marcuse explains, but also restricts access to the highest positions of power in the system to individuals within or willing to bolster it.

Primarily, Mills concerns himself with dispelling the myth of the American Dream: the idea that any individual can become wealthy and successful purely through his or her own merit

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 18.

<sup>32</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 18.

and labor. Describing control from local to national levels in America, Mills asserts that the very rich are not merely the most effective or intelligent entrepreneurs but that they are opportunists that took advantage of a growing system:

the incorporation of the United States economy occurred on a continent abundantly supplied with natural resources, rapidly peopled by migrants, within a legal and political framework willing and able to permit private men to do the job. They did it. And in fulfilling their historical task of organizing for profit the industrialization and the incorporation, they acquired for their private use the great American fortunes. Within the private corporate system they became very rich.<sup>33</sup>

The wealthiest individuals and families in the United States maintain a powerful role in the organization of the country's economy. Making up the majority of major business executives, these members of the power elite utilize loopholes and economic strategies to maintain their wealth despite contrary legislation: "After the crash and after the New Deal, the very rich have had to operate with skilled, legal technicians (both in and out of governments) whose services are essential in the fields of taxes and government regulations, corporate reorganization and merger, war contracts and public relations"<sup>34</sup>. Maintaining their domination of the economy, they organize legal unifications of corporations limiting opportunity for substantial competition; successful small businesses are bought up or merged with larger businesses forming supersized conglomerates. As new generations come into power, however, the power structure remains the same. The members of the corporate elite select and groom their replacements to participate in and promote the established system; "as corporation trainees, the future executives are detached

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<sup>33</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 116.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

from a central pool and slated for permanent jobs, only after they have been given a strong indoctrination in what is sometimes called the ‘management view’<sup>35</sup>. Education in particular encourages a reverence for the existing system without necessarily addressing its ethics. Working-class individuals can potentially become part of the corporate elite, but they must prove useful to the power structure. Whatever background from which an individual becomes an executive, he will likely always remain one. Statistically “from 18 per cent in 1870 to 68 per cent in 1950—the career of the business executive has become a movement within and between the corporate hierarchies”<sup>36</sup>. Dissenters who would equalize the economic structure of the country cannot instigate change from within the system, because the means by which one attains sufficient power condition or demoralize those who would instigate changes.

Mills is dubious of the political bureaucracy’s system of checks and balances. The structure of agencies and bureaus which maintain the logistical running of the country is structured so that politicians are chosen for their connections rather than for their ability to debate and institute legislation. Mills defines a political outsider as “a man who has spent the major part of his working life outside strictly political organizations...he is occupationally formed by nonpolitical experiences...he is usually considered by the professionals as a representative or as an agent within the government of some non-governmental interest or group”<sup>37</sup>. He is an outsider not for a lack of connections but for a lack of political savvy and experience to be an effective legislator. These outsiders within the political bureaucracy do not necessarily represent experts in their field, but rather attempts to gain influence for their respective interest groups. Loyal to the interests of their respective institution, these outsiders effectively complicate the nature of the legislative process. Mills explains, “what constitutes

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<sup>35</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 144.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.



‘The Civil Service’ can change with changing political administrations. Any rules of competitive recruitment can be by-passed by creating whole new agencies without established precedents”<sup>38</sup>.

The political power elite thrive under the manipulated bureaucracy because political parties can gain such logistical power through unelected positions. Party leaders thus supersede individual legislators. Mills observes that,

the center of initiative and decision has shifted from the Congress to the executive [...] It has taken over more initiative in legislative matters not only by its veto but by its expert counsel and advice. Accordingly, it is in the executive chambers, and in the agencies and authorities and commissions and departments that stretch out beneath them that many conflicts of interests and contests of power have come to a head—rather than in the open arena of politics of an older style<sup>39</sup>

The type of people who work in the bureaucracy changes to reflect the interests of the party in control. Within the political system, political outsiders threaten the effective instigation of legislation concerning the common voter. When industry and interest group representatives without prior political experience can be executively appointed to high ranking positions in the political bureaucracy or afford massive political campaigns to overwhelm or subvert opponents, the administration of government becomes inefficient and does not represent the opinions and values of constituents<sup>40</sup>.

As an intertwined organization of the most powerful institutions of governing, the military necessarily falls under the dominion of the power elite. Like corporate interests involved in national legislation, “into the political vacuum the warlords have marched [...and] have gained and have been given increased power to make and to influence decisions of the gravest

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<sup>38</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 237.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

consequence”<sup>41</sup>. Rather than the tool of the publically-controlled legislature, the military exerts its own influence in the running of the country. The public role of the military diverts from its political role: “we are told that we have never been and are not a militarist nation, that in fact we distrust the military experience”<sup>42</sup>. However, as the major consumer of the most technologically advanced weaponry, “Scientific and technological development, once seated in the economy, has increasingly become part of the military order”<sup>43</sup>. Following the Second World War, Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower maintained the country’s production of weaponry. The advent of the Cold War arms race continued this militaristic footing on recommendations from military personnel. Truman’s advisors explained in NSC-68 that the Soviet position in Europe threatened America’s position of power and “it is imperative that this trend be reversed by a much more rapid and concerted build-up of the actual strength of both the United States and the other nations of the free world. The analysis shows that this will be costly and will involve significant domestic financial and economic adjustments”<sup>44</sup>. In one document, the military influenced the direction of the country’s economic and political future. The military justifies conflicts on the basis of security, containment, and international interests, but the power of the American military owes its prominence to its economic, monopolistic significance. Mills considers the role of peace as a tool of control; “the big fact about peace in modern or even in world history... [is] that peace has been due to the centralization and monopoly of violence by the national state”<sup>45</sup>. During the Cold War, the military adopted the practice of containment abroad; however, this

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<sup>41</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 171.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>44</sup> “The President’s Advisers Urge Military Expansion (NSC-68), April 1950,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 53.

<sup>45</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 172.

policy also afforded domestic politicians the opportunity to contain political discourse<sup>46</sup> in the name of national security.

The major institutions of American society are systematically organized in an unfair system perpetuated by those made powerful by its existence. Each of the three institutions Mills critiques influences the other. America maintains its superiority by increasing the country's political power through its technologically advanced military and ever-growing economic market. Using a policy of containment, military justifications of security “eliminate intellectual and moral distinction from the Government service, [...] to staff the Government instead with political good fellows who cannot be suspected of superiority”<sup>47</sup>. In Mills' description, the established hierarchy of the power elite creates a closed system creating a specific process by which people enter the power structure. Programming education combined with the financial benefits of power give little incentive for the critical rhetoric that might depose the sanctioned hierarchy. Subversive thinking thus diminishes because a majority of bureaucrats in these various institutions are indoctrinated with maxims of the system's essential goodness or apathy against the possibility of change. Because every major institution of power influences one another, structural intervention in one area seems nearly impossible without restructuring all three.

Mills denounces the justifications that conceal the grip of the power elite. In particular, he contends with descriptions of a balanced system. Though there may seemingly be a balance of power between branches of government, the military, and the corporate sectors, Mills argues that

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<sup>46</sup> “Senator Joseph McCarthy Charges the Democrats are ‘Soft on Communism,’ 1950,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 49-51.

<sup>47</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 209.

these are all controlled by the power elite. Through the use of a familiar false logic, the power elite maintains its own interests:

the goals for which interests struggle are not merely given; they reflect the current state of expectation and acceptance. Accordingly, to say that various interests are ‘balanced’ is generally to evaluate the *status quo* as satisfactory or even good; the hopeful ideal of balance often masquerades as description of fact.<sup>48</sup>

This discredits the possibility for improving government because taken as fact the power elite’s rhetoric circumvents challenges to their power and legalizes their claims to it. The power elite in America perpetuate a stagnant system, a one-dimensional society. Without strong contestation to its ethics, the American power elite, Mills maintains, will continue to perpetuate the institution of one-dimensional thought and society.

#### Chapter 4: Media’s Dynamic Potential

A central tool institutionalizing one-dimensional thought is media. Comprising various forms of communication, media has a substantial impact on individual and group perceptions of the information being presented. The specific medium by which people receive information has as much effect on an individual’s interpretation as the content itself<sup>49</sup>, and “Those who are concerned with the program ‘content’ of media and not with the medium proper, appear to be in the position of physicians who ignore the ‘syndrome of just being sick’”<sup>50</sup>. The means by which information is given encourage different tendencies in critical thought. For example, in reading through a daily newspaper, we may disregard stories that we find uninteresting, whereas in watching a television program, our ability to ignore boring news stories is limited because if we change the channel or walk away from the set, we risk missing stories of interest. Therefore,

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<sup>48</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 246.

<sup>49</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 64.

where television may have a greater demand and command of attention, the newspaper has a greater capacity for scrutiny and criticism. Analyzing these differences, Marshall McLuhan seeks to understand the historical and social effects of different media during the historical periods in which they emerged and how the old media they replace changed to maintain relevance.

McLuhan examines media and the historical impact exerted as it emerges and settles into a societal role. When a new form of media is introduced, culture adjusts and changes to reflect technological differences as one medium comes to dominate another. During the 1950s, the entire country experienced a surge of wealth and nearly every household could afford a TV set,<sup>51</sup> thus allowing the “Electric means of moving of information [to begin] altering our typographic culture as sharply as print [had] modified medieval manuscript and scholastic culture”<sup>52</sup>. A central concept in McLuhan’s media theory is his assertion that all technology and media function as an extension of a sensory perception<sup>53</sup>. In the post-war culture of the 1950s and 1960s, American culture became increasingly unified by electrical technologies not limited to the television or the radio; “whether a toaster, washing machine or vacuum cleaner”<sup>54</sup> the prevalence of these technologies mandated the creation of an electrical network to power them. This electrical network, in McLuhan’s view, creates a significantly new extension of sense in the history of media: “after more than a century of technology we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace”<sup>55</sup>. However, this extension of the central nervous system poses a threat of negative manipulation despite its convenience; “This power of technology to create its own world of demand is not independent of technology being first an extension of our own

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<sup>51</sup> By the end of the decade, nine out of ten households had a television. See: James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 30.

<sup>52</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 171.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

bodies and senses”<sup>56</sup>. As observed by Herbert Marcuse, the manipulation of media tends to create false needs redirecting the attention of the populace<sup>57</sup>. As extensions of the senses, the ‘worlds of demand’ redirect social foci.

Differences exist between all forms of media, and historically, periods of transition in popular media technology often parallel periods of cultural transition because “A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them”<sup>58</sup>. New media uproot the old, forcing them to fill a different niche or fade from use entirely. The Baby Boom and post-war economic stability led to the emergence of adolescents as major consumers of media. Seeking to capture the growing market, new producers began focusing specifically on adolescents.

*Seventeen Magazine*, for example, catered to the attitudes of teenage girls. Previously, no magazine could focus on this demographic because teenage girls lacked consistent capital to financially support a magazine specifically for their age group. However, during the affluent 1950s, “The magazine’s editors and publishers invested substantial resources in interpreting and promoting their definition of the prototypical teenager girl, ‘Teena,’ [...who] meant advertising revenues for *Seventeen* as well as sales and profits for businesses that marketed to her”<sup>59</sup>. The cultural shift in population growth led to the creation of new media products to satisfy a growing demand, but as these new products came into the market, the influence they exerted began to show. As the magazine drew attention to the teenage demographic, business advertisers took notice, so “the magazine created an advertising advisory board to encourage age-appropriate

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<sup>56</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 174.

<sup>59</sup> Kelly Schrum, “Making the American Girl,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 109.

advertisements and unite advertising and editorial content into a seamless product”<sup>60</sup>. In the same way that the cultural change influenced the growth of media, the media subsequently influenced how the culture developed and thought about itself.

Similarly, while television technology was not new, it gained social significance in the 1950s, and people began to question the nature of this new medium as a force of change. Television too marked the changing nature of adolescence, and McLuhan notices that “earlier the adolescent had been provided with a rain check. He was prepared to wait it out. But since TV, the drive to participation has ended adolescence, and every American home has its Berlin Wall”<sup>61</sup>. Not limited solely to adolescents, the entire population intertwined themselves into one another’s lives through television. Changes in media shaped the perception of cultural changes directing social attitudes. Advertising fortified the growing economic boom “because or in spite of TV, people are buying more and more things they never before thought they needed or wanted”<sup>62</sup>. However, this focus on individual purchasing power had negative consequences for public infrastructure; “If you looked at American schools, if you contrasted the conditions of trains and subways with the condition of suburban houses and cars, you could see that public services were being starved, that public funds were going to fuel the boom in private spaces and private goods”<sup>63</sup>. Although the media shift of the 1950s bolstered feelings of stability and prosperity, they also reflect a negative capacity of media to be used as an instrument of obfuscation. According to McLuhan, “myth *is* the instant vision of a complex process that ordinarily extends over a long period. Myth is contraction or implosion of any progress, and the

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<sup>60</sup> Kelly Schrum, “Making the American Girl,” 115.

<sup>61</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 70.

<sup>62</sup> “*U.S. News And World Report* Assesses the Perils of Mass Culture and the Evils of Television, 1955,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 91.

<sup>63</sup> Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 14.

instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social action today”<sup>64</sup>. As a tool of one-dimensional thought, media shrouds the consumer within a mythic image of his or her surroundings. Confining attitudes, media simplified changes in the public and private infrastructure. Its influence continues to resonate in historical depictions of 1950s’ prosperity despite growing underlying criticisms.

McLuhan observes that television, among other developing electronic technologies, has informed people about the lives of others, forcing individuals to address social issues. He considers this intertwining of perceptions to be the “implosive factor that alters the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to electric media”<sup>65</sup>. It is McLuhan’s assertion that the legacy of political protests and civil unrest in the 1960s has a direct correlation to the expansion of electronic media in the 1950s. The electronic infrastructure forces people to recognize each other despite geographical space and social difference. He explains the unrest of his own epoch as the result of “Innumerable confusions and a profound feeling of despair invariably [emerging] in periods of great technological and cultural transitions”<sup>66</sup>. Before a medium gains an established cultural role, it holds a greater dynamic potential. The sweeping popularity of television combined with new media outlets directed at youth evince the 1960s as a period of media and, consequently, cultural transition.

This transitional period reveals the dynamic uses of media normally concealed by its standardized, established form. Discussing the homogenizing nature of media, McLuhan describes that “the man in a literate and homogenized society ceases to be sensitive to the diverse

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<sup>64</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, 8.



and discontinuous life of forms [...unaware] that we become what we behold”<sup>67</sup>. Once it has become something understood and manageable, media can operate to control opinion and dissuade unrest. McLuhan admonishes people’s tendency to ignore cultural changes evidenced by media, especially in the electronic era, because “once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves we don’t really have any rights left”<sup>68</sup>. If unchecked, the corporate powers that produce media, McLuhan warns, will essentially control the collective central nervous system subsequently strengthening the position of the power elite and the one-dimensional society maintaining the status quo.

Considering the work of William S. Burroughs, McLuhan notes that the Nova Trilogy ultimately recreates the process of media manipulation. Burroughs’ cut-up method simulates the consumption of media:

To read the daily newspaper in its entirety is to encounter the [cut-up] method in all its purity. Similarly, an evening watching television programs is an experience in a corporate form — an endless succession of impressions and snatches of narrative. Burroughs is unique only in that he is attempting to reproduce in prose what we accommodate every day as a commonplace aspect of life in the electric age.<sup>69</sup>

Given the cultural shift afforded by the rise of the electronic era, media, as an extension of human senses, develops into a control system. As a literary artist, Burroughs occupies an authoritative position to describe the present<sup>70</sup>, precisely because the role of the artist has

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<sup>67</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>69</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Notes on Burroughs,” *Nation* 199, no. 21 (December 28, 1964): 517.

<sup>70</sup> Wyndham Lewis quoted by Marshall McLuhan. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 65.

changed as a result of changes in the operation of media and culture. As articulated by Walter Benjamin, technology allows art to be instantaneously reproduced, and therefore, “As soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics”<sup>71</sup>. Thus, contextually, the novels of William S. Burroughs function as an indispensable, artistic expression of the critical theory of the *One-Dimensional Man* and *The Power Elite*; like other forms of media, novels exist within a control system delineating structure and content, and because Burroughs writes them from within this control system, his novels manifest the theories of Marcuse and Mills beyond their polemical critiques. Each individual novel, while simultaneously embodying their essential critical spirit, necessitates individual participation awakening Burroughs’ readers to the critical perspective for which both theoreticians advocate.

## Part Two: Equal Members of an Impoverishing Control System

### Chapter 5: The Junky Called Burroughs

A particular social ostracism defines William S. Burroughs as a novelist. Ted Morgan titles his renowned biography of Burroughs, *Literary Outlaw*, and having been arrested on numerous occasions, addicted to narcotics, and an outspoken homosexual<sup>72</sup>, Burroughs certainly cannot be portrayed as a conventional member of society. But, Burroughs himself felt that *outlaw* failed to encompass the full extent of his social isolation; in an autobiography, *My Education*, Burroughs claims that he could not be an outlaw because “to be an outlaw you must first have a base in law to reject and get out of”<sup>73</sup>. He rejects Morgan’s title because he sees himself essentially outside of society, not recognizing the law that criminalizes him.

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<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>72</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> William S. Burroughs, *My Education*, 7.

Nonetheless, Burroughs unique sociological position cannot be contested. His ostracized perspective makes Burroughs' literary work an inestimable resource for understanding the philosophy and mentality of the counterculture movement.

As the child of a wealthy, upper-class family, Burroughs is in a precarious situation when his addiction threatens his economic fortitude and his admitted homosexuality degrades his social status. Moving from a position of financial stability into a state of constant struggle, he loses rapport with his class; yet, maintaining modicums of behavior from his upbringing, he does not fall completely into poverty. Burroughs, thus, experiences socioeconomic stratification first-hand. He experiences the harsh treatment of junkies at the hands of police<sup>74</sup> and the struggle to remain financially afloat, but he likewise experiences class privileges because, for example, his family could post his bail whenever he was arrested without serious financial burdens. The 1950s both historically and contemporarily projected an image of America in prosperity, and the growing market and increased production supported this image. However, these projections of stability veiled remaining problems with the country's economic organization, so "the experiences of countless people clashed with the decade's dominant imagery: for example, the millions of Americans who at decade's end remained mired in poverty"<sup>75</sup>. In spite of the decade's legacy of social and civil rights' milestones, the restructuring efforts to alleviate economic stratification failed, thus maintaining the struggle of working class individuals.

Growing up in a prominent family, the subtle, inconsistent morals and ideals of the upper-class pervaded Burroughs' early life. In one of his favorite childhood books, *You Can't Win* by Jack Black, he "learned about the Johnson Family of good bums and thieves, with a code of conduct that made more sense to [him] than the arbitrary, hypocritical rules that were taken

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<sup>74</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Junky: The Definitive Text of Junk* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 120.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. *Major Problems in American History*, 81.

for granted as being ‘right by my peers’<sup>76</sup>. Burroughs frequently described the substantial role that this book played in shaping his life and work, but his family history also predisposed his critical nature towards the establishment. His paternal grandfather was renowned for inventing and developing one of the first adding machines but was swindled out of the millions that the machine earned by his business partners<sup>77</sup>. Barry Miles, another biographer of Burroughs, explains that Burroughs “always thought that the Burroughs Company swindled the children out of their shares by buying them back at less than they were worth”<sup>78</sup>. Though his family remained an upper-middle class family on the Social Register, had the family maintained their inheritance, they would have been leaders of the corporate rich rather than its middle class legacy.

Additionally, Burroughs’ maternal uncle, Ivy Lee, is known as the father of public relations, for making “the robber barons look like nice guys, [he] lied so often on their behalf that he became known as ‘Poison Ivy’”<sup>79</sup>. Gaining the nickname from Upton Sinclair, Lee infamously attempted to euphemize the Ludlow Massacre in 1914 and, at the time of his death, was under investigation for involvement with Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels<sup>80</sup>. Having grown up in a family well-acquainted with the double dealing and hypocrisy of the corporate hierarchy, his family’s position of prestige and economic status predisposed Burroughs’ critical position in his novels. Inspector J. Lee, or William Lee, appears throughout the Nova Trilogy as Burroughs’ penname as well as his surrogate in the novel. The penname, his mother’s maiden name, suggests a connection to Ivy Lee because of Burroughs’ own manipulation of language to suit his aims. Reproachful of the wealthy class, he admitted that “wealth stifles the creative

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<sup>76</sup> William S. Burroughs, foreword to *You Can’t Win*, by Jack Black (New York: Amok Press, 1988), v.

<sup>77</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Barry Miles, *Call Me Burroughs: A Life* (New York: Hachette Book Group 2013), 16.

<sup>79</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 23.

<sup>80</sup> Miles, *Call Me Burroughs*, 12-13.

impulse”<sup>81</sup>, and in his own writing he sought to oppose his uncle’s perversions to “restore integrity to language. To use language honestly, or to expose the ways language was used dishonestly”<sup>82</sup>. His familial connections to the industrialized state undoubtedly affected Burroughs’ conceptions and portrayal of it in his novels.

In his first published novel *Junky*, Burroughs explores the world of narcotics addiction and his own decision to forsake his upper-class roots. Published under the penname William Lee, *Junky* illustrates the author’s own struggles and the events that led him to use opium and derivative drugs. Though *Junky* is not explicitly an autobiography, the parallels between the lives of Burroughs and his narrator undoubtedly suggest an autobiographical tone. Like the novel’s narrator, Burroughs was born into a prominent family in St. Louis, graduated Harvard, and financially sustained himself on an allowance from his family<sup>83</sup>. He was exempt from the draft after receiving a discharge for reasons of mental illness<sup>84</sup>, and he was arrested for various drug offenses<sup>85</sup>. Much like Burroughs’ beloved *You Can’t Win*, *Junky* explores life as an outcast. Enamored with Black’s underground lifestyle in *You Can’t Win*, Burroughs romanticizes criminal activity; in the prologue, he comments, “I did not have to have money. It seemed a romantic extravagance to jeopardize my freedom by some token act of crime. It was at this time and under these circumstances that I came in contact with junk”<sup>86</sup>. Receiving a monthly allowance from his family and therefore without a need for money, he creates one, namely using drugs. The autobiographical tone of *Junky* establishes a precedent within Burroughs’ novels because this personal involvement expands as his authorial style develops. Additionally, *Junky*

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<sup>81</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, xl.

begins to frame Burroughs' understanding of control systems within the parameters of heroin addiction.

While living in the Rio Grande Valley, referred to simply as 'the Valley' in the novel, Burroughs discusses the precarious economic position of the area's inhabitants. The narrator explains that in this area, "All of the worst features of America have drained down [...] and concentrated there"<sup>87</sup>. The narrator moves to the valley with an intention of making money growing citrus fruit but learns that the land's growing seasons do not bear a consistent, lucrative harvest. Burroughs' own experience in the Rio Grande Valley mirrors that of his narrator<sup>88</sup>. He explains that the myth surrounding the land was created during a time of national, economic prosperity: "Any business was good, just as any stock is good on a rising market [...] Now the Valley is in a losing streak and only the big operators can ride it out"<sup>89</sup>. During courses of prosperity, the potential to make life-changing economic gains grows exponentially, but conversely, during depression phases, the same anecdotes describing economically thriving areas or industries endure despite their inability to deliver the same success. Addressing an overarching problem in American capitalism, he implies that the constant cycle of prosperity and depression perpetuates the myth of the American Dream.

Through his experience with habitual drug usage, Burroughs asserts that addiction pervades American culture: addiction to power, money, drugs, sex, and media all make up systems that exert a controlling influence over people's motivations. Considering the progress of his literary style in the cut-up novels, his concern with the political problems of the American social structure grew as he investigated control systems and their extensive role in maintaining the status quo. Towards the end of *Junky*, Burroughs directs a degree of criticism at the society

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<sup>87</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, 90.

<sup>88</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 146-147.

<sup>89</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, 90.

from which junkies are made. In the preface, it is explained, “you become a narcotics addict because you do not have strong motivations in any other direction [and] junk wins by default”<sup>90</sup>. He lacked a need to work, had no incentive to work, and therefore, easily became a junky. This problem of a junk ‘habit’ distinguishes heroin from other drugs because “Junk is not a ‘good kick.’ The point of junk to a user is that it forms a habit. No one knows what junk is until he is junk sick”<sup>91</sup>. For Burroughs, as for many youths, drugs were a means of experimenting with consciousness: “by taking the appropriate drug, I might so change my ordinary mode of consciousness as to be able to know, from the inside, what the visionary, the medium, even the mystic were talking about”<sup>92</sup>. Ironically, however, heroin teaches Burroughs how addiction can overwhelmingly control a person’s life. His experiences as an addict reveal to him the negative social features and pressures which encourage various addictions and how any addiction might control a person as powerfully as heroin controlled him.

This revelation of drug usage as a system of control inspired Burroughs’ writing. As an author, he creates media and subsequently explains that media is a point of origin behind control systems. He focuses on the plethora of contradictions within media advertisements asserting that “The controllers know what reactive commands they are going to restimulate and in consequence they know what will happen. Contradictory suggestion is the basic formula of the daily press: ‘Take drugs everybody is doing it.’ ‘Drug taking is WRONG’”<sup>93</sup>. Burroughs observes that people, like his uncle, use media in order to control others. Informed by Burroughs’ family history and experience with drugs, this realization leads to a broader criticism of the American capitalist structure that unfolds in the Nova Trilogy.

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<sup>90</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, xl.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>92</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception ; And, Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 14.

<sup>93</sup> William S. Burroughs and Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with Daniel Odier*(New York: Grove Press, 1974), 45.

## Chapter 6: Word Lines—Cut Naked—Lunch

Preceding the cut-up novels, *Naked Lunch* introduces the manipulation of language as a tool of control. As an initial experiment with cut-ups, the syntax of *Naked Lunch* begins playing with narrative and grammatical conventions; Burroughs writes, “fell asleep reading and the words on code significance...Obsessed with codes...Man contracts a series of diseases which spell out a code message”<sup>94</sup>. Arguably, the diseases he describes symbolize the conventions of language coded upon one’s brain forming a control system. During his trial for obscenity in Massachusetts, friends of Burroughs, like Allen Ginsberg, defended his experimental techniques asserting that the most socially relevant aspects of the novel “are all interrelated in the presentation of the book [...] a theory of heroin addiction applied as a model for addiction to many other things besides drugs [...] most of all, an addiction to power or addiction to controlling other people by having power over them”<sup>95</sup>. The critique of control addicts becomes intertwined with the cut-up style. Because different organizations and institutions regulate the ‘proper’ use of language, it necessarily represents a controlled system. Uniquely codifying his diction, Burroughs uses words and phrases that are folded into unconventional cut-ups which recur throughout the Nova Trilogy. By analyzing the early, arguably prototypical, cut-ups in *Naked Lunch*, the recurring thematic elements in the later novels might become more accessible.

The cut-up style literally samples from bits and pieces of borrowed and original writing and haphazardly rearranges them, often into run-on sentences or fragments. Distinguishing exactly where every line of borrowed text comes from is impossible, however, because the references are so numerous and interspersed with original text. In many cases, Burroughs repeats or paraphrases certain lines of text within his own novels corresponding to recurring ideas and

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<sup>94</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 25th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 66.

<sup>95</sup> Barney Rosset, ed., “The Boston Trial of ‘Naked Lunch’” *Evergreen Review* 9, no. 36 (June 1965): 44.



themes. The cut-up style is driven by Burroughs' assertion that literal words on a page have no meaning without the connotation and meaning assigned to them by the individual and to the individual by culture and society<sup>96</sup>. In the following quotation, the phrases are only loosely related to one another by the image of cacophony: "A train roar through him whistle blowing...boat whistle, foghorn, sky rocket burst over oily lagoons...penny arcade open into a maze of dirty pictures...ceremonial cannon boom in the harbor...a scream shoots down a white hospital corridor"<sup>97</sup>. Each set of ellipses seem to mark a pause in a drug-addicted narrator's attention creating run-on sentences and suggesting that the prototypical cut-ups in *Naked Lunch* are stream-of-consciousness. However, this use of pauses creates a pattern of thematic coding. While each instance may have some relation to a different moment in the narrative, they all help to establish a structure outside of conventional grammar. As the reader becomes more familiar with this structure, it becomes less jarring, easing the acquisition of meaning.

The cut-up style seeks to expose the arbitrariness of meaning by creating its own set of linguistic modes, contrasting accepted definitions. Sex appears prevalently in this manner, but Burroughs' blatant language portraying sex acts is not intended purely for vulgarity. Burroughs often references postmortem priapism, ejaculation, and the process of one person embodying another's consciousness. Explaining the process, Burroughs describes an absurd sex scene in which two characters, Mark and Mary, hang another named Johnny. The scene ends observing Mark, now Johnny as

[he] leaps about the room. With a scream of longing that shatters the glass wall he leaps out into space. Masturbating end-over-end, three thousand feet down, [...]  
He is a boy sleeping against the mosque wall, ejaculates wet dreaming into a

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<sup>96</sup> See discussions of the Nova Trilogy in Robin Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

<sup>97</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 93.

thousand cunts pink and smooth as seas shells [...] the bodies disintegrate in green explosions. The hut falls in ruins of broken stone. The boy is a limestone statue, a plant sprouting from his cock, lips parted in the half-smile of a junky on the nod.<sup>98</sup>

This final image of a character newly embodying another, floating off and losing any sense of corporeal reality appears throughout the Nova Trilogy though it is not always distinctively explained. Consequently, Burroughs relies on repetition to indicate this occurrence as he explores more complex science fiction concepts. In this particular example, *limestone* appears in various similar situations of astral projection. Similarly, the phrase “you smell like a compost heap”<sup>99</sup> first appears in *Naked Lunch*, indicating a character’s decaying smell and the loss of his identity and dignity, and appears multiple times throughout the Nova Trilogy with similar connotations of cosmic decay. Burroughs’ early novels can be considered as a series that build upon one another because of these recurring connections between the novels.

The plot of the Nova Trilogy refutes its title because it lacks typical narrative elements to unite the books. Though they lack clear character descriptions and neatly constructed plot points, the expansion of consciousness in each novel coupled with the increasing appearance of familiar phrases ironically suggests some continuity in the narrative. William Lee appears in every one of Burroughs early novels as a character-surrogate for the author. With each novel, Lee becomes increasingly immersed in a complex world of drugs, sex, and expanded consciousness. Before the inter-dimensional battles of the later novels, Lee encounters control addicts and is introduced to the idea of nova. Specifically, Dr. Benway, a control addict, conducts experiments to control patients in elaborate and embarrassing ways. At one point, he recalls, “this one kid, I conditioned

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<sup>98</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 98-100.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

to shit at the sight of me. Then I wash his ass and skrew him It was real tasty. And he was a lovely fellah too. And sometimes a subject will burst into boyish tears because he can't keep from ejaculate when you skrew him"<sup>100</sup>. Dr. Benway symbolizes the power of control systems and the entirely selfish motivations of those who administer them. Though *Naked Lunch* only begins to describe Burroughs' cosmic themes, he explores further the nature and origins of control systems as the Nova Trilogy progresses, eventually discerning their cosmic, viral origins. Thus the set up provided by *Naked Lunch* informs the later novels and establishes a timeline delineating Burroughs' philosophical struggle to understand the control machine.

#### Chapter 7: Becoming Agents of the Nova Police

The cut-up method and Burroughs' own disdain for traditional narrative coherence often make distinguishing a unitary plot in the Nova Trilogy difficult. Though Burroughs' style does not always follow novelistic conventions, he maintains certain consistencies throughout the Nova Trilogy and their precursor *Naked Lunch*, laying a solid, though minimalistic, narrative framework. The novels follow William Lee as he becomes an agent of the Nova Police and learns about the nova conflict. Despite his absence from many areas of each novel, Lee remains a central figure and likely, as Burroughs' surrogate, the protagonist. The convoluted plot, like every element of the narrative, contributes to countercultural critiques of systematic repression.

Beginning in *Naked Lunch* and *The Soft Machine*, Lee experiences control through addiction to drugs, uninhibited sex acts, and specifically in the twisted experiments of Dr. Benway. In *The Soft Machine*, Lee refers to himself as a 'Private Eye,' yet he has no idea who hires him and offers minimal explanation about the purpose of his investigation. As he espies the controlling influences around him, Lee begins to oppose them though his motivations are not expressly stated. He explains that "I am a public agent and don't know who I work for, get my

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<sup>100</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 28.

instructions from street signs, newspapers and pieces of conversation I snap out of the air”<sup>101</sup>.

The process of ‘snapping’ instructions from everyday locations relates directly to cut-ups. Lee discerns his missions from language surrounding him as Burroughs folds together various bits of language to create the narrative. The use of a penname-surrogate implies that Burroughs connected the task of writing each novel with the goals of the Nova Police in their cosmic efforts to dissolve control systems.

Lee traverses the novel, engaging in sex with young men and looking ultimately for the means to inhabit another person’s consciousness and to travel in time. He eventually discovers a doctor able to perform the task who explains, “The patient’s neck is broken and during the orgasm that results he passes into the other body”<sup>102</sup>. During his first successful transference of consciousness, Lee moves into the body of a Latin-American boy and travels back in time to the era of the Mayans where he experiences “the crushing weight of evil insect control forcing my thoughts and feelings into prearranged molds, squeezing my spirit in a soft invisible vise”<sup>103</sup> at the hands of Mayan priests. According to Burroughs, “The Mayans had the perfect control system through their calendar, which was a monopoly of the priestly caste, and which told the population what to do on a daily basis”<sup>104</sup>. Burroughs reveals the integration of control systems employing the image of the calendar, an everyday aspect of life integrated into the social fabric but with profound, controlling properties. In this chapter, Burroughs establishes a number of images that recur throughout the later novels; crab parasites, ‘Death in the Ovens,’ and

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<sup>101</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 31.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>104</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 464.

centipedes<sup>105</sup>, are explained as punishments used by the Mayan priests upon opponents of their inter-dimensional masters the Nova Criminals.

In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs introduces various opposing parties seeking their own form of control over mankind<sup>106</sup>; however, these parties are absent from the succeeding novels, having been replaced by two opposing groups, the Nova Criminals and the Nova Police. As explained by Marcuse, a sense of pluralism may exist within the one-dimensional society, but it is meant only to indoctrinate and distract people from their limited, one-dimensional options<sup>107</sup>.

Subsequently, the later novels of the Nova Trilogy reveal a loose binary forming the forces of control: the Nova Criminals, and the antagonists to that control, the Nova Police. Conflict between these two occurs on a fourth-dimensional plane: time and space are not depicted linearly. The setting jumps between planets and alien species even within a single chapter or paragraph. Agents and criminals of nova perceive time differently from ‘three-dimensional’ humans. Time literally shifts and moves for these beings, “The 1920’s careened through darkening cities in black Cadillacs spitting film bullets of accelerated time”<sup>108</sup>. As Lee and the reader learn, nova revolves around control and the process of disabling it. By taking over the bodies and consciousness of others, the Nova Criminals exert control because they “are not three-dimensional organisms [...] but they need three-dimensional human agents to operate— The point at which the criminal controller intersects a three-dimensional human agent is known as ‘a coordinate point’”<sup>109</sup>. The Mayan Priests are consequently one example of coordinate points exemplifying Burroughs’ perception of the cosmic origins of control. Accordingly, control exists

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<sup>105</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 93-94.

<sup>106</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 146.

<sup>107</sup> Marcuse, *The One-Dimensional Man*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 31.

<sup>109</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 1st ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 64.

not as a pressure between humans, but as a virus organism invading and antagonizing the universe.

Rather than focusing on the effects of control systems experienced by individuals or, as he describes, ‘three-dimensional humans’<sup>110</sup>, Lee pursues the highest levels of the control system, the cosmic directors of the universe. At these cosmic levels, control appears as a virus infiltrating mankind as well as alien species. Certain aspects of the control machine are named to connote the specific means used to exert control. “With ‘the White Smoke’ in one hand and ‘the Blue Heavy Metal Fix’ in the other he has human hosts the way he likes to see them: caught in the switch—And if they make it out of that switch the Garden of Delights is there waiting with ‘Orgasm Death’— Make it out of there? ‘the Ovens’ down in the hole”<sup>111</sup>. These phrases relate to different control systems associated with different vices. Connected to sex and lustful means of control, the Garden of Delights represents the use of pleasure to exert control. Heavy Metal Fixes represent chemicals or drugs whose addictive properties overwhelm their victims’ attention. Their addictive qualities maintain their hold over a person, and when one overcomes a single vice or control system, another waits to take its place or the person controlled falls into inescapable despair, ‘the Ovens.’ In *Nova Express*, Burroughs writes, “Stay out of the Garden Of Delights—It is a man-eating trap that ends in green goo—Throw back their ersatz Immortality [...] Flush their drug kicks down the drain—*They are poisoning and monopolizing the hallucinogen drugs—learn to make it without any chemical corn*”<sup>112</sup>. These offerings of Nova Criminals force the controlled into a delirium making them unaware of their subjugation. As in Marcuse’s one-dimensional society, average people are denied self-government by an elusive, oppressive elite that is integrated and concealed within the social fabric; thus discerning and

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<sup>110</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 64.

<sup>111</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 134.

<sup>112</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 14.

removing their controlling influence requires access to the highest levels of human interaction which, in Burroughs' expression, have cosmic origins.

Essentially criminal viruses, Nova Criminals pose the problem of how to stop their elicit activity. Because they are conscious beyond static space and time, they can exert control almost indefinitely. A variety of characters make up the list of nova criminals, but most active in the novel are Mr. Bradley and Mr. Martin, the leader or leaders of the Nova Mob. First appearing in *The Soft Machine*, Mr. Martin is described as “the biggest operator in any time universe”<sup>113</sup>. Revealed later as a leader of the Nova Criminals, he claims, “Don't care myself if the whole fucking shithouse goes up in chunks—I've sat out novas before—I was born in a nova”<sup>114</sup>. However, this introduction is one of only a few instances when either Mr. Bradley or Mr. Martin is described in a physical form. It is not even certain that they are two individuals. Despite the description of two stars having their same names<sup>115</sup>, the forms of the Nova Criminals cannot be distinguished definitively. The only way offered to trace the nova criminals “is *habit*: idiocyncracies, vices, food preferences [...] a gesture, a special look, that is to say the *style* of the controller”<sup>116</sup>. Using coordinate points, these controllers exert power over their three dimensional human hosts manifesting their presence through different forms of habit. Burroughs uses this metaphor to explain the problem of addiction on all levels because essentially, according to Burroughs, control has addictive properties like heroin. As cosmic control addicts, the Nova Criminals also symbolize the inundating, interrelated problems with the American political, economic, and social infrastructure. Even with one problem solved, one criminal seemingly arrested, it may still exert control through a different coordinate point, reestablish its influence.

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<sup>113</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 72.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>115</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 82.

<sup>116</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 57.

After *The Soft Machine*, William Lee realizes his status as an agent of the Nova Police, and in *The Ticket That Exploded*, he has achieved the rank of inspector. Learning about the nature of this police force, he explains the complex nature of his investigations, contrasting those of his enemies: “Their agents become addicted to orders. You will receive orders of course and in some cases you will be well-advised not to carry out the orders you receive. On the other hand your failure to obey certain orders could expose you to dangers of which you can have at this point in your training no conception”<sup>117</sup>. Contradicting absolute authority, Nova Police maintain independence within their own investigations; Lee reminds us that imposters within the police are not uncommon. Much like the criminals they oppose, the Nova Police must exist on multiple planes of reality in order to trace their targets and must rely on their own intuition. Examining coordinate points, they seek to identify and eventually arrest the criminal; however, in order to completely block a single criminal, all of its coordinate points must be closed off lest it escape into another body<sup>118</sup>. Burroughs frequently repeats the strategies of the Nova Police to ‘cut’ the various control lines of the Nova Mob. Like the cut-up method itself, this repetition pervades the novels as a constant reminder to the reader to cut and reevaluate his own lines of biased connotation.

Burroughs does not elaborate on the word *nova* until the second novel of the trilogy, *The Ticket That Exploded*. Resonating with space and the supernova, the concept provokes images of explosions. Although he explains that the basic nova technique is very simple — “Always create as many insoluble conflicts as possible and always aggravate existing conflicts”<sup>119</sup> — he does not avoid making connections between nova and nuclear weapons like “The Bomb.” Likely the greatest example of conflict in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the atomic bomb represents the Nova Mob’s

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<sup>117</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 9.

<sup>118</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 64.

<sup>119</sup> Appears twice Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 54-55. and *Nova Express*, 61.



ultimate goal of aggravation. Nova itself essentially represents war and destruction. In Burroughs' narrative, this war exists between criminals and police, but beyond mere cops and robbers, it is a violent arguably unending war: "I know how 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"<sup>120</sup>. Because the conflict surpasses the confines of space and time, it could potentially continue indefinitely. Consequently, Burroughs regards the task of writing with gruesome significance, for "These are conditions of total emergency. And these are my instructions for total emergency if carried out now could avoid total disaster"<sup>121</sup>. Ultimately, the one-dimensional society exists as a consequence of Nova Criminals.

Burroughs' connection to his work with cut-ups and his novels is not limited to mere fiction writing; in his novels<sup>122</sup> and in his daily life<sup>123</sup>, he saw his work as indispensable to the human experience. Beyond a mere penname, William Lee represents Burroughs' perception of himself as an agent of the Nova Police; thus, his writing traverses the edge between fiction and polemic dissertation as anyone might conceive of himself or herself as an agent of the Nova Police after reading his novels.

#### Chapter 8: The Impoverishing Control System, Nova

Burroughs' novels continuously develop subversive criticisms that focus on the oppressive force of control addicts attempting to retain their social and economic dominance. Exploring the various forms of control that maintain this oppressive system, Burroughs portrays his perception of Marcuse's one-dimensional society. His critiques support an essentially polemical purpose: to awaken, appeal to, and admonish the populace; he writes: "The

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<sup>120</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 5.

<sup>121</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 14.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>123</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 393.

point where the past touches the future is right where you are sitting now on your dead time ass hatching virus negatives into present time into the picture reality of a picture planet. Get off your ass, boys. Get off the point”<sup>124</sup>. Through the conscious attention paid to systems of control, Burroughs’ writing in the Nova Trilogy refutes the myth of the American Dream, enumerating the control systems that immobilize the socioeconomic classes within a solitary hierarchy. He criticizes post-war America for its materialistic, homogenized culture. Observing the systems that enforce this culture, he excoriates them for their dynamic capacity to control thought and sustain social stagnation.

As one of the most addictive forces in the one-dimensional society, money, Burroughs suggests, empowers one’s social and political opportunity. A person’s wealth significantly comprises his worth in society: “The owner of a roadside fruit stand does not have as much power in any area of social or economic or political decision as the head of a multi-million-dollar fruit corporation”<sup>125</sup>. Refuting American equality, Mills condemns the executive’s power despite his equal citizen status with the small business owner. Describing this discrepancy, Burroughs observes the set path by which business executives gain power and prestige. Detailed by Mills in *The Power Elite*, this path creates a stereotype of individuals entering the power structure and embodying standardized definitions of success. A man’s family ties, educational access, and social prowess provide him with opportunities to become valuable in the American hierarchy<sup>126</sup>. The stereotypical businessman came from a wealthy or middle class background and attended a prestigious university where he was indoctrinated with the skills and the mindset to become an executive<sup>127</sup>. During his time in college, he networked with recruiting agents from the corporate

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<sup>124</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 196.

<sup>125</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 18.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

sector and likely was offered a job before completing his degree. Disdained furiously by the Beat Generation, this stereotype came to represent the restricted lifestyle of the ‘successful:’ “Why don’t I work for your uncle’s company? Work for a company and what do they give you? . . . member of the Country Club . . . house and garden . . . a wife . . . heart attack at 55 . . . no thanks”<sup>128</sup>. Burroughs’ message of an early death not only embodies the stress inherent in the stereotype, but also a creative death suffered by those who are forced to embody it. Because of these systematically organized means of achieving success, lifestyles discontinuous with this norm were met with derision and therefore practiced seldomly.

America’s widespread affluence, developing after the Second World War, led to the cultural homogenization of the suburban 1950s. Having surplus wealth, the country no longer had to concern itself with alleviating the stress of poverty, but rather, had to account for the sudden rise in purchasing power of the new American family<sup>129</sup>. Resultantly, a distinct middle class developed that changed American society: “the equalizing qualities of new synthetic fabrics and suburban amenities, and the expansion of automobile and appliance ownership had created a totally middle-class society in which all significant differences were simply free expressions of personal tastes”<sup>130</sup>. Understood from a perspective of economic power, equality thus takes on an economic definition oblivious to the consequential limitations placed on self-determination. With the successful life so strictly confined, a person’s capacity to live according to his own motivations compresses under the constant pressure of economic ambition. This pressure is precisely what Burroughs and the Beats contended against; their experiments with sexuality, drugs and artistic expression represented a creative experiment with life and the self.

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<sup>128</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 184.

<sup>129</sup> Roland Marchand, “Visions of Classlessness,” in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, Robert Griffith and Paula Baker, eds. (Boston: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2007), 101.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Burroughs and the Beats did not exclusively criticize the homogenized economic hierarchy. For example, Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* describes a dystopia ruled by the corporate elite which excludes anyone without a PhD in engineering or a technological field. Vonnegut and Burroughs both portray negative aspects of corporate power, yet they contend with the power structure on different levels. From the perspective of his managerial protagonist Paul, Vonnegut writes, "Their superiority is what gets me, this damn hierarchy that measures men against machines. It's a pretty unimpressive kind of man that comes out on top"<sup>131</sup>. Burroughs likewise contends with this hierarchy, but unlike Vonnegut's protagonist, Burroughs delineates the practical means of control used by the hierarchy to quell rebellion: The Garden of Delights, Heavy Metal Fixes, and Immortality. On both ends of the economic spectrum are systematic pressures that discourage dissent. The wealthy are led by assertions of their inherent superiority: "What are you doing over there with the apes? Why don't you come over here with the Board where you belong?"<sup>132</sup>. The poor receive constant threats because "in this business you always have to find an angle or you'll be in the bread line without clothes or a dime"<sup>133</sup>. Because Vonnegut finds rebellion futile at the end of his narrative, his novel leaves society unscathed, bolstered even by his pointless criticism. Contrarily, Burroughs sees the workings of a control system that fuel these feelings of futility; his pugnacious critique refuses to accept the norm as an inalterable end, thus encouraging unabashed criticism and willful opposition.

Burroughs realizes that by overcoming the system's influence on oneself, the power of the entire system can be more easily subverted than by a full-scale revolution. Burroughs recognized the appeal of indoctrinating suburban comforts, so rather than stage a revolution against an insurmountable enemy, he and members of the Beat Generation chose to live and

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<sup>131</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1952) 75.

<sup>132</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 151.

<sup>133</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 142.

write outside standard proscriptions, hence the emerging term *counterculture*. Throughout the Nova Trilogy, Burroughs contends with various elements of the American control system. From the military industrial complex to addictive narcotic drugs, Burroughs sees elements at every level of society that extend the pervasive control system and repudiate alternatives. Frequently, Burroughs employs an image of “the Board” symbolizing American corporate power as a tool of Nova Criminals. Supporting the ambitions of the Nova Criminals, as Agent Lee describes, the board, “in three dimensional terms the board is a group representing international big money who intend to take over and monopolize space”<sup>134</sup>. In the novels, the board enlists new members to become part of the intricacies of its mechanism similar to the path of the corporate power elite<sup>135</sup>. Commenting on corporate power, Burroughs denounces its monopolistic aspirations. Bolstering this point, Mills claims that “the Fourteenth Amendment [...] by later interpretations sanctified the corporate revolution”<sup>136</sup>. By inserting itself into the political machine, corporate power legitimized its drive for power manipulating the language of the constitution. Metaphorically representing this connection between corporate and political power, the Board contributes to the control virus infecting the various levels of culture.

Poverty curtails liberty in a system where money is a substantial part of power, and indoctrinating language control systems make defining oppression nearly impossible. The social hierarchy excludes impoverished people from active participation in society by brainwashing them with twisted media reports and encouraging complacency through controlled educational standards and perverted forms of critical thinking. This problem of poverty develops from “One-dimensional thought [which] is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information. Their universe of discourse is populated by self-validating

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<sup>134</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 139.

<sup>135</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 151.

<sup>136</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 102.

hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations”<sup>137</sup>. In an effort to frustrate the influence of one-dimensional thought, William S. Burroughs writes the Nova Trilogy using the cut-up method to literally exemplify and contradict the harsh, repetitive messages thrust upon the populace. Only occasionally does poverty appear as a specific theme in Burroughs’ novels, but the control machine in various roles in society functionally distracts from the influences of systematic control because in Burroughs’ novels, everyone is impoverished by control systems ignorant to the virus controlling and leading them to a cataclysmic end in nova.

#### Chapter 9: The Algebra of Absolute Need

From his first published novel, William Burroughs fills his writing with topics of social taboo. Sexual promiscuity and recreational drug use both play integral roles in the development of Burroughs’ themes. While the blunt inclusion of these topics garnered him opprobrium from various groups, most notably government censors, his treatment of drugs and sex often cautioned against their addictive properties. Though he claims in *Junky*, “I have learned a great deal from using junk”<sup>138</sup>, this admission is not necessarily intended as a recommendation, for in the same novel he explains that heroin addiction is “the worst thing that can happen to a man”<sup>139</sup>. Similarly, though he describes sexual experiences in grotesque detail, he explains that “a room full of fags gives me the horrors”<sup>140</sup>. Drugs and sex become influential to Burroughs’ writing because through them he conceives of “the algebra of absolute need”<sup>141</sup>. Addiction frames Burroughs’ understanding of one-dimensionality; at various social, political, and economic levels

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<sup>137</sup> Marcuse, *The One-Dimensional Man*, 14.

<sup>138</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, xxxix.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>141</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 143.

people are controlled by false, but absolute, needs. Burroughs' socially unacceptable drive to have sex with men and the addictive grip of heroin become synonymous with all control systems. Whether addicted to drugs, sex, luxury, money, power, or status, people's addictions stem from the perception, chemically based or otherwise, that their false needs are essential, insatiable, or absolute.

Conscientious of the words he uses, Burroughs creates unique phrases in order to counter misunderstanding from conventional meaning because "any image repeated loses charge and that loss is the lack that makes this Hell and keeps *us here*"<sup>142</sup>. Words are primarily tools of control systems, so in order to dissolve these systems, Burroughs must work outside their conventions. Despite its significance to the plot, sex is highlighted as a metaphorical device often representing the overwhelming influence of love on the psyche. That he is dubious of the meanings and manipulations behind the word is evidenced in the chapter "do you love me?" in *The Ticket That Exploded*. He describes the sounds of sex being played on a tape recorder and heard by a character, Bradley, who upon hearing it bursts into "cosmic laughter"<sup>143</sup>. In the chapter, the word *love* appears in a variety of common phrases within a long cut-up. The section title's question, "do you love me?" is repeated and inverted stressing not only the word's multiple connotations but also the essential meaninglessness attained by this myriad of conditional meanings: "Do you love void and scenic railways back home?? And do you love me with a banjo permutated the structure every time i felt blue [...] Love is red sheets of pain hung oh oh baby oh jelly [...] Mary, you know i love you through sperm [...] Orgasm floated arms still i feel the thrill of slow movement but it won't last—I've forgotten you then?—i love you"<sup>144</sup>. With descriptions of sexual love, love for specific moments, and fleeting love, there seems to be no single meaning

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<sup>142</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 188.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>144</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 44-45.

for the word. Consequently, Bradley's laughter derives from a new freedom found in this realization.

Burroughs contends that people are controlled by a need for 'love' despite its imprecise meaning. Understood as an 'absolute need,' love modifies to fit specific individual definitions. Because of the term's social significance and indefiniteness, institutions can easily control people by invoking it. Burroughs explains that shame controls love in regard to sex and that "it is precisely this breakdown of shame and fear with regard to sex that the Nixon Administration is all out to stop it so it can continue to use shame and fear as weapons of political control"<sup>145</sup>. Through shame, people are controlled and inhibited from exploring and understanding their sexuality. Consequently, an individual's personal desires for love are proscribed, and the satisfaction of those proscribed aspects become means of control. Social conventions combine desires for orgasm, companionship, and longing into one word: "We are serving The Garden of Delights Immortality Cosmic Consciousness The Best Ever in Drug Kicks. And *love love love* in slop buckets"<sup>146</sup>. The use of the verb *slop* depersonalizes mass-culture. Love defined and produced on a mass scale appears like animal fodder distracting those being fed by catering to and manipulating their basic drives.

This metaphor of addiction explains a complex idea prevalent throughout the 1960s and the counterculture movement. The existing political, economic, social system has foundational flaws, but as observed in the eventual disillusionment of the New Left, the process of addressing these flaws requires more than political and social action. It requires the cutting of word associations and a complete shift in consciousness. Though liberal idealism drove many of the reforms in the 1960s, idealistic feelings can easily be redirected as Carl Oglesby recalls, "The

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<sup>145</sup> Burroughs and Daniel Odier, *The Job*, 11.

<sup>146</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 13.



political imagination, necessarily banished from even so chill an Eden, had therefore disguised itself as nostalgia, to reinfiltrate first consciousness and then discourse with a happy orgasm in its pocket like a concealed weapon—a threat and a promise, this orgasm, and in both aspects revolutionary”<sup>147</sup>. Here, Oglesby captures Burroughs’ concept of ‘Orgasm Death;’ like the fleeting pleasure of orgasm, political energies once used to inspire change can revert under the right conditions into reactionary desires to contradict the inspirational mood. One dies by relinquishing his or her principles for the comforts of normalcy: in the case of the 1960s, a gradual return to conservative political domination and a blind eye to the remaining insufficiencies of the system.

Ultimately, Nova Criminals are control addicts. They thrive on the control they exert upon their hosts and their proliferation of nova, for control “is not just another habit-forming drug this is the habit-forming drug takes over all functions from the addict”<sup>148</sup>. Burroughs understands control to be an addiction existing throughout space and time exerted by the cosmic forces of inter-dimensional addicts. Resultantly, he attacks positions of power: “The President is a junky but can’t take it direct because of his position. So he gets fixed through me....From time to time we make contact, and I recharge him. These contacts look, to the casual observer, like homosexual practices, but the actual excitement is not primarily sexual, and the climax is the separation when the recharge is completed”<sup>149</sup>. Here, Burroughs ironically calls the president a junky to indirectly implicate the position. Ultimately, every president gets their fix from the people he controls. Sex and drug addictions symbolize control addiction; Burroughs does not specifically attack a person, group or corporation because he does not see any individual as responsible. Rather, he observes these cosmic viruses as responsible for socio-political problems

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<sup>147</sup> Oglesby, *The New Left Reader*, 5.

<sup>148</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 46-47.

<sup>149</sup> Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 67.

and one-dimensional thought. Like any other false need, control appears to be essential and absolute, a necessary evil, but Burroughs argues that this is merely the desperate rhetoric of an addict trying to justify his problem.

#### Chapter 10: Subversion through Media

Burroughs must write each novel of the Nova Trilogy using cut-ups, for it is not merely the American society with which he contends. The very basic units of language, shrouded by the euphemistic rules of propriety and manners and used to describe the society and the universe around it, must be exploded and revealed for their confining capacity. If formulated impassively in standard grammatically-correct syntax, Burroughs' denunciation would disintegrate into inartistic, philosophical dribble—ultimately opinion. Yet, through its creative restructuring, the cut-up circumnavigates an intellectual elitism, obfuscating the text's meaning but opening it to creative readings. However, in spite of this openness, the style itself relays a definitive countercultural message. Throughout the Nova Trilogy, the language connects American society to feelings of alienation and failure that contrast harshly with the country's promise of opportunity and diversity; it is suggested that "Everything America ever stood for in any man's dream America stands for now . . . Everything this country could have been and wasn't it will be now . . . Every promise America ever made America will redeem now . . ." <sup>150</sup>. Burroughs cannot escape his historical era despite his noncommittal attitude toward the wave of idealism and activism <sup>151</sup>. As an artist, his work embodies the countercultural spirit and willingness to challenge reality, and through his own creative medium, he exemplifies the capacity of the creative to refute the laws and constrictions of normalcy.

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<sup>150</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 122.

<sup>151</sup> Morgan, *Literary Outlaw*, 288.

Yet, in order to achieve this ideal, he must overcome the rhetoric which arguably binds the one-dimensional society. Images of graphic sex and violence describe a harsh perception of the depths of reality, refuting the pristine Potemkin villages of the American suburb with “Glass blizzards thru the rusty limestone streets exploded flesh from the laughing bones. spattering blood cross urine of walls. We lived in sewer of the city, crab parasites in our genitals rubbing our diseased flesh thru each other on a long string of rectal mucus”<sup>152</sup>. Irreverent toward conventions of meaning and grammar, the language forms a series of grotesque images correlating to a ghetto or slum reality. Burroughs claims that American prosperity comes “At the expense of people starving in remote unimportant Third World areas”<sup>153</sup>. The affluence experienced by a majority in America invariably creates an economic hierarchy with those at the top singing the praises of the system’s infallibility, but “These are the words of liars cowards collaborators traitors. Liars who want time for more lies. Cowards who cannot face your ‘dogs’ your ‘gooks’ your ‘errand boys’ your ‘human animals’ with the truth”<sup>154</sup>. Society’s lowest classes suffer despite the bleats of prosperity, believing in a dream of opportunity they almost undoubtedly will not achieve.

Ultimately, Burroughs challenges the concept of reality. Experienced differently by individuals in a class-driven culture, reality is perverted by the language of mass media because “‘Reality’ is simply a more or less constant scanning pattern—The scanning pattern we accept as ‘reality’ has been imposed by the controlling power on this planet, a power primarily oriented towards total control”<sup>155</sup>. Projected regularly and controlled by the power elite, media controls how the information available to the ‘scanning process’ of reality is presented. Consequently,

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<sup>152</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 180.

<sup>153</sup> Burroughs, *My Education*, 149.

<sup>154</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 12.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

control may be exerted to pacify masses into ignorance to their status relative to the hierarchy as well as that of those beneath them. Through repeated, and thereby accepted, definitions in language, the powerful maintain influence, but “if we disintegrate verbal units, that is vaporize containers, then the explosion could not take place in effect would never have existed”<sup>156</sup>. In the trilogy, the goal of the Nova Criminals is to destroy planets in massive explosions, and this potential exists within words, within the manipulation and indoctrinating use of language to “aggravate the conflicts that lead to the explosion of a planet”<sup>157</sup>. This threat undoubtedly parallels the conflicts of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear holocaust.

Closely connected with the process of nova, technology in Burroughs’ novels plays a problematic role in the workings of the control machine. He considers the dynamic potential of technology, specifically tape recorders, as tools for breaking and building control lines. For example, in her essay “Making the American Girl,” Kelly Schrum explains the role of *Seventeen Magazine* in the context of the growing teenage market,

Seventeen was primarily a fashion and beauty magazine that cultivated insecurity and the constant need for personal improvement, [...] Seventeen also recommended books on inflation and atomic energy, offered articles on politics and world affairs, and encouraged its readers to take responsibility for themselves and become active, questioning citizens. The result was a kind of civic consumerism, combining one’s democratic role as [an] active citizen with one’s duty as a responsible and active consumer<sup>158</sup>

While Schrum remains ambivalent towards the magazine’s influence over teenage girls, she fails to observe the consistent, subtle political proselytization inherent in the magazine’s language.

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<sup>156</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 48.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>158</sup> Kelly Schrum, “Making the American Girl,” 117.

Though she observes the negative effects of ‘cultivated insecurity,’ she fails to mention the magazine’s cultivation of unquestioning capitalists. Voting and political activity are presented through a lens of consumerism invariably insisting that one’s best means of exercising her political voice is through her pocketbook<sup>159</sup>. This type of mass-produced language is exactly what Burroughs opposes because it exerts an unscrupulous influence on people. Adolescents, children or, as observed in a *US News and World Report*, people with low-income backgrounds are more inclined to consume mass media and are less equipped with the tools to scrutinize it<sup>160</sup>. Burroughs exemplifies throughout his novels that the masses have been indoctrinated by this kind of language. Thus, the Nova Trilogy’s depiction of media and technology means to dissolve this influence offering a process for ‘cutting’ it.

With his focus on words, Burroughs maintains an interest in the methods by which words are communicated. Experimenting with tape recorders and cameras, Burroughs observes the operation of control systems in various communicative forms. Describing a method of manipulating recordings, he reveals these control systems in his novels: “I recorded sound tracks of TV and film programs—mixing in suggestions from Rewrite to microphones and radio cruise cars—So i press a button and record all sounds and voices of the city—So i press a button to feed back theses sounds with cut-ins [...] A few seconds later you are hearing the same words from my broadcast with cut-ins from Rewrite”<sup>161</sup>. By recording and splicing, Burroughs summarizes how media technology manipulates meaning. Messages are interspersed with suggestions or opinions or ideas and concealed by the appealing clothes of entertainment. Hyperbolizing the degree of influence exerted by control systems, he suggests that even a person’s bodily functions can be controlled through manipulation of recordings: “his voice has been spliced in 24 times per

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<sup>159</sup> Kelly Schrum, “Making the American Girl,” 122.

<sup>160</sup> “*U.S. News and World Report* Accesses the Perils of Mass Culture and the Evils of Television, 1955,” 93.

<sup>161</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 169.

second with the sound of my breathing and the beating of my heart so that my body is convinced that my breathing and heart will stop if his voice stops”<sup>162</sup>. Control systems have become so interspersed into the communication and media that people are subsequently incapable of imagining alternatives. The splicing of tape recorders, much like written cut-ups, expose the subliminal influences a person potentially endures in everyday interactions with media.

Cut-ups are more than innovative literary devices; Burroughs uses them as a means of literally overcoming linguistic absolutes, offering a method which others might repeat. The principle operates on the idea that “A tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system”<sup>163</sup>. *Nova Criminals* exasperate conflict by manipulating communication forms to exercise control, “Always create as many insoluble counterorders and alternative conflicts recordings to the explosion of a planet”<sup>164</sup>. Burroughs explains that the work of the Nova Police is to “infiltrate, sabotage and cut communications—Once machine lines are cut the enemy is helpless”<sup>165</sup>. However, in order to cut these lines of communication, an agent must be able to perceive falsehood within language; consequently, social outcasts, already disenfranchised by their surroundings, are best prepared to become members of the Nova Police, “Paradoxically some of our best agents were recruited from the ranks of those who are called criminals”<sup>166</sup>. By explaining a process of using audio cut-ups, Burroughs gives anyone the opportunity to act as an agent of the Nova Police: “A camera and two tape recorders can cut the lines laid down by a fully equipped film studio”<sup>167</sup>. Thus, the novels of the Nova Trilogy cannot be described as pure fiction because they demand personal experimentation and questioning of language as a system.

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<sup>162</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 3.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>166</sup> Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 63.

<sup>167</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 111.

Moreover, they give individuals the tools to analyze and subvert the messages they receive using the same methods as those who mean to control them. Dubious of news media, Burroughs denounces its mollifying qualities, observing, “take a political speech on TV shut off sound track and substitute another speech you have prerecorded . . . hardly tell the difference”<sup>168</sup>. Frustrating this passive acceptance of media, Burroughs makes basic linguistic analysis accessible for the average individual. By practicing cut-ups, an average person is forced to consider individual words and their arbitrary assignment of meanings. Accordingly, a word’s meaning in context must be scrutinized by the individual’s own understanding of the word, creating opportunity to more easily scrutinize the language in various media.

The novels antagonize language as well as specific manipulations of it. They offer a suspicious view of words’ absolute meaning. Describing the process by which media is manipulated, Burroughs exposes the ease by which information is biasedly presented, suggesting that any individual might use the same process for his or her own purposes. Portraying all means of communication as potential fodder for *Nova Criminals*, he writes, “Why stop anywhere? Everybody splice himself in with everybody else. Communication must be made total. only way to stop it”<sup>169</sup>. This is not to suggest that communication is inherently good or bad. Burroughs would likely be dubious of those distinctions. Rather, ‘total communication’ implies that language be explored and used individually. If everyone is conscious of his as well as others’ manipulation of language, the influence of control systems would become transparent and could arguably be changed to benefit the population. His own language of cut-ups exemplifies this idea driving his novels: “The only thing *not* prerecorded in a prerecorded universe is the prerecording

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<sup>168</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 169.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

itself which is to say *any* recording that contains a random factor”<sup>170</sup>. This ‘random factor’ indicates the uniqueness and individuality quiescent in language. This is not to say conventions of grammar should be eradicated, but rather to suggest that language be universally understood for its arbitrary nature in its role as part of the human condition.

As a novelist, Burroughs is intimately concerned with the creation of unique work, of unique communication; thus, he distrusts rules and conventions of communication and language for their confining and controlling characteristics. He views these conventions of language as contrary to the process of communication not only in creative works but in individual understanding. As an established social pariah, he rejects the conventions which force negatively connoted identities upon him and deny him the language to define himself. The language of control systems limits one’s understanding of his surroundings as well as his understanding of himself. According to Burroughs, people, like words, are arbitrarily assigned identities and social roles based on their social and economic positions, “anything to avoid the hopeless dead-end horror of being just who and where you are: dying animals on a doomed planet”<sup>171</sup>. Historically, the pressure of socially appropriated identity resonates with the struggles for civil rights along lines of race and sexuality, but Burroughs takes a broader position. Observing the arbitrarily constructed regulations of language, he suggests that all language and discourse be accepted and understood as individualistically arbitrated. Resultantly, identity and information could not be universally controlled by socially defined language but mutually influenced and consciously analyzed.

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<sup>170</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 166.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.



## Chapter 11: Beyond Time and Space

It may perhaps be said that the novelistic styling of William S. Burroughs is offensive, obscene trash without literary merit or even tacit entertainment value. The author himself admitted that “I do not feel that *Nova Express* is in any sense a wholly successful book”<sup>172</sup>. Scenes of anal sex, exploding ejaculations, masturbating green aliens and talking anuses litter the pages of a book which reads often more like sadistic pornography than a novel. These perverse scenes purport to symbolize social commentaries, but their author “expressed his need to write to make money”<sup>173</sup> only to spend it on more drugs to fuel his erratic and murderous behavior. Inspirations of a diagnosed schizophrenic<sup>174</sup>, these writings should be written off as the musings of a disturbed individual rather than artistic works of literature.

By censoring Burroughs’ writing, the various institutions that opposed its publication, like the academy, the US Postal Service, the US Customs Service, the State of Massachusetts, and the city of Los Angeles<sup>175</sup>, attempted to monopolize reality. These claims of obscenity and of Burroughs’ insanity all confine and deny creative expressions of reality demanding that existence be homogenized in its perceptions, and these demands form the foundations of the one-dimensional society. Wyndham Lewis observes that “the artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present”<sup>176</sup>. By denying the artist access to the public, censors sustain the present and reject change. In the case of *Naked Lunch*, early attempts at publishing the novel were “rejected as almost inaccessible to the average reader not only because of its intentional lack of organization, but

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<sup>172</sup> Burroughs and Odier, *The Job*, 27.

<sup>173</sup> Goodman, *Contemporary Literary Censorship*, 112.

<sup>174</sup> Burroughs, *Junky*, xxxix-xl.

<sup>175</sup> Goodman, *Contemporary Literary Censorship*, 1.

<sup>176</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 65.

also because of its total disregard for the conventions of fiction”<sup>177</sup>. What one publisher dubbed ‘inaccessible,’ a reader might call innovative or fresh. Precisely because Burroughs’ novels did not match novelistic conventions, because he could not successfully write popular fiction even in financial crisis<sup>178</sup>, these novels demand attention. As Goethe said, “Literature is a fragment of fragments; only the smallest proportion of what took place and what was said was written down, while only the smallest proportion of what was written down has survived”<sup>179</sup>. The literature of William Burroughs exposes the fragmentation of history and the author’s observations of the depths of its hypocrisy. The one-dimensional society’s monopoly of reality conceals these depths, denies structural flaws, removes dissenting thought and indoctrinates it with “indicated alterations”<sup>180</sup>. Artists, in addition to Burroughs, indicated similar flaws in the structure of society, but only Burroughs dismantles society’s monopolistic control at the foundational level of language.

A variety of thinkers, exploring the social effects of new technologies and economic institutions, detect control systems and inspire the countercultural revolution beginning in the 1960s. However, though they may inspire and inform, these thinkers are not necessarily the drive behind the political activism of the New Left. Historical factors of the post-war society hypersensitized the Baby Boom Generation to homogenization, and similar historical factors stimulated the beginnings of Burroughs’ writing. Many regarded traditional ideology with suspicion; liberalism and conservatism, capitalism and socialism, “both these forms of historic agency have either collapsed or become most ambiguous. So far as structural change is

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<sup>177</sup> Goodman, *Contemporary Literary Censorship*, 6.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>179</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>180</sup> Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 56.

concerned, neither seems to be at once available and effective as *our* agency anymore”<sup>181</sup>.

Society disenfranchised and discouraged its citizens, and no ideology existent at the time could adequately conceive of a means of overcoming and improving it. The impoverished class remained in its continuous struggle to maintain financial stability and independence because of apathy and ignorance, ignorance of the systematically sanctioned class divisions and the subtle indoctrinations that made them seem fair.

Many share the notion that by attacking this ignorance and making the populace aware of the subtle controls concealing inequality, efforts to restructure and redistribute power within the industrialize state might begin. Herein, Burroughs work becomes essential because as Marcuse expounds, “We must become aware of the essentially new features which distinguish a free society as a definite negation of the established societies, and we must begin formulating these features, no matter how metaphysical, no matter how utopian, I would even say no matter how ridiculous we may appear to the normal people in all camps, on the right as well as on the left”<sup>182</sup>. Any reader might find Burroughs’ cut-ups ridiculous, useless, or obscene, but the skeptic ought to be willing to consider the criticisms implicit in his style and enumerated in his prose. Media dominates the communication of information; in its power to influence the minds and wills of people “there is no difference between occult and technological media. Their truth is fatality, their field the unconscious”<sup>183</sup>. Consequently, conventions ruling and defining how communication ought to be formed are illogical because every new media technology necessarily redefines rules and conventions to suit its means and limitations of communicating.

As a media form, Burroughs’ novels dispel the authority of arbitrary conventions. He elucidates the macabre swept to the edges of society, but with a hope that “a Great Society can

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<sup>181</sup> Oglesby, *The New Left Reader*, 27.

<sup>182</sup> Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s*, 78.

<sup>183</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 229.

look into the chasm of its own potential Hell and recognize that it is stronger as a nation for possessing an artist who can come back from hell with a portrait of its dimensions”<sup>184</sup>. In spite of Burroughs’ blatant antagonism to control systems and the respective language, the Nova Trilogy’s complicated, jarring organization creates a degree of individuality for the reader. Burroughs scorns preprogramed definitions and contexts, so he uses words in unfamiliar contexts: “Ghost slime sitting naked on tattoo booths, virus flesh of curse. suffocating town, this. Ways to bury explorer”<sup>185</sup>. Individuals are free to make their own associations to the words. For example, a reader might have mixed associations for ‘tattoo booths.’ Depending on the individual, he or she might connote *tattoo* with permanent markings with religious, personal, social, or no significance and *booths* with phone booths, locations to hide drugs, cubicles, or nothing in particular. Without a prescribed connotation, the definition of ‘tattoo booth’ becomes subject to individual connotations with the individual words and the context surrounding it. Walter Benjamin comments on technology’s alteration of art noting that a “technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction [...] technological reproduction can place a copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain”<sup>186</sup>. Because a reader can look at a phrase in Burroughs’ writing and not have a particular association for it, the writing itself contextualizes its own subjectivity. As the product of a particular person at a particular time, the novels self-reflexively accept their own historical position. This intentional decision makes the novels malleable and interpretable so that they could be associated with any society at any time. Images and phrases can have no meaning or exceptional meaning given the particular time. Burroughs writes in *The Soft Machine*, “Storm the

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<sup>184</sup> Barney Rosset, ed., "The Boston Trial of 'Naked Lunch,'" 44.

<sup>185</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 117.

<sup>186</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 21.

Reality Studio”<sup>187</sup>. From a modern perspective, the Reality Studio connotes with images of reality television. This connection is not outside justifiable interpretation; rather, it proves the applicability and universality of Burroughs writing.

This uniqueness, this individuality, reveals the one-dimensional society more powerfully than direct theoretical pontification. Through art, the reality of society is twisted. The layman becomes the critic “for individuality makes a mockery of the kind of society which would turn all individuals to the one collectivity”<sup>188</sup>. One cannot so easily follow social interpretations of art because as it is reproduced in different times and regains popularity, its significance can change. William S. Burroughs’ literary work may have come out of a particular time period in American history and may have resonances with the particular economic and political situation, but because his artistic style supersedes his time period, the Nova Trilogy, like its characters, exists consciously on a plane beyond time and space

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<sup>187</sup> Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, 155.

<sup>188</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 13.

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