

The Control Machine: Myth in *The Soft Machine* of W. S. Burroughs¹

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The claim made by William S. Burroughs that he is creating a “mythology for the space age”² did not lend me much assistance when writing this paper, however it did raise a question: what are myth and mythology, and what connection do they have with storytelling? This, in turn, led to other questions: Is mythology religion we no longer believe in? That works for Greek or Roman but not Hindu mythology. Or is myth a fundamentally Eurocentric concept referring to our past but not to other, non-European, cultures? What makes myth different from fable? I had to find out first what myth meant, or what it could mean before I went any further. I read through encyclopaedia and dictionary definitions, all of which seemed to link myth with something untrue or at least unproven. Unproven I could accept, however, to state that myths are untrue adds nothing to an understanding of their influence and leads us back to Aristotle’s point on poetic truth.³ However, more than anything, these definitions did not go far enough.

Why is myth so important to society? I moved on to histories of religion and anthropology, where I felt I might find something more useful. Many scraps of information were gleaned on the social importance of myth and its place in the structure of a community, but I did not feel any further forward. Until one afternoon I started re-reading the *L’Ecriture du Désastre* by Maurice Blanchot after a vague remembrance that there were comments on myth somewhere inside. There I found a hesitant definition that satisfied my needs: a definition of myth that took in the unproveability of myth, its link with storytelling, its social power and, at the same time, its flawed nature, perhaps even the futility of myth-making. In *L’Ecriture du Désastre* Blanchot writes:

Le mythe serait la radicalisation d'une hypothèse, l'hypothèse par laquelle, passant à la limite, la pensée a toujours enveloppé ce qui la désimplifie, la désagrège, la défait, détruisant à son comble la possibilité de se maintenir, fût-ce par le récit fabuleux (retour au dire même).⁴

Blanchot's definition of myth divides the myth-making process into two steps: firstly the hypothesis is founded, and secondly that hypothesis is radicalized. This radicalization takes place when the hypothesis becomes the base for the "fantastic narrative," but at this point the myth undermines itself. This takes place as the "myth" and the thought behind the "myth" attempt to pursue contradictory aims: that of storytelling and explanation (or simplification). The storytelling begs interpretation and as the interpretations multiply so we get further from simplicity. However, it is the "myth's" purpose to instruct and perhaps illuminate. This unmaintainability of the "thought" behind the myth, that thought undoing itself by at once suggesting an explanation of the phenomena that are presented to us in the everyday, and, at the same time, complicating that everyday by adding other narratives to it, gives us a starting point for this discussion of the mythic element within *The Soft Machine* by W. S. Burroughs.⁵

In this paper I wish to show that in *The Soft Machine* Burroughs seeks to invent a myth in this sense of "radicalization of a hypothesis." To illustrate this I will analyse the "myth of control" in *The Soft Machine* and extract the hypothesis from it. The hypothesis which is fundamental to *The Soft Machine* breaks down into three constituent parts: firstly, that language is a means and method of control; secondly, that reality is a construct; and thirdly, that the body itself is in fact a control system. The "fantastic narratives" take the hypothesis and portray vested interests as using language to manipulate the populace at large, by laying down a "word and image track," which is a form of mental programming that moulds behaviour and negates resistance.

I will look at the difficulty raised by the inherent contradiction in *The Soft Machine*: *The Soft Machine* is made up of language but seeks to attack the use of language by institutions. I will, therefore, examine Burroughs' attempts to get round this problem by the use of the cut-up technique and the character of the "technical sergeant."

The Soft Machine was first published in 1961 and is the first work of William S. Burroughs to incorporate the "cut-up" method of Brion Gysin.⁶ It was followed by *The Ticket That Exploded*⁷ and *Nova Express*,⁸ the two other texts which make up the so-called "cut-up trilogy." This trilogy grew out of the "word hoard" of about one thousand pages of manuscript that were the overflow from the writing of *Naked Lunch*.⁹

In *The Soft Machine* we find a mixture of narrative fragments and cut-up texts. The juxtaposition of, and the play between, "conventional," if fragmentary, narrative and the "meaningless jumble" of the cut-up makes *The Soft Machine* a challenging text to read and, perhaps, even a challenge to reading.

The narratives in *The Soft Machine* expand the idea of addiction from the relation of the addict to drugs, which was first developed in *Naked Lunch*, into an addiction to power and control whereby an elite few can manipulate the action and thought of the mass by way of the "word and image track."

"Track" can be read in many ways but in the works of Burroughs it most often refers to a prerecorded portion of sound or film. Also at the time of writing *The Soft Machine*,¹⁰ Burroughs had a strong interest in the methods of Scientology and it is the interpretation of "track" in its Scientological sense that opens up the widest possibilities.

In the Scientological sense, "track" is again used in the sense of something prerecorded but rather than on magnetic tape this recording is on the "reactive mind."¹¹ This recording takes place due to indoctrination (through language), or through other forms of conditioning including the "past lives" of the human being: an imprint is left on the individual and this "track" produces predictable, and therefore, controllable, reaction in the viewer/listener much like Pavlovian stimuli. Therefore, in the jargon of Scientology, "the whole track" refers to the accumulated experiences from all past lives and their conditioning effect on the present of the individual. It is through the use of the E-meter, a type of lie detector, that Scientology claims to be able to decondition people from the effects of the "reactive mind." The use of the E-meter and its revealing of hostile intention opened up the possibility of an "exposure therapy" which would decondition through repetition. This therapy took the form of exposure to questions that provoked a hostile

response. The questions would be repeated until the area of "track" was narrowed down by elimination and the hostility eradicated by admission. It was this element of Scientology, the idea of conditioning and its cure by the E-meter, that particularly interested Burroughs. It was by extending this concept of deconditioning that Burroughs envisaged using cut-ups and repetition to decondition people from the "word." The aim being to unencumber the mind: to allow the individual to see clearly without preconditioned reactions to

Queen, Country, Pope, President, Generalissimo, Allah, Christ, Fidel Castro, The Communist Party, The CIA... When automatic reactions are no longer operative you are in a condition to make up your own mind.¹²

It is by determining the areas in which we are conditioned and those through which conditioning takes place that we are able to sort through the "bombardment of images" and, finally, are able to deal with situations without preconceptions: to deal with facts rather than beliefs.

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The cut-up itself serves as the principal weapon in the fight against the controlling power of the "track." At the core of *The Soft Machine* is the postulation that language itself is a method of control that forces us to perceive the world in a certain, fixed way, and these perceptions, in turn, place limits on our interactions. The "word track" always moves away from plurality towards uniformity, leading us further and further away from the "multi-levelled structure of experience."¹³ The cut-up is used in order to expose the "word track" by throwing up unlikely juxtapositions and permutations that force the readers into adjusting their approach to reading and, therefore, to the power and use of language. The technique is similar to montage with the writer cutting his or other authors' texts¹⁴ into pieces and then re-arranging them in a more or less random fashion. After this the results are "processed," that is the "cut-ups" are selected according to their interest to the writer and juxtaposed to make up a larger text. Taking this into account, Feyerabend's comments on the Dadaists can be easily applied to the cut-up:

Assume you tear language apart, you live for days and weeks in a world of cacophonous sounds, jumbled words, nonsensical events. Then, after this preparation, you sit down and write: 'the cat is on the mat'. This simple sentence which we usually utter without thought, like talking machines (and much of our talk is indeed routine), now seems like the creation of an entire world: God said let there be light, and there was light.¹⁵

To continue to comment on the cut-up it is necessary to illustrate with an example; here we will take a cut-up from page 8 of *The Soft Machine*:

He went to Madrid. . . Alarm clock ran for yesterday. . . 'No me hagas caso.' dead on arrival. . . you might say at the Jew Hospital. . . blood spilled over the American. . . trailing lights and water. . . The Sailor went so wrong somewhere in that grey flesh. . . He just sit down on zero. . . I nodded on Nino Perdido his coffee over three hours late. . . They all went away and sent papers. . . The Dead Man write for you like a major. . . Enter vecinos. . . Freight boat smell of rectal mucous went down off England with all dawn smell of distant fingers. . . About this time I went to your Consul. He gave me a Mexican after his death. . . Five times of dust we made it. . . with soap bubbles of withdrawal crossed by a thousand junky nights. . . Soon after the half maps came in by candlelight. . . Occupy. . . Junk lines falling. . . Stay Off. . . Bill Gains in the Yellow Sickness. . . looking at dirty pictures casual as a ceiling fan short-timing the dawn we made it in the corn smell of rectal mucous and carbolic soap. . . familiar face maybe from the vacant lot. . . trailing tubes and wires. . . 'You fucking-can't-wait-hungry-junkies! . . .' burial in the American. 'Quedase con su medicina'. . . on Nino Perdido the girl screaming. . . They all went away through Casbah House. . . 'Couldn't you write me any better than that? Gone away. . . You can look anyplace.'
No good. No Bueno.¹⁷

The size of the quote is necessary in order to illustrate, at least to some extent, the problem of actually reading a cut-up and, indeed, very different approaches can be employed to achieve a "reading." One of these is to reconstruct the text in order to find a sense. Certainly in the text there are identifiable themes: anal sex, a consular visit, a burial, sickness and death, and even literary criticism. These can be sifted through, analysed in relation to preceding pages (from which some of the material used in this cut-up undoubtedly came) and then interpreted in order to fix on the text a specific "meaning." However, the problems with this approach can be pointed out very simply. Take the line: "Freight boat smell of rectal mucous went down off England with all

dawn smell of distant fingers. . ." Do we punctuate the line: "Freight boat, smell of rectal mucous, went down off England with all dawn smell of distant fingers. . ." ? Then interpret in the following terms: the smell on the freight boat was of rectal mucous at the time when it sank, the expression "dawn smell of distant fingers" being a lyric substitution for ship's "hands." Alternatively, we could have the smell going down, as in disappearing at sea, off England! Or with the line: "He gave me a Mexican after his death," if we presume the Mexican refers to a person, who is dead, the giver or the gift? Each reading opens up new possibilities, and the rules of grammar do not apply as they are not used. To fix an interpretation on the text seems impossible, and as J. M. Bernstein states: "Fragmentary writing functions through the multiplication of logically distinct perspectives."¹⁶ It is these distinct perspectives in the cut-ups that over-ride the "word track" allowing a plurality of (re)action.

However this, the prose-poem approach to the cut-ups, is only one method of reading them. Another method is to integrate the surroundings into the text. That is, rather than ignore the outside world, to mix it in with the text and then examine the results. This exercise of "intersection reading" is outlined in Burroughs's essay "Creative Reading":

Just where and under what circumstances did you read? What were you reading when the phone rang or some other interruption occurred. The point at which your stream of consciousness—and when you read of course you are simply borrowing the writer's stream of it, being bored by your own, if indeed you *have* one, isn't it all bits and pieces, shreds and patches? Constantly being cut by *seemingly* random factors which on examination turn out to be significant and important. [. . .] So note down in the margin actual interruptions, which may be frequent if you are riding on a subway. [. . .] I just tried an interesting experiment. I turn on the TV, open an anthology of poems and read a few lines, noting action and words on screen. I throw away some duds but the results are impressive. Just try it.¹⁷

One could read a cut-up on a train: mix the text in with images that pass the window and with overheard speech. Barry Miles suggests integrating Burroughs's other cut-up experiments, on cassette and film, with the cut-up text in order to get a full cut-up experience:

Ideally one would read the cut-up trilogy with Burroughs's cut-up tapes playing in the background, taking time off occasionally to examine a photo-collage or play *Towers Open Fire* or *The Cut Ups* on the VCR. To get in the right mood it would be appropriate to eat some majoun first, preferably made to Paul Bowles's recipe.¹⁸

A third method incorporates the first two but gives more weight to the power of the cut-up to confuse the reader and produce an almost hallucinatory effect due to the frequent changes of images, the repetition and the use of association blocks to refer to texts of Burroughs as well as those of other writers. This method of reading does not look for a meaning in the cut-up, which by reading the cut-ups would seem to be a futile exercise, but rather analyses the effect of that reading: the confusion; the cacophony that makes us aware of the power and function of language.

The cut-up can be seen as an attack on both discourse and narrative with textual shift and dislocation demobilising any move towards a single sense. The process of reading a cut-up therefore entails a fragmentation: the text is fragmented and the reading habit is splintered. The "I," as reader, is caught in the spaces between the words. We have a choice to make when reading a cut-up text: to impose a meaning, despite the difficulties, through the use of interpretatory techniques and by so doing take part in the very power play that the text seeks to undermine, joining in the battle for and about meaning, or we can adjust the very structure of reading and place ourselves in a constant state of shift which does not privilege sense but rather effect, plunging us into a vortex of spinning sense.¹⁹ This vortex has its place not in an understanding of the workings of the text or even in the comprehension of the words and phrases that make it up, but rather in the perception of its effects on oneself as a reader.

In attaching no single, fixed sense to the cut-up the reader undermines power play and opens up the text to multiple readings as his/her environment changes. The reading drifts with the readers through their own geographies: the space of the text unfolds in the minds of the readers. *The Soft Machine* cuts and folds and we are in those lacerations and those shadows. Not being able to read *The Soft Machine* is not being

able to allow it to act on us: to permit loss (of structure) in order to find the zero of meaning. Language insists on meaning, the cut-up tries to defy it. The constant currents, the endless permutations in the cut-ups encourage entry into certain patterns of action while discouraging others, and it is by analysing the effects of these currents and of the textual repetitions, on ourselves as readers of the cut-up, that we renew both our reading and the text. As Burroughs states in the *Paris Review* interview:

[T]he new techniques such as the cut-up will involve much more of the total capacity of the observer.²⁰

The observer/reader is placed in an active relation with the text involving his/her "total capacity." This type of reading pushes us beyond the text and we then pull the text and its effects into our world: where we have relations and interactions with objects and people.

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As stated before the cut-up is combined with short narrative sections which satirize the state or institutional techniques of control. For example, in Chapters 4 and 7 of *The Soft Machine* we find two mediums of control described and the method of their destruction outlined. In chapter 4, "TRAK TRAK TRAK" we are referred to the control system of advertising and the "tie in" techniques of consumer-capitalism. This is accompanied by the repetition and permutation of the company's slogan:

SMOKE TRAK CIGARETTES. THEY LIKE YOU. TRAK LIKE ANY YOU. ANY TRAK LIKE YOU. SMOKE TRAKS. THEY SERVICE. TRAK TRAK TRAK. [SM 24]

The slogan is for Trak Servicing: the all-purpose, all-you-need company: everything is provided for, sit back and relax: there is no escape! "TRAK" refers us again to "track" and the consumer of Trak products is conditioned by the advertising to buy a product that "is not just another habit forming drug this is the habit forming drug" [SM 27]. The product

itself “takes over all functions from the addict” and finally reduces him to the “helpless condition of a larva” [SM 27].

Dependency can be terminated by acting on the call for self-sufficiency rather than relying on the machinery of consumer capital:

Cut the sex and Dream Utility Lines//
 Cut The Trak Service Lines//
 [. . .] Trak your own utilities [SM 25]

This sign, nailed to a wall, “was printed on white paper book page size.” This connection with print and books suggests that the resistance to Trak comes from a writer: the printed page of the book delivers the message. However, this message is given by someone dependent on the machinery of consumer capital to live: the insider is given the role of bringing down the system. It is by this method, of putting the resister inside the system, that Burroughs attempts to free himself as a writer from the contradiction of writing against the use of language.

In Chapter 7 of *The Soft Machine*, “The Mayan Caper,” we witness through the narrator the workings and then the destruction of another control mechanism. “The Mayan control calendar” is operated by a religious elite who control the populace using a time manipulation technique whereby every movement of the members of the society can be predicted.

In this chapter the narrator, Joe Brundige of “The Evening News,” is “transferred” into the body of a Mayan peasant in order to infiltrate the society and destroy the control calendar. The system of control can only be destroyed by an insider, and it is for this reason “Joe Brundige” must become a Mayan. Effective resistance can only come from within. Again the “word and image track” are at work:

I felt the crushing weight of evil insect control forcing my thoughts and feeling into prearranged moulds, squeezing my spirit in a soft invisible vice. [SM 55]

Control is present and acts through a “continuous round of festivals.” However, “sacrifices were rare” [SM 55]. While fear of being sacrificed could be seen as an effective means of control, the narrative seems to move the emphasis from sacrifice to ritual in a more general sense. This, along with the means of destruction of the “calendar” by playback of

“control music and festival recordings together with sound and image track of rebellion” [SM 57] confirms that “control” acts through the manipulation of the “word and image track.”²¹

The combination of cut-up and short narrative comes together in a clash of images, the aim of which is to have the reader question not only the meaning and power of language but also the meaning and power of all extra-individual systems.

All the “control” systems in *The Soft Machine* reduce the victims to an unconscious, malleable mass to be used and discarded by an elite at their whim. However, these control systems seem only to be a shadow of a more sinister threat, as Burroughs states in the *Paris Review* Interview:

Time, Life, Fortune applies a more complex, effective control system than the Mayan calendar, but it also is much more vulnerable because it is so vast and mechanized. Not even Henry Luce understands what’s going on in the system now. Well, a machine can be redirected. One technical sergeant can fuck up the whole works.²²

It is this idea of redirection of the machine that dominates the “messages of resistance” in *The Soft Machine*. The machine itself is reprogrammed by the rogue “technical sergeant,” and this leads to its destruction. The “technical sergeant” works within the system in order to bring about its downfall. This “technical sergeant” is the “writer” in the section “TRAK TRAK TRAK” and “Joe Brundige” in “The Mayan Caper,” and another example is found in the “Movies” section at the end of the chapter “The Case of the Celluloid Kali” [SM 48-49].

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The narrator at this point in the text is Clem Snide, the “Private Ass Hole” who is also known as “Lee the Agent.” The chapter opens with a monologue by the “Survival Artist,” who relates the techniques used to survive three thousand years “of showbusiness” in an extension of the theme “wouldn’t you.” That is, in the situation of absolute need the individual returns to a survival instinct: in those conditions, wouldn’t you do the same?

Towards the end of the chapter Clem/Lee joins the “guests” at the villa of the Countess di Vile. From the entrance of Clem to his abrupt departure a control system is described and then attacked. After being introduced to the Countess, Clem is shown the naked boys at the bar “and their cocks jumped up one after another—And I did the polite thing too when my turn came—” [SM 48]. This parody of polite behaviour and the function of social etiquette points us to the rule of the “normal,” however bizarre that “normal” may be, and the controlling power of the fear of being “other.”

The eager boys begin chanting for the movies: “The movies!—The movies!—We want the movies!—” [SM 48]. There follows the screening of movies depicting hangings in which the victims ejaculate on the point of death. The boys watching the film come “right with him spurt for spurt” [SM 48]. The direct physical and mental control exercised by the movies is illustrated by the slowing down of the film and the consequences of this on the “boys.” As the film is slowed the effects of the recording on the viewers changes also: the boys’ ejaculations take one, then two hours, then become “geologic.”

This fragment of narrative links us with a second element in the Burroughsian hypothesis: the postulation that reality is a construct. This is portrayed here by the distortion of the line between the action that takes place within the movie and that of the boys in the villa. This distortion can take place because both the movie and the boys are contained in the larger frame of the “reality film” or “reality con.”

The main elements that constitute the “reality film” are the notion of reality as a construct and, its collateral, the mechanisms by which the individual is made to act in the film. Both in interviews and in the “cut-up trilogy,” “reality” is stated to be a construct: a film that links us to the body and, therefore, to time and space:

[W]hat we call reality is actually a movie. It’s a film. What I call a biological film.²³

and again

The whole human film was pre-recorded.²⁴

Exclusion from the “reality film” means having no role to fill in the theatre of existence:

[P]eople will go to any lengths to get in the film to cover themselves with any old film scrap . . . junky. . . narcotics agent. . . thief. . . informer. . . anything to avoid the hopeless dead-end horror of being just who and where you all are: dying animals on a doomed planet.²⁵

This horror of “seeing what we see” binds us to our pre-recorded roles, another “track,” following the old, worn out script of

birth and death and the human condition—always been that way and always will—Besides you can’t do anything—Don’t stick out your neck—Don’t get ulcers.²⁶

The horror alone, however, is not enough to keep the character playing in the “reality film,” and so other techniques are used by those with a vested interest in keeping the “tired old show on the road.” These techniques include sublimination.

In 1957 Vance Packard’s exposure of the techniques used by the advertising industry in *The Hidden Persuaders* was heralded as revealing the process known as “subliminal stimulation.” He states in the 1981 edition of the work:

This technique involves getting visual or whispered messages to us below our level of conscious awareness. Visually they can be split-second flashes, or fixed but dimly-lit messages that stay on the screen for longer periods.²⁷

For example a toy advertisement would contain the subliminated message “Get it!” flashing on screen several times. While this “tucking” of messages caused a storm for a time, interest soon waned, with the result that only a few radio and television channels decided to take any action. In 1981 Packard could state that the practice continued but its effect on sales was unknown.²⁸

In “The Case of the Celluloid Kali” the boys are shown a slow-motion film and this produces a synchronised response. The image causes direct biological effects. Accordingly, in the “theory” section of *The Ticket That Exploded* “Let Them See,”²⁹ playback at “subliminal slow motion” will

build an image into the flesh of the viewer.³⁰ Returning to "The Case of the Celluloid Kali," the sound/image track of the film produces precise reactions in the viewers and, as the interval between events in the track becomes longer, so does the time between the actions in the "physical" space. In this we have perfect correlation between the cause and effect. The combination of these two elements leads us back to the concept of the "pre-recorded universe," or what Burroughs calls, referring to Castaneda, the "tonal universe":

The tonal universe is the every day cause-and-effect universe, which is predictable because it is pre-recorded.³¹

Therefore, the movie scene becomes a parody of the doctrine of predestination with the fate of the viewer, the "orgasm-death," being imprinted on the body.

The causality machine (the film) is speeded up, by Snide, in order to reach a critical point where the word/image track must be abandoned or lead to mental or physical destruction. However, the "guests" are locked into a perception/action cycle that controls them, and they have no choice but to follow their destiny. It is only by the insertion of a random factor that the "causal" or "tonal" universe can be broken away from in order to reach beyond control into the magical or "nagual" universe:

The nagual is the unknown, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable.³²

The action of the character Clem breaks through to this level and allows for his escape, but the process of "nagual" action is also exemplified by the cut-up technique:

For the nagual to gain access, the door of chance must be open. There must be a random factor [. . .].³³

Unpredictable and unauthorised behaviour of "wised up" characters, the technical sergeant, along with the scissors of the cut-up break the bonds that keep us tied to the illusion of an objective reality:

Better than the "real thing?"—There is no real thing—Maya—Maya—It's all show business—³⁴

"The Case of the Celluloid Kali," and the Burroughsian "myth of control" in general, do not point to some absolute reality beyond the physical world, but rather point out that there is no objective reality at all. One can compare this to the simile of the cave in *The Republic* of Plato. The fate of the "boys" resembles that of the cave-dwellers, whose life is dominated by the shadows and who would rather kill than venture into the light. However, the "boys" are the victims in "The Case of the Celluloid Kali," not the philosopher: the simple dupes, the "marks," fall victim to the "con" and they pay with their lives. More importantly, in *The Republic* the reality which exists outside the cave, beyond the film, is the goal, whereas in Burroughs's texts survival is the name of the game, and reality appears as a flux that is 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.³⁵

If, therefore, we place reality within language, then language forms and confines that which we can interact with while using it as a tool. Likewise, if reality is based on our relationships with institutions, those institutions determine the parameters of acceptable behaviour. However, we are still bound to this planet and, as the narrator states in *Nova Express*, "To live is to collaborate."³⁶

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The first two elements that make up Burroughs's myth of control are, therefore, the postulations that, firstly, language is a means of manipulation that functions to protect the power of both secular (Trak advertising) and religious (the Mayan priests) institutions, and secondly, that (objective) reality is a fabrication, this being conveyed through the image of the meshing of the action in the "movies" with that of the "boys."

The third element in the hypothesis is that the body itself is a form of control. In "The Case of the Celluloid Kali" the reaction of the Countess Di Vile when Clem speeds up the movie is violent. The acceleration of the movie causes the boys to come "like machine guns":

Half the guests explode straightaway [. . .] The others are flopping around the floor like beeched idiots [SM 49]

At this point the Countess steps in to curb this desecration of the control machine, and, invoking the Hindu goddess Kali, kills the boys: the narrator, Snide, the private asshole, escapes in an "aqualung" to fight another day.

From the chapter title we are placed immediately in relation to myth—that of the Hindu goddess Kali—and to the displacing of that myth, by the use of the word "celluloid." The second time "Kali" is used is as invocation and dedication of the murder of the "guests" to that goddess.

While the name of the goddess is used, the reasons for this are not at first evident. Kali is the goddess of the "Omnipotence of Time" depicted in the *Kali Tantra*, verse 496, as

Most fearful, her laughter shows her dreadful teeth. She stands upon a corpse. She has four arms. Her hands hold a sword and a head and show the gestures of removing fear and granting boons. She is the auspicious divinity of sleep, the consort of Siva. Naked clad only in space, the goddess is resplendent. Her tongue hangs out. She wears a garland of heads. Such is the form worthy of meditation of the Power of Time, Kali, who dwells near funeral pyres.

Kali is linked both with destruction and the end of the world and, therefore, an assumption can be made from the title, that destruction is going to take place through the medium of film, which is to some extent what happens. However, it is only in following the "cut-up trilogy" and by questioning the reference to Kali in *The Ticket That Exploded* that the full import of the reference becomes clear. In *The Ticket That Exploded* at page 85 we have a parenthesis:

The noose is a weapon—the weapon of Kali

The weapon of Kali, the Goddess, is a sword; however, the weapon of the thugees was the noose. The thugees, a Hindu confraternity of ritual murderers, killed solely by strangulation and dedicated the last gasp of their victims to the terrible blood-smeared goddess.³⁷ This shifts the reading of the title from an emphasis on destruction through the means of film; to the content of the film itself: ritual murder in the form of hanging and the "orgasm-death" thereby produced. This in turn is dedicated to the goddess of the final destruction of the world through the power-of-time-over-all-things.³⁸ Therefore, the reference to Kali, linked with the "orgasm-death," underlines the facts of biology: birth, aging through time and death.

In the "myth of control," the "orgasm-death" is the human condition as we are forced to accept it. The beginning and the end are linked by the inescapable power of time. The bringing together of these two fundamentals of human existence, male orgasm and death, highlights the "deadly impasse" in which we are held. The main device of this confinement is the human body in which freedom cannot exist due to the constraints placed on the individual by biological necessity:³⁹ the ultimate system of control is the nervous system.

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The Soft Machine combines the cut-up, narrative fragments and reference to myth in order to postulate a fundamental explanation of the control systems of language and institution, both religious and secular, all of which are bound together in biology; in the body. This radical hypothesis challenges the reader of the text as well as the reader after-text, taking the reading off the page and into the world of action.

The Soft Machine presents us with a myth of control that challenges the concept of discourse as it is linked to the power of institutions. That very discourse confines and manipulates action, hijacking the individual's power to "think" beyond the parameters it lays out and, therefore, to question the existence of both the institution and the related discourse, and, at its limit, of the body and language. *The Soft Machine* itself fixes on an anti-discourse of textual folds. It attempts to explain the systems of control by way of fantastic narrative fragments, but at the same time

these fragments further confuse our relation with the world, beyond *The Soft Machine*, by adding other narratives to it. However, anti-narrative is provided by the cut-up, and the mutual negation, of cut-up alongside narrative fragment, provides the reader with the perfect zero of meaning.⁴⁰ In this textual confusion each thought becomes unmaintainable: the technical sergeant has served his purpose as far as our (nervous) system is concerned.

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NOTES

¹For Salvina D'Anna and Louis. "Hands up . . ."—Thanks to Didier Ober and Peter Gaines for all their help.—This article is the revised version of a paper presented on "The Presence of Mythology in American Literature" at the Fachhochschule Köln in July 1995.

²Jennie Skerle traces the first use of this expression back to an interview with Burroughs conducted by Eric Mottram for the BBC in 1965. See *William S. Burroughs* (Boston: Hall, 1985) 50, 105.

³See Aristotle, "Poetic Truth and Historical Truth," *Poetics*, chapter 9 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

⁴"Myth would seem to be the radicalization of a hypothesis, the hypothesis whereby, going to the limit, thought has always included what desimplifies, disjoins, and undoes it, what destroys at its strongest point the possibility of its maintaining itself even through fantastic narrative (a return to telling)." M. Blanchot, *L'Écriture du Désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) 136. Translation based on that of Anne Smock, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986) 86.

While I have chosen this particular approach to myth other starting points are possible when discussing the presence of myth in *The Soft Machine*. If one perceives myth as based on a creation or foundation theme then a suitable example can be found in the final chapter of *The Soft Machine*, "Cross The Wounded Galaxies" (127-29), which depicts the evolution of the human species from apes as the evolution of the "muttering sickness," also known as "the spoken word."

⁵W. S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (Paris: Olympia, 1961; New York: Grove, 1962; London: Calder & Boyars, 1968 [revised]).

⁶For Burroughs's account of the discovery of the method and its application, see *The Third Mind* (New York: Viking, 1978); "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin," *Research* 4/5 (San Francisco, 1982) 35-36; "The Name is Burroughs," *The Adding Machine* 12-14; "It Belongs To The Cucumbers," *The Adding Machine* 53-60; *The Job* 27-32. For examples of the texts produced, see "The Cut-up trilogy" and *The Burroughs File* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1984). For examples of criticism of the technique, see: D. Lodge, "Objections to Burroughs"; A. Friedberg, "'Cut-Ups': A Synema of

the Text"; O. Harris, "Cut-Up Closure," all in *William S. Burroughs at the Front*, ed. J. Skerle and B. Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991).

⁷W. S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (Paris: Olympia, 1962; New York: Grove, 1967; London: Paladin, 1985).

⁸W. S. Burroughs, *Nova Express* (New York: Grove, 1964).

⁹W. S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (Paris: Olympia, 1959; New York: Grove, 1962; London: Flamingo, 1993).

¹⁰Or perhaps we should say at the time of the rewriting of *The Soft Machine*, as here I am working from the 1968 edition which was considerably re-edited. This makes the comments in *The Job* especially relevant as it was produced at roughly the same time as the rewrite of *The Soft Machine*, being first published in France under the title *Entretien avec William Burroughs* in 1969. W. S. Burroughs and D. Odier, *The Job* (New York: Grove, 1974).

¹¹See Burroughs, *The Job* 38-48.

¹²Burroughs, *The Job* 21.

¹³Burroughs, *The Job* 199.

¹⁴Burroughs has cut-up and incorporated texts from Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Eliot, Conrad, Kafka and Fitzgerald among others, in his work. On this aspect of the cut-up technique, see "Les Voleurs," *The Adding Machine* (London: Calder, 1985) 19-21.

¹⁵P. Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: New Left Books, 1975; London: Verso, 1988) 265-66. One must handle carefully the links between Burroughs's work and the Dadaists. Burroughs, while acknowledging his debt to the Dadaists, criticises vehemently the efforts of the Dadaists to bring about political change. His criticism seems to rest on two points. Firstly, that the Dadaists remained on the outside of the organs of political power and were therefore powerless, and secondly, their criticisms were too frivolous. In *Nova Express* Burroughs writes: "those dumb rubes playing around with photomontage—Like charging a regiment of tanks with a defective slingshot." In the later work *The Western Lands* he is just as abusive: "*Jeder Mann sein eigener Fussball*. (Every man his own football.) They deserved to lose for such vapid nonsense." *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* was a Dadaist periodical launched by a group including George Grosz and John Heartfield in February 1919. See *John Heartfield*, ed. Peter Pachnik and Klaus Honnef (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992) 123.

¹⁶J. M. Bernstein, "The Culture Industry," in T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991) 21.

¹⁷W. S. Burroughs, "Creative Reading," *The Adding Machine* 43-44.

¹⁸Barry Miles, *El Hombre Invisible* (London: Virgin, 1992) 140. Burroughs used tape recorders to construct cut-ups by inserting random, in the temporal sense, interruptions and also by inching and splicing tapes. See *Break on through to the grey room* (Brussels: SubRosa, 1986), which includes early tape experiments. *Towers Open Fire*, *The Cut-Ups*, and *Bill and Tony*, made between 1962 and 1965, were directed by Antony Balch and extended the cut-up to film. These films along with other "cut-up" films are included on the video *Three Films* (Brighton: Temple Press).

¹⁹Vortex is used in the light of "A Descent into the Maelström" by Poe (*The Complete Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982] 127-40) where the (scientific) explanation of the workings of the whirlpool are altogether insufficient in describing the torrents and their effect. However, science does come in useful

as a tool for escaping the downward pull of that "abyss." Similarly, attempts to "understand" *The Soft Machine* in the analysis of forms is altogether insufficient and could do nothing but distract the reader from plunging into the textual depths.

However, if the reader wishes to avoid such distasteful events, as being sucked in, there is no easier way than by a study of forms. As Artaud puts it in *Le Théâtre et son Double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 20:

"Et s'il est encore quelque chose d'inférial et de véritablement maudit dans ce temps, c'est de s'attarder artistiquement sur des formes, au lieu d'être comme des suppliciés que l'on brûle et qui font des signes sur leurs bûchers." ["And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signalling through the flames."]

The reader of the cut-up becomes the victim of torture, but a delicious one that he calls others to take part in. The protection of "examination of forms" or "critical distance" is pushed aside in order to become victim of the text. We abandon ourselves to the textual attractions, to the geography of the text, its spacings and holes, the folds and juxtapositions, and the encounters, not looking for but stumbling across the witches' house of ourselves in the textual terrain. In this way the motives of reading are in themselves questioned: what do we search for when we read a text: looking for meaning (based on what); looking for story; plot; characters; answers?

The "old man," in "The Descent into the Maelström," experienced the vortex but the cost of that suffering was that "the whole expression of [his] countenance had changed" (139), he came back but he was forever altered. Likewise we can use interpretation to come back into "the" world, but after the vortex nothing seems quite the same.

²⁰Writers at Work: interview with Conrad Knickerbocker," *Paris Review* 35 (1965) 27.

²¹In *The Job* Scientology, the Mayan Control Calendar and advertising are linked. Scientology provides the template for all methods of dismantling control systems, while the mass media "of newspapers, radio, television, magazines form a ceremonial calendar to which all citizens are subjected." Burroughs, *The Job* 44.

²²Burroughs, *Paris Review* 35 (1965) 48.

²³Burroughs, *Paris Review* 35 (1965) 30.

²⁴Burroughs, "The Beginning is Also the End," *The Burroughs File* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1984) 62.

²⁵Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (Paris: Olympia, 1962; New York: Grove, 1967; London: Paladin, 1985) 113.

²⁶Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 115.

²⁷V. Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: McKay, 1957; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 232.

²⁸Packard 232.

²⁹Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 133-36.

³⁰Sublimination is described, though not named, in *The Job* 45. Another notable reference to sublimination in the "cut-up trilogy" is the "Subliminal Kid" who is a character in the Nova police/Nova mob sections of *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express*.

³¹From the catalogue for an exhibition of Burroughs paintings at Cleto Polcina, Rome, May 1989; quoted in B. Miles, *William S Burroughs: el hombre invisible* (London: Virgin, 1992) 213.

³²Miles 213. For a discussion of "nagualism," a religious practice based on relations with a familiar, see L. Spence, *The Magic and Mysteries of Mexico* (North Holywood: Newcastle, 1994) 159-71.

³³From the catalogue for an exhibition of Burroughs paintings at Cleto Polcina, Rome, May 1989; quoted in Miles 213.

³⁴Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* 62. Here is another example of the use of Hindu myth, "Maya" being magic illusion, an aspect of the goddess.

³⁵Burroughs, *Nova Express* 53.

³⁶Burroughs, *Nova Express* 7.

³⁷This interpretation of the use of Kali is underlined if one refers to *Cities of the Red Night* (London: Calder, 1981; London: Picador, 1982) where the methods of the thugues are condoned but their alliance to Kali is not, see 117.

³⁸Whatever the benevolent side of Kali may be, Burroughs states clearly in his latest work that this is outweighed by her use of the threat of total destruction: "So God had to play his trump card. The Atom Bomb. But was it not Satan who enticed Eve into eating Adam's apple and got them both evicted? Satan miscalculated, or he would not have lost the battle. And now God, like Kali, must resort to Satan's weapon of total destruction." *My Education: A Book of Dreams* (London: Picador, 1995) 181.

³⁹See, for example, *The Soft Machine* 13-14, where the establishing of a "protection racket" is made necessary due to the "grocery problem," that is the biological necessity for nutrition.

⁴⁰Unless, of course, negation unto zero can be said to have a meaning.