



“Shift Linguals – Cut Word Lines” Viral Topology and the Cut-Ups of William Burroughs

Abstract: William Burroughs perceived the method of collage as a way towards a rebellion – an insurrection against the system of control inherent in language itself. In this article, a vision of language as a parasitic life-form presented by Burroughs in books such as *The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express* is examined. The method of collage (or, as Burroughs calls it, the cut-up) is analyzed as an opportunity to tear down the oppressive structures of meaning self-reproducing themselves through our adherence to sociolinguistic rules. The very notion of struggling with parasites of meaning is connected with Roland Barthes’s conceptualization of myths as layers of meaning that envelop and parasitize signs in order to further their own agendas. I endeavor to reformulate Barthes’s dyadic model of myths into a triadic one (following Peircean semiotics), which I then relate to Jeffrey Elman’s text on language as a dynamic system, which allows for an in-depth perception of the way in which the parasite of language is described by Burroughs.

Keywords: William Burroughs, virus, language, Nova Myth, semiotics

William S. Burroughs versus the Burroughs Corporation: a line of conflict burrows itself already as one considers this juxtaposition of a countercultural icon and a corporation, of all things. Rafał Księżyk rightly ponders on how it must have felt for the rebellious writer to share a name with an organization of this sort,¹ for this very issue brings to the fore one of the crucial themes on which Burroughs had worked: the deeply-rooted entanglement of people and the names they give to everything within and without them – words, language at large. In this paper, I will attempt to – if not unravel – then at least loosen the knots of this entanglement and peer into its viscera so as to analyze the way in which Burroughs’s writings simultaneously give shape to the lingual cobweb and provide his readers with the tools necessary for changing this shape.

1. Rafał Księżyk, *23 cięcia dla Williama S. Burroughsa* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2013), 14.

On the first pages of Burroughs's *Nova Express* one reads the following maxims: "To speak is to lie – To live is to collaborate."² The first axiom is of course paradoxical – if to speak is to lie, then that very sentence is necessarily a lie as well, and is therefore forced to contradict itself. A paradox derails the train of thought and ushers language into a state of aporia, suspending it in the process. The aporetic apothegm thus exposes language for what it is – a lie in an asymptotic relation to what 'lies' beneath it. In Burroughs's view, language allows us to interact with merely a "playback" world transmitted from the "reality studio,"³ a shabby façade unable to contain the possibilities of experience. Language itself is a parasitic virus⁴ sucking the world dry.⁵ Understood prescriptively as a superimposed, strictly codified system of meaning, language resembles bureaucracy as it is described in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*: "Bureaucracy is wrong as a cancer, a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action, to the complete parasitism of a virus."⁶ To reiterate, enforced sign systems are nothing but an edifice of semiotic power relations that force us to walk in circles over and over again:

Images of past time invade damage and occupy imposing repetition of past image – Picture the mold that encloses you the mold of what is not that inexorably determines and pre-determines what is as composed of millions of images a mould extending in time stretching out behind and ahead of you with the speed of light a vast tunnel of old photos a mold that penetrates every cell of your body like a virus filter and the negatives continually develop in the dark room of your body [...].⁷

To better understand the above-quoted passage, we must introduce the pivotal (and oft-cited) assertion: "Word begets image and image *is* virus."⁸ Word and image are both viral in nature, contagious to the point of spreading across continents and propagating scripted behaviors, be they the phrases we use every day or the rituals we uphold by performing them on holy occasions. As vessels

2. William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 5.

3. Tony Tanner, "Rub Out the Word," in: *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959–1989*, ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 105–113.

4. Mixing up parasites and viruses is not up to the standards of biological taxonomy, but, shortly speaking, that is what Burroughs does, and I will try to remain in accord with his poetics.

5. William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 55–56.

6. William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 67, www.secret-satire-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/William-S-Burroughs-naked-lunch.pdf (25.10.2018).

7. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 284.

8. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 49.

of meaning – as signs – they are the building blocks of culture, and, from the anthropological perspective of Mary Douglas,

[c]ulture, in the sense of the public, standardised values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals. It provides in advance some basic categories, a positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered. And above all, it has authority, since each is induced to assent because of the assent of others.⁹

The somewhat enthusiastic description of a “positive pattern in which ideas and values are tidily ordered” is perhaps at odds with the suspicious smell of conspiracy of which Burroughs’s writing reeks. Nonetheless, the final sentence of this quotation regarding the authority possessed by culture and the way in which this authority functions is of interest to us. As we can see, Douglas emphasizes the fact that in order to become a form to which individuals must conform, a system of meaning must be convincing enough to make people convince others about its convincingness. In other words, the power of a particular cultural pattern depends on how firmly it can become lodged in intersubjective experience; or it depends on how well can a given system usurp intersubjective experience and conjure up an illusion believed to be true by so many people that it eventually becomes impossible to distinguish fact from fiction.¹⁰ As Douglas G. Baldwin put it,

[f]or Burroughs, both visual and verbal narratives traditionally fail to mimic real processes of perception; they instead redefine how people ‘see.’ For Burroughs, this ‘redefining’ becomes a trope for how perception – individuals’ ‘narrative self-fashioning,’ as it were – is controlled by outside forces.¹¹

Therefore, by existing as a cultural being, an individual finds themselves in quite a predicament, for culture is made out of the very “molds” Burroughs describes as shaping our lives by imposing “repetition of past image.” We are stuck in a hypnotizing constellation of loops orchestrated through the system of meaning which operates not so much as a language but rather as a *langauge* – an all-encompassing machinery of measurement that gauges our attunement to the patterns in power. Its instrumentarium consists of, among other things, the “Juxtaposition Formulae”: “The Formulae of course control populations of the world – Yes it is

9. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 49.

10. Cf. the “hypernormal” state of politics as analyzed in Adam Curtis’s 2016 documentary/movie-length video-essay *HyperNormalisation*.

11. Douglas G. Baldwin, “Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs,” *College Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2000), 65, www.jstor.org/stable/25112496?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (2.11.2018).

fairly easy to predict what people will think see feel and hear a thousand years from now [...]” by turning potential chains of association into actual instruments of discipline¹²; another formula is at play as well:

Junk yields a basic formula of evil virus: *The Algebra of Need*. The face of evil is always the face of total need. A dope fiend is a man in total need of dope. Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: *Wouldn't you?* Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do *anything* to satisfy total need. Because you would be in a state of total sickness, total possession, and not in a position to act in any other way.¹³

Not only does the pattern of addiction relay power to those who have the means of production of all things addictive, but the powers that be can also ‘divine’ the whirlpools of meaning with the “Juxtaposition Formuale” in order to come up with predictions about the future, thus cementing the sway they can hold over the addicted populations (is this not the trade of futurologists and semiotic insight agencies?). If we remember that, at least for Burroughs, “drug addiction mirrors image addiction,”¹⁴ then yet another gloomy blueprint glimmers at an unspecified distance: a manual for what Guy Debord infamously named “the society of the spectacle,” the spectacle being staged by the “Grey Room,” the reality studio, which, as Oliver Harris points out, is the media.¹⁵

Against the script of the playback world Burroughs pitted his cut-ups. What can we say about this technique? “The cut-up,” wrote Gérard-Georges Lemaire, is a “mechanical method of shredding texts in a ruthless machine, a machine that could upset semantic order.”¹⁶ “The paradoxical result of its mechanical creative procedures is an organic textuality, a living text that changes on every reading.”¹⁷ By cutting a text open one fractures the structure, the skeletal form into which the flows of possible meaning have been enchanted, and allows these juices to spring forth again. In a way, one finds oneself in the midst of untold things, in dangerous, formless realms, where chaotic, ever-changing forces reside; it is

12. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 89.

13. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 4.

14. Baldwin, “‘Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus’: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs,” 65.

15. Oliver Harris, “Introduction,” in: William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), xix.

16. Gérard-Georges Lemaire and Brion Gysin, “23 Stitches Taken by Gérard-Georges Lemaire and 2 Points of Order by Brion Gysin,” in: William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), http://lab404.com/lang/burroughs_gysin_third_mind.pdf (26.10.2018).

17. Harris, “Introduction,” xix.

by venturing there that one jeopardizes the image a society has of itself.¹⁸ The cut-up chops up the gossamer (let us not overlook the spidery connotations lurking within this word) network of semiotic connections, and of social existence. Even though it is arguably most efficient in changing the lives of those who try it out for themselves,¹⁹

Burroughs is interested in the power of the image – like the word – as it can be manipulated and restructured in order to suggest not so much alternative narratives as anti-narratives free from the constrictions of socially constructed language and image.²⁰

As Burroughs himself acknowledged, collages were already done by the likes of T. S. Eliot or Tristan Tzara,²¹ the latter representing the Dadaist movement, many members of which dabbled in experimental composition and decomposition. We will not, however, be discussing the history of the cut-up method or of collages in general, but we would rather attempt to make a connection between its inherent imagery of carving, severing, dividing, and the way in which the powers that be are construed within the books of Burroughs's Nova Myth, namely *The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*.

So as to be able to do so, we must return to the axioms from the beginning of *Nova Express* quoted earlier, and specifically to the second one: “To live is to collaborate.” With whom does one collaborate by living? In the combustible depths of *The Ticket That Exploded* we learn that the “[c]ontrollers of word and music monopolized and froze the Earth.”²² Who are these controllers? As far as the ‘canon’ of the Nova Myth is concerned, they are the Nova Mob: a group of extraterrestrial parasites. “The Nova Mob have taken over the Earth. They control humanity by the use of viruses replicating within the structures of consciousness. Their invisible regime is governed by a single rule: create as many conflicts as possible [translation mine].”²³ The reason behind their incessant escalation of strife is their desire to cause a Nova – an explosion of planet Earth: “Another planet bites the cosmic dust.”²⁴ But what are the details of their modus operandi? How do they function?

18. Cf. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

19. Oliver Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” in: *Retaking the Universe. William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 182–183.

20. Baldwin, “‘Word Begets Image and Image Is Virus’: Undermining Language and Film in the Works of William S. Burroughs,” 71.

21. Conrad Knickerbocker's interview with William S. Burroughs, in: William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978).

22. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 200.

23. Księżyk, *23 cięcia dla Williama S. Burroughsa*, 61.

24. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded*, 61.

They are the unseen bureaucrats of *langauge*; they are the control-exerting control addicts safely nestled (or nestléd, if the red tape is corporate) within the innumerable strata of bureaucracy.²⁵ Why are they unseen? Burroughs explains this through the mouth of Inspector Lee, a member of the Nova Police – the antagonists of the Nova Mob in the great cosmic conflict of the Nova Myth.

nova criminals are not three-dimensional organisms – (though they are quite definite organisms as we shall see) – 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’ – And if there is one thing that carries over from one human host to another and established identity of the controller it is habit: idiosyncrasies, vices, food preferences [...] – a gesture, a special look, that is to say the *style* of the controller – Now a single controller can operate through thousands of human agents, but he must have a line of coordinate points – Some move on junk lines through addicts of the earth, others move on lines of certain sexual practices and so forth.²⁶

The gossamer network of semiotic connections – or what Wojciech Kalaga terms the “mega-text of culture”²⁷ – turns out to be a dense mesh charted with lines of vulnerability traversed by the viral invaders, because any “mold” can be a point on such a line. If we look at the books of the Nova Myth, then this idea of “lines of coordinate points” is used consistently throughout the saga. The “Towers Open Fire” section of *Nova Express*, for example, which seems to be a violently flickering succession of scenes from an apparently successful attack on the Reality Studio, ends with the following appeal:

Electric waves of resistance sweeping through mind screens of the earth – The message of Total Resistance on short wave of the world – *This is war to extermination – Shift linguals – Cut word lines – Vibrate tourists – Free doorways – Photo falling – Word falling – Break through in grey room – Calling partisans of all nations – Towers, open fire* –²⁸

The call to “partisans of all nations” to “shift linguals” and “cut word lines” echoing throughout the books is an exemplification of Burroughs’s strategy that aimed at evoking eerie feelings of recognition in his readers, and thus warping

25. William L. Stull, “The Quest and the Question: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William S. Burroughs, 1953–1960,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1978), 236–237, www.jstor.org/stable/441129?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (5.11.2018).

26. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, 64–65.

27. Wojciech Kalaga, *The Literary Sign: A Triadic Model* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach, 1986), 44–48.

28. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, 68–69.

their sense of time²⁹ as they took their mind-bending voyage across the hundreds of pages and folds of a ruptured world, of prescribed *langauge* mutilated back into unpredictable language.

Returning to the subject matter: what we have to deal with appears to be a viral topology comprised of “lines” composed of “coordinate points” (and quite necessarily so). We shall now endeavor to, as it were, zoom into this space. In order to do so properly, we shall have to make a detour, or even perform a *détournement* – although Guy Debord would probably very much dislike the fact that this notion of recontextualization is being brought up in the context of this paper.³⁰ We are, nonetheless, going to have to engineer an apparatus out of three disparate elements drawn from three theories.

The human host with which a Nova Mobster intersects is to some extent analogous to a sign being intercepted by a myth as seen in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*. For Barthes, who was inspired in his semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure, myth arises when a (dyadic) sign becomes subjugated to an agenda external to itself, when it is pulled into an alien, ahistorical, depoliticized discourse and used therein as an instrument, an empty receptacle for an extraneous narrative; *the myth is parasitical*.³¹ The interception patterns seem to align, especially if we remember that “in myth signs renounce their ‘significance’ [meaning here the quality of being a sign], pretending to be the things in themselves [translation mine].”³² One could thus say that the Nova Mobsters – impostors, identity thieves – are ‘mythical’ creatures. Another one might answer that this is unsurprising, given that they originate from the Nova Myth, but to remain bound to such an outlook would constrict our argument astringently, our argument being that the Nova Mob can be used to shed light on the inner workings of the mythologies that environ us to this day.

We have picked up from Barthes’s mythology a general description of how a host – already held captive by a cultural “mold” – is hijacked by a controller as they intersect in the semiotic mesh of coordinate points; we have the first element. But it is too general, and a particular wording on the side of Burroughs leads us to consider the parasitical controllers through a lens capable of zooming even closer into the processes of the viral topology. Let us try to apply the Barthian

29. Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” 183.

30. Cf. Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, “A User’s Guide to *Détournement*,” trans. Ken Knabb, *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8 (1956), www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm (14.11.2018). “*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude,” trans. Ken Knabb, *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 3 (1959), library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315 (14.11.2018).

31. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), soundenvironments.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/roland-barthes-mythologies.pdf (16.11.2018).

32. Marcin Napiórkowski, *Mitologia współczesna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2013), 51.

myth to the triadic model of the sign devised by Charles S. Peirce. The short outline that follows in the three paragraphs below (and further on as well, unless stated otherwise) is based on the already-referenced Wojciech Kalaga's *The Literary Sign: A Triadic Model*, and on Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz's *Semiotyka Peirce'a*.³³

First, in Peircean semiotics the essence of the triadic sign is mediation: a Representamen (the First element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of pure sensations called Firstness) standing for an Object (the Second element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of factual events called Secondness) results in an Interpretant (the Third element of the sign that belongs to the ontological category of rules and laws called Thirdness). The compound sound of 'the tolling of a bell' is first a sonic sensation, and then it becomes interpreted as a Representamen of an event in which someone or something is tolling the bell. The Interpretant can be a thought as simple as the realization that a church is nearby.

Second, the triad operates in a fractal manner: the Interpretant becomes a new Representamen, kickstarting the next mediation: semiosis is an infinite process. The realization that a church is nearby is followed by an emergent thought, which is in turn succeeded by yet another thought, and so on and so forth.

Third, as it has been stated above, Interpretants belong to the category of rules and laws. Particular interpretative paths are delineated by these rules and laws. Some of these paths lead us directly towards behaviors; in other words, we have habits that stem from Interpretants. As the thoughts about the tolling of the church bell develop, we acquire a habit of measuring time by the use of the tolling, which then diverges into habits organized specifically around this way of time-keeping.³⁴

Since we have found the keyword that connects this thread of our theoretical ambulation with the Nova Mob – the habit (the “idiosyncrasies, vices” etc.), it would be worthwhile to take note of what Eliseo Fernández wrote about the role of habits in Peircean semiotics:

Here I propose that habits, as laws, be regarded as instances of thirdness mediating between embodied tendencies and their surrounding circumstances. A habit is a tendency to enact the same tendencies every time the same precipitating circumstances are enacted.³⁵

33. Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Semiotyka Peirce'a* (Warszawa: Zakład Semiotyki Logicznej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1994).

34. Cf. Jonathan Sterne and Emily Reine, “Command Tones: Digitization and Sounded Time,” *First Monday*, Special Issue no. 7 (2006), <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1607/1522> (22.11.2018).

35. Eliseo Fernández, “Peircean Habits and the Life of Symbols,” from the thirty-fifth meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, October 21–24, 2010, Louisville, Kentucky, 6, http://www.lindahall.org/media/papers/fernandez/Peirce_habits.pdf (20.11.2018).

And later:

[...] habits appear as higher-order tendencies that repeatedly release lower-order tendencies into action whenever similar circumstances are reenacted. Habits are themselves subject to the action of tendencies of an even higher order. Namely, they have a tendency to repetition and a tendency to grow. But beyond these propensities, they labor under a tendency of a supreme order, the self-relational habit of acquiring habits. This supreme habit is the basis of Peirce's mature evolutionary vision. Peirce's synthesis mirrors within its own logical structure the trajectory of this primordial generalizing habit. This higher-order habit arises at the cosmic creation and unfolds through the rise and evolution of life forms onwards to the most recent stages known to us: the growth of *symbols* into the sprawling branches of human culture and technology [*italics mine*].³⁶

These two passages, the second being admittedly lengthy, though incandescently illuminating, both reveal relevant aspects of the 'mythical' controllers. To attend to them adequately requires that we focus for a moment on symbols. In Peircean semiotics, a symbol is the most developed form which the process of signification may take; it belongs to the category of Thirdness, for its very existence as a symbol depends on the proper functioning of a rule of interpretation. Associating an arbitrary hand gesture with a collectively acknowledged meaning – in other words, employing a symbol – is a habit of interpretation. Fernández claims that, for Peirce, symbols could have the qualities of a "living being,"³⁷ or at least share in the liveliness of organisms by way of being their extensions.³⁸ Though some may be taken aback by such a suggestion, it would be rewarding to at least entertain this proposition in our current context. For would not such symbols resemble in an uncanny fashion the Nova Mobsters – living organisms roaming the "network of 'habits' of interpretation,"³⁹ which is their habitat? We could define the extraterrestrial, parasitical controllers as, so to speak, rogue symbols, a spontaneous outburst of consciousness that took place somewhere within the semiotic cosmos of a remote, otherworldly civilization. Invoking Viktor Shklovsky's notion of "enstrangement,"⁴⁰ one could say that through the figures of the Nova Mob Burroughs defamiliarizes our mental processes, making our very thoughts strange and alien, filling us with a feeling of unfalsifiable dread – for who is to say that the thought I think I am thinking is not in actuality thinking me?

36. Fernández, "Peircean Habits," 6–7.

37. Fernández, "Peircean Habits," 8.

38. Fernández, "Peircean Habits," 12.

39. Kalaga, *The Literary Sign: A Triadic Model*, 45.

40. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," trans. Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2015), https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/first/en122/lecturelist2017-18/art_as_device_2015.pdf (2.11.2018).

The apparatus is almost ready, and we see more clearly now the viral topology and its inhabitants. The intersection of a host and a controller is like a mythical interception, but one in which the myth's capability of interception is derived from the strength of particular habits, which, as Burroughs himself admitted, mark the coordinate points. But how to account for this strength? And what about the lines? We will need the last piece of our puzzle to resolve these issues, and we shall procure it from Jeffrey L. Elman. In "Language as a Dynamical System," a text based on his work with neural networks, Elman wrote:

The lexicon is viewed as consisting of regions of state space within that system; the grammar consists of the dynamics (attractors and repellers) which constrain movement in that space. [...] [T]his approach entails representations which are highly context-sensitive, continuously varied and probabilistic [...], and in which the objects of mental representation are better thought of as trajectories through mental space rather than things which are constructed.⁴¹

This is neither the time nor place to delve into Elman's argument; what we need is the nomenclature he arrived at through his consideration of language as a dynamical system: the state space, the attractors and repellers, and the trajectories. If we envisage particular Interpretants as coordinate points in a dynamical, time-dependent state space, then the attractors and repellers – the rules and laws governing thought-processes, which serve as tools in measuring adherence to *langauge* – would account for the strength of particular habits of signification/interpretation/behavior. The viral topology would thus be 'populated' with gravitational bodies of myth pulling and pushing an individual along a particular trajectory, *along a particular "word line,"* the very "word line" Burroughs implores us to cut, to cut-up.

We have spoken at length about battling myths, but there is, of course, in Burroughs's work a sense of myth-making: the Nova Myth is a mythology for the Space Age.⁴² However, as it has been shown here through the construction of our apparatus, Burroughs's cut-ups are a weapon pointed at myths of a different order, the kind of myths that, despite being a usurpation of reality, continue to control us. Our apparatus has also allowed us to extract from Burroughs's notions of the language virus, Nova Mobsters and cut-ups a viral topology – a spatial model which can be used to identify and study what could be called *con-structures*,

41. Jeffrey L. Elman, "Language as a Dynamical System," in: *Mind as Motion: Explorations in the Dynamics of Cognition*, ed. Robert F. Port and Tim van Gelder (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), <https://crl.ucsd.edu/~elman/Papers/dynamics/dynamics.html> (2.11.2018).

42. Księżyk, *23 cięcia dla Williama S. Burroughsa*, 59. Stull, "The Quest and the Question: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William S. Burroughs, 1953–1960."

“con” understood here as a fraud, the fundamental deception of language (and the Magrittean treachery of images) making the usurpation of reality by myth possible: in the viral topology linguistic structures turn out to be *langaugeable con-structures*. Furthermore, the viral topology – a conceptualization based upon “word lines” and “coordinate points” – grants us a deeper understanding of the cut-up method by being the very environment in which the method is at its most useful – a war-zone of symbols in which addictive images are fought for and fought against, and which can be manipulated through cut-ups. Let us conclude with the following sentence: if, as Harris claims, Burroughs’s “cut-up methods should be understood as artistic only in the specific sense of a liberating life praxis” that he tried to spread,⁴³ then they are not only a way of waging the “image warfare,”⁴⁴ but also a stratagem in what I would call a *mythic warfare*.

43. Harris, “Cutting up Politics,” 182–183.

44. Nicholas Zurbrugg, “Beckett, Proust, and Burroughs and the Perils of ‘Image Warfare,’” in: *William S. Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception, 1959–1989*, ed. Jennie Skerl and Robin Lydenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 179.

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