

## The Body is a Soft Machine: The Twisted Somaesthetic of William S. Burroughs

*Robert W. Jones II*

**Abstract:** *This article explores the role of the body in William S. Burroughs's novels Junky (1959), The Soft Machine (1961, revised 1966 and 1968), The Ticket That Exploded (1962, revised 1967), and Nova Express (1964), of which the latter three comprise the Nova or Cut-Up Trilogy. The links between Burroughs's work and the fringe sciences and philosophies which he pursued for much of his life, are clear within his oeuvre. The fringe areas he studied most ardently include Alfred Korzybski's General Semantics, Wilhelm Reich's orgone theory, and the Scientology of L. Ron Hubbard, all of which examine control mechanisms of body and mind. This article shows that Burroughs's texts stand up not only as avant-garde literature but also as philosophical texts that outline a system to break free from control systems by exploiting the body/mind relationship. As such, this paper makes use of the tenets of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics to provide a critical matrix with which to explore Burroughs's unique methods of investigating the body's role in achieving transcendence.*

**Keywords:** *somaesthetics, beat literature, general semantics, Orgone theory, William S. Burroughs.*

American avant-garde author William S. Burroughs's fiction, non-fiction, and audio-visual works set a clear course for a soma centered path towards breaking free of societal control. This vast interdisciplinary program took inspiration from the work of Alfred Korzybski, W. Grey Walter, and Wilhelm Reich among many others, in order to create an oeuvre that pushes the boundaries of the arts and genres they were created in. This forms the basis for a philosophical program in line with mid-century philosophies of the body and functions as a continuation of the American Pragmatist tradition. This article examines Burroughs's work, and places him firmly within the American philosophical tradition by linking his program to Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics as well as within the larger cultural zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s surrounding the role of the body and language. To be clear Burroughs did not seek the high-minded ideals that Shusterman espouses nor did Burroughs consider his project in any way a physically healthy endeavor. As such, Burroughs eschewed a straightforward approach to the soma/body-mind nexus and, as I propose, he engaged in what might best be described as a "twisted somesthetic" program.

To build the connection from Burroughs to Shusterman, it is wise to consider the brief

definition of somaesthetics as, "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 1). This definition can be applied to Burroughs's entire oeuvre. As noted, Burroughs's primary concern was liberation in the form of freedom from control; however, due to his psychonautical exploits with drugs and other means of altering consciousness he created a bodily centered approach to freedom. Burroughs articulated his thoughts on the body in "Journey Through Time and Space", chapter one of *The Job*, his book of interviews with Daniel Odier. Burroughs states, "I would say that free men don't exist on this planet at this time, because they don't exist in human bodies, by the mere fact of being in a human body you're controlled by all sorts of biologic and environmental necessities" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 22). On the surface this suggests that the body is a limiting factor in the pursuit of true freedom; however, what Burroughs is working towards is a version of ascetic practice that allows the practitioner to work with the body as a primary tool for freedom as he states, "Silence is only frightening to people who are compulsively verbalizing" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 22). These two phrases are essential to an understanding of Burroughs's approach to the body and his desire to illustrate a path out of the mechanisms that dominate modern life. This path and the aestheticism that Burroughs appears to espouse, align with many of the theories of Buddhism as well as those of western philosophers such as Michel Foucault. "Silence," in the way Burroughs uses it, is the primary tool for transcendence. Many religious orders and traditions have practices based on silence, and Burroughs's antagonism towards "compulsively verbalizing" is directly related to his ideas that the word, and language itself, is a virus. Turning again to *The Job*, Burroughs writes, "My basic theory is that the written word was actually a virus that made the spoken word possible" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 6). By aligning verbalization with a virus, Burroughs is highlighting the key importance of silent concentration and contemplation. As noted, these tools are important in many philosophies and religions as a means of achieving enlightenment or transcendence.

Silence then becomes golden in the alchemical sense of the word. Burroughs was asking his readers to silence their inner dialogue and to use that silence to transmute the lead of human existence into the gold of a higher existence. In many contemplative traditions there is an admonition to relax. Buddha once explained the path of mediation to one of his monks (Shrona) and likened mediation to playing a vina (a stringed instrument similar to a lute):

*"Weren't you an excellent vina player when you were still in the householder's life?"*

*"Yes, lord."*

*"When the strings of your vina were tuned too tight, did they sound good?"*

*"No, lord. They were squeaky and harsh and hard to work with the fingers."*

*"When they were too loose, how did they sound then?"*

*"Not good then either, lord. Slack and dull."*

*"Was it when the strings were neither too tight nor too loose that they responded well to your fingers and made beautiful music? Is that right, Shrona?"*

*"Yes, lord that is just the case."*

*"It is the same in meditation, Shrona." (Kohn & Chödzin, 2000, pp. 113-114)*

Burroughs had a passing familiarity with the tradition of Dzogchen (a special system of mediation popular in Tibet) due to his friendships with Allen Ginsberg, Brion Gysin, and John Giorno in addition to his own retreat in 1975 at Karmê Chöling, a center founded by Tibetan Lama Chögyam Trungpa. In this system practitioners are similarly told to relax into the nature of their mind. To be clear, neither of these meditation instructions asks the practitioner to aim for total silence, they are however tasked with not grasping on to their internal verbalization. Relaxation then for Burroughs becomes a desirable state. This led to his early and lifelong interest in altered states of consciousness. To be certain, Burroughs was interested in almost any means of transcending the normative perception of reality; however, his primary intoxicants were opiates, cannabis, and alcohol, all of which serve (at least temporarily) to relax the body and perhaps depress the central nervous system. When describing a shot of junk, Burroughs writes, "The shot was a long-time taking effect. It hit slowly at first, then with mounting force. I lay back on the bed like I was in a warm bath" (Burroughs, 2012, p. 112). This description and the imagery of the "warm bath" shows the reader that, for Lee opiates are a tool for relaxation. Burroughs (and his characters) are often at their most effective when they are relaxed. For Burroughs, his addiction to opiates created a state of discomfort during withdrawal which causes an experience that is the exact opposite of a relaxed natural state. Thus Burroughs's characters (and the author himself) would induce a state of dis-ease that when alleviated by the introduction of opiates would create a false relaxation, allowing for greater introspection and body consciousness.

Much of the somatic consciousness in Burroughs's earlier works is centered on the ways in which stimuli (namely drugs or sex) are processed in different parts of the body. For example, in *Junky* a group of patients at the Lexington Narcotics Farm are spending time speaking about various drugs when one of the inmates notes, "Sure you can shoot cocaine in the skin. It hits you right in the stomach" (Burroughs, 2012, p. 65). In this way a drug (cocaine), which is often thought of as a central nervous system stimulant, is felt not within that system but in the stomach. The attention that one must pay to the body and its processes in order to sense what organ(s) and systems are affected first is staggering. The stomach and digestion play a key role in the attention to the self throughout *Junky*. Once Lee, the protagonist and fictionalized version of Burroughs, moved to New Orleans he is picked up by a local man. As they were walking through the streets, Lee states, "He was leading the way in the direction of his hotel, so he said. I could feel my stomach knot up like I was about to take a shot after being off the junk a long time. I should have been more alert, of course, but I never could mix vigilance and sex" (Burroughs, 2012, p. 74). Here we see again that the stomach and digestive organs are the center of Lee's somatic focus, not due to the stimulation of cocaine, or any other drug, but due to the excitement and stimulation caused by the promise of sex. Also, the somatic sensation in the stomach over the excitement for sex is compared to taking a shot of opiates. Many of us are familiar with the sensation of anticipation that rises in our midsection, and biology tells us that this is due to a surge of adrenaline. The beauty of Burroughs's prose in these instances is the central role he places on the embodied experience of his characters. The fact that these characters exist primarily in the mind of the reader and wield a visceral influence, is startling and serves to suggest that Burroughs is aware of the body-mind relationship and he intentionally exploits this for effect as well as to transmit his message more powerfully and completely.

Aside from the sense of anticipation that one feels in the gut, Burroughs also noted the physiological connection between opiate use and digestion. In two different sections of *Junky*, Burroughs mentions constipation. Early in the novel he is speaking about Bill Gains, his friend and opium dealing partner in New York. Lee was somewhat enthralled by Gains

and their partnership proved fruitful for a time. However, in *Junky* Lee notes that, "One of Bill's most distasteful conversation routines consisted of detailed bulletins on the state of his bowels. 'Sometimes it gets so I have to reach my fingers in and pull it out. Hard as porcelain, you understand. The pain is terrible'" and Lee notes, "There was no stopping him. When people start talking about their bowel movements they are as inexorable as the processes of which they speak" (Burroughs, 2012, p. 49). Here via the character of Gains we get a sense that the junkies that Lee is in contact with, and Lee himself are developing a deep somatic awareness. In this way, they are perhaps more attuned to their bodies than the average non addicted person. The constant states of addiction, withdrawal, expectation, anxiety, and pleasure that the characters (and no doubt many real-life addicts) experience puts them at a somatic advantage when it comes to focus. The addition of opiates into the system sets up a dependency and the addict will often note subtle changes in their soma that are indicative of withdrawal or stasis.

The idea of psychedelics, various mind-altering substances, and mental training is not new to Burroughs. In fact, many religions have techniques that involve the practitioner getting into an altered state of consciousness. One can consider Sufi whirling, fasting, physical yogas, or even sleep deprivation as some of the religious practices that are vital to altering consciousness and achieving a closer relation with the sacred. These techniques are given credence within the broad category of somaesthetics and the use of psychedelic drugs is explored in the work of Ken Tupper as footnoted in *Body Consciousness*, where Shusterman cautions, "I should note that my views on somaesthetics have in fact been deployed to recommend using strong mind-altering drugs, though in moderation and in carefully controlled contexts, to promote insights in education" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 39). Of course, both Shusterman and Tupper are considering the educational applications of entheogens. Throughout his life Burroughs often eschewed the role of teacher; however, his texts are in many ways instruction manuals for his readers, as links from Burroughs's thoughts on the body-mind and language, to psychedelia and entheogenic substances are common. Aside from referencing Burroughs's work with ayahuasca (yáge), author and psychonaut Terrence McKenna sounds practically Burroughsian when he writes, "From the point of view of the psychedelic shaman, the world appears to be more in the nature of an utterance or a tale than in any way related to the leptons and baryons or charge and spin that our high priests, the physicists, speak of" (McKenna, 1993, p. 7). The tale or utterance of McKenna, is however, more insidious in the work of Burroughs. For Burroughs, if the word or language is a virus then it stands to reason that one must "rub out the word" (Burroughs, 1992c, p. 164). This act, for Burroughs, erases the entirety of controlled existence.

## Language and The Body

Some of Burroughs's earliest thoughts on language are codified in a 1966 interview with John Calder, where he states that words "can stand in the way of the nonbody experience" (Burroughs & Gysin, 1982, p. 2). This statement raises a natural question of authorial intent in the respect that Burroughs's writing is so deeply laden with images of the body (and of incredibly vivid descriptions of bodily processes, be they drug use and abuse, sexual imagery, or executions performed for the voyeuristic pleasure of an audience) that we must confront what, precisely, he meant by "nonbody." It seems that Burroughs as an author was, at the very least, interested in the body as the subjective site of cultural norms and practices, even if Burroughs the philosopher was (at this stage in his career) ready to "leave the body behind" (Burroughs & Gysin, 1982, p. 2). Relating to his concept of "nonbody", Burroughs cites a difference between his writing and that of Samuel Beckett: "Beckett wants to go inward ... I am aimed in the other direction: outward"

(Burroughs & Gysin, 1982, p. 2). This idea places Beckett and Burroughs as the two heads of Janus, joined together yet focused in opposite directions. One way to rectify the disparity between these two points of view is to consider that Burroughs was driving at a new way of presenting a holistic view of the body-mind dichotomy. While it seems in these quotations that Burroughs privileges the mind over the body, his statements on Aristotelian philosophy (in the same interview) reveal that he was not so ready to accept the concept of a mind that is distinct from the body. Burroughs notes that "either-or thinking is just not accurate thinking ... I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the greatest shackles of Western civilization" (Burroughs & Gysin, 1982, pp. 5-6). Hence, Burroughs must be struggling against the construct of body or mind in separation from one another. In a sense, when Burroughs suggests that he is working towards a "nonbody" experience, what he is actually moving toward (in an anti-'either-or' construct) is a recognition of the unification of the body and the mind in a way that subverts the role of language as a control mechanism. This also begs the question of the cultural construction of the body and of language, Shusterman notes that "whether we speak of the body-mind or body and mind, we are dealing with what is fundamentally shaped by culture" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). In that way Burroughs himself is working to both destroy and employ culture as a means of attaining freedom as he challenges "languages, values, social institutions, and artistic media" in the service of his battle with the forces of control (Shusterman, 2012, p. 27). This linguistic subversion allows the subject/reader to break free of conditioning and lead a truly fulfilled life. Further, Korzybski himself had very specific notions on the prefix non, "non-, mind you, does not mean anti-! Nobody has more admiration for Aristotle than I have" and he continues, stating that "Non-Euclidean geometries were a revolution. Non-Euclidean geometry, which did not deny Euclid, just made an alteration, a change in the premises, and the endless results followed" (Korzybski, 1990, p. 679). Thus, the idea of "nonbody" for Burroughs, following the Korzybskian model, would be to have a body (or a discussion about the body) which does not deny the body, and by implication does not deny its importance in the body-mind continuum. Rather, what Burroughs (drawing on Korzybski) is setting up is the idea of an alteration that is brought about via visceral communication and produces an aesthetic response in the audience or reader. This is a key element missing from other scholarship on Burroughs, specifically the work of Douglas Kahn author of *Noise Water Meat* (2001). While Kahn makes several connections and observations regarding Burroughs and Korzybski that are profound and, on some level, deeply esoteric, he misses this simple linguistic relationship. When we consider that Burroughs not only read Korzybski but attended his lessons while living in Chicago and promoted his works to everyone in his inner circle, it is clear that when Burroughs uses the prefix "non" he must be using it in this uniquely Korzybskian fashion. Hence, we must consider the cited work from Kahn and others in this light.

Burroughs's unique perspective on the body-mind-language problem and the underlying issue of control was informed by a lifelong interest in what would (during the mid-twentieth century) be referred to as fringe science: namely the work of Wilhelm Reich on orgone energy, W. Grey Walter's cybernetics, and Alfred Korzybski's general semantics. Reich's work enlightened Burroughs to the dual nature of orgone energy. As first postulated by Reich the orgone is a life energy, however, there also exists Deadly Orgone Radiation (DOR), which works to destroy rather than nurture. Burroughs's earliest experiences with orgones involve the sexual nature of the energy. In 1949 Burroughs and Kells Elvins (a longtime friend) built an orgone accumulator; of the experience Burroughs notes, "the Orgone box does have a definite sexual effect ... One day I got into the big accumulator and held the little one over my joint and came right off" (Miles,

1993, p. 54). In the late 1960s and early 1970s Burroughs began to clearly articulate some of the danger and promise of the converse side of orgone energy by pointing to experiments Reich conducted: "One experimenter nearly died as a result of exposure" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989). However, like many of Burroughs's interests, he also noted that the use of small amounts of DOR could lead to immunity to radiation sickness (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 65). Finally, Burroughs noted that Reich's experiments with orgones with their sexual nature and inherent power pointed towards a way that different types of orgasms could be distinguished, "Reich started studies with electrodes attached to the penis, and found that actual electrical impulses were given off and that these could be graphed, and that pleasurable orgasms would show a different graph than unpleasant ones" allowing the individual to better understand their sexual desires in order to subvert societal controls (Burroughs, 1999, p. 47). Burroughs felt that this last piece of information could be used to liberate people from unsatisfying sex lives, thus eliminating one of the major mechanisms of control that society wields over its citizenry. In this way, Burroughs was utilizing and subverting the control mechanism of sexual desire as a way to help instruct his readership about possible solutions. By helping individuals live a more fulfilling sex life he felt that society might take a great step forward.

### **Burroughs and Biofeedback**

Along with Burroughs's aforementioned pursuits into various means of subverting control, he became interested in the body-mind nexus and the ways in which one could use the body to retrain the mind. His interest in Korzybski and the latter's approach to an embodied cognition is summarized in the maxim, "You think as much with your big toe as you do with your brain...and a whole lot more effectively", showing that despite the clear linguistic trajectory of Korzybski's general semantics, the body holds a deeper role in every facet of the cognitive process (Burroughs, 2013, p. 97). As part of Burroughs's exploration into the manipulation of the body, he explored concepts of biofeedback and autonomic shaping in depth as a doorway to unlocking human potential which, according to Burroughs is stifled by the many faces of control. These techniques hold great potential, and biofeedback could hold great value in the linking of Burroughs's somatic theories with Shusterman's somaesthetics. Both rely on a heightened or attenuated focus on the various processes of the body in order to gain mastery or even control over them. Burroughs speaks of biofeedback and the necessity for dreaming in a 1982 interview with Jennie Skerl. He states that warm blooded animals must dream, or they will die (Burroughs, 1999, p. 126). The importance of dreams is also linked to Burroughs's interest in Scientology, or rather, his interest in Scientology is recorded in Burroughs's dreams. For example, in late 1969 Burroughs decided not to be bound by the Gregorian calendar and instead created a dream calendar. A few days after beginning this new date system, Burroughs recorded a dream where he tells L. Ron Hubbard, "You can't date yourself. Time is the presence of another being" (Wills, 2013, p. 159). In this way, somatic consciousness, the rejection of time, and the dreams themselves are all linked to transcendence and it is Burroughs's use of various biofeedback practices that unlocks these ideas.

This interest in biofeedback techniques is, no doubt, connected to Burroughs's early interest in Scientology. The primary technology for auditing (or even self-auditing) is the electropsychometer or e-meter. The e-meter is a device that measures the electrical conductivity of the user's skin and is a key tool (or as the scientologists call it "a religious artifact") for a person to understand how various images or thought forms can control or effect the physical body. Burroughs was an early adherent and promoter of Scientology and spent a great deal of

time performing self-audits as a method to uncover the many ways in which he (and as he felt, all of humanity) was being controlled and manipulated. In interpreting L. Ron Hubbard's (the founder of Scientology) methods, Burroughs notes that, "The Reactive Mind consists of goals so repulsive or frightening to the subject that he compulsively reacts against them and it is precisely this reaction that keeps these negative goals in operation. Negative goals are implanted by fear" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 25). To Burroughs's credit, he generally applied his keen analytical mind to issues such as the e-meter (e.g. orgones, infrasound, flicker) with a predisposition toward believing that the device or technique worked. The "Reactive Mind" (also written as RM) according to Hubbard, stores engrams or images that contain pain threats and recordings of past trauma (Wills, 2013, p. 59). Additionally, the Reactive Mind works in direct opposition to the "analytical mind", which Hubbard likens to the conscious mind. It is this tension that allegedly creates the physical responses measured by the e-meter. The subject of the audit can then zero in on buried trauma that is encoded within the engram, and by repeated exposure can then drain the power that this trauma or fear has to control aspects of the subject's mind. This open approach to fringe ideas allowed Burroughs to chronicle his experiences without prejudice. His view that a good writer is a recording device, allowed him to weave his experiences with fringe body practices into his essays, interviews, fiction writing, and multimedia work.

Regarding the e-meter and the Reactive Mind (RM) Burroughs notes, "Techniques exist to erase the Reactive Mind and achieve a complete freedom from past conditioning and immunity against such conditioning in the future. Scientology processing accomplishes this" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 28). In vouching for the efficacy of the method, he notes, "It may be necessary to run the entire R.M. hundreds of times to effect complete erasure. But it will erase. The method works. I can testify to that through my own experience" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, p. 28). What Burroughs presents to his audience is a method of measuring the connection of the body and mind. The galvanic responses registered via the e-meter are (according to Scientology) a somatic response to this tension or opposition. Burroughs's idea of complete erasure manifests through the works of the Nova Trilogy (also known as the Cut-up trilogy). For example, Burroughs writes in *Nova Express*,

*—Record for ten minutes on a tape recorder—Now run the tape back without playing and cut in other words at random—Where you have cut in and re-recorded words are wiped off the tape and new words in their place—You have turned time back ten minutes and wiped electromagnetic word patterns off the tape and substituted other patterns—You can do the same with mind tape after working with the tape recorder—(This takes some experimentation)—The old mind tapes can be wiped clean—Magnetic word dust falling from old patterns—.* (Burroughs, 1992a, p. 74)

The use of the tape as a metaphor for the mind is directly correlated to the techniques of Scientology, thus when Burroughs writes about "words wiped off tape" and suggests that "The old mind tapes can be wiped clean" he is clearly referring to the concept of "becoming clear" in Scientology parlance (Scientology, Church of). For Burroughs, his desire to rub out the word and erase the tapes was mediated through the body-mind continuum and assessed via tools that are clearly linked to the body.

## Exploiting the Body-Mind Continuum in the Cut-Up

In earlier work I make the case for the ritual like aspect of consuming heroin as one way in which Burroughs is using twisted ideas to effect real change within his soma. Drugs, psychedelics or entheogens continue their central role throughout much of his oeuvre. With regards to all of Burroughs's output it is clear that his prose, poetry, interviews, and multimedia compositions are user manuals for the revolution. This revolutionary track, while present in his earlier work is most dramatic in the Nova Trilogy (also known as the Cut-up Trilogy), the first novels (in addition to two books of cut-up poetry that were published between the release of *Naked Lunch* (1959) and *The Soft Machine* (1961)) he published after the completion of *Naked Lunch*. The first novel in this trilogy, titled *The Soft Machine* is, from the title itself deeply connected to Burroughs's ideas around the importance of the soma in resisting control and achieving a state of transcendence. Also, this text leads off the trilogy and is largely made up of material that was part of the "Word Hoard" of leftover text that he could not use in *Naked Lunch*. As these are the first long form published cut-up works that Burroughs wrote, it is just as important to examine the links between the cut-up technique, the Nova Trilogy, and Burroughs's somatic philosophy as it is to view these works as the convergence of Burroughs's personal intellectual history and philosophy, culminating in the ideal presentation to educate the reader.

Partly as a response to this formulation (that humanity is being controlled and the word virus is one mechanism of that control), the Nova Trilogy is Burroughs's most explicit literary treatment of the cut-up as an artistic medium. In addition, the name of the first book in the series *The Soft Machine* (originally published in 1961 and substantially revised and republished in 1966) is another name for the human body; as such, this naming sets up a main focus of the trilogy, the body-mind and language-control relationships. The routines or sections of the text cover many areas familiar to Burroughs, including opiates and the body's need for them once addicted, as well as sexual scenarios that are taken to an extreme. For example, in the section "Trak Trak Trak" Burroughs uses language to approximate film (a medium he was exploring as a natural cut-up) when he writes,

*Flash bulb monster crawling inexorably from Old Fred Flash--the orgasm in a 1920 movie...Flapping genitals in the wind--explosion of the throat from peeled noon drifting sheets of male flesh...flapping genitals of carrion--Our drained countess passed on a hideous leather body.* (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 36)

The first image we see is of a "flash bulb." Since flash bulbs are of the same intensity as the stroboscopic lights used in flicker experiments we can sense that this is the beginning of a textual flicker experiment. The intersections that Burroughs places within this passage would seem to suggest deliberate breaks, thus creating a rhythm that would be akin to the reader's alpha brain wave pattern if this were indeed a flicker session. Hence, we now start this passage under the influence (so to speak) of stroboscopic flash and its potential for consciousness expansion or perhaps evolutionary breakthroughs. Burroughs is repeating certain motifs "flapping genitals" within a heavily cut-up page, the "--" indicate the intersection points of the source material. These intersections are noted by Burroughs in *The Job* to be both "very important" and not random. This lack of randomness would then indicate that the placement of these points of intersection is a deliberate effort to dislodge the reader from the body-mind-language issue in order to generate a type of askesis that the reader can utilize to transcend the shackles of Aristotelian thought (Odiar & Burroughs, 1989, p. 32). This repetition is also analogous to the

first repeated image sequence as reported by many flicker subjects. By creating intersection points that bring attention to the words "flapping genitals" Burroughs is drawing the reader's attention to this image, which in turn instinctively causes the reader to focus on his or her genitalia. As he changes the text (and subsequent points of intersection) from the benign image of "flapping genitals in the wind" to the much more ominous "flapping genitals of carrion" Burroughs connects the reader viscerally to the text and, in this way, he deliberately attempts to create an abject response in his readers.

### **Burroughs and the "nonbody" Somaesthetic**

Abjection for Julia Kristeva is both a "process of becoming an other at the expense of [one's] own death" and a "place where meaning collapses" which for Burroughs's audience can then be transmuted into an experience (if the reader is sufficiently in touch with their body-mind) where the reader's corpus connects directly with the text via unclean or transgressive imagery (Kristeva, 1982, 2-3). This sort of interoceptive response is described by Oliver Cameron as "the ability of visceral afferent information to either reach awareness and/or to directly or indirectly affect behavior" (Cameron, 2002, p. 3). As such, with regards to interoception, when the viscera are influenced by external stimuli, their reaction to said stimulation reaches the level of consciousness in the experiencer. Hence, by becoming attuned to our bodies, internal processes and cognition, a person can have access to an enhanced field of experience and intuition. By expanding a subject's frame of reference and making them keenly aware of their body, Burroughs can attempt to communicate at a level that – for the receiver – may be beyond words (Cameron, 2002, p. 3). Cameron expands his definition to make clear that "methods to determine the occurrence of visceral sensory impulses that do not depend on indicators of awareness (such as verbal report in humans) will need to be developed" (Cameron, 2002, p. 5). When I examine the "Mayan Caper" section of *TSM* later in this article, interoception becomes an important tool to explore the transference of memory. An abject and interoceptive response to Burroughs's text aligns with the notion of limit-experience and transcendence developed by Michel Foucault who writes, "however boring, however erudite my books may be, I've always conceived of them as direct experiences aimed at pulling myself free of myself, at preventing me from being the same" (Foucault, 2001, 241-242). In this way, language, writing, and reading can wrest an author and their reader out of their normative subject position. Further, Cameron's assertion that nonverbal (or perhaps extra verbal) means of determination could be read to indicate that interoceptive responses are at the root of the Burroughsian "nonbody" experience (Cameron, 2002, p. 5). This rests upon a reading of Burroughs's utterance of "nonbody" as a unified way of viewing the relationship between mind and body. This idea may be thought of as not only anti-Aristotelian, but also as in opposition to Cartesian dualism in its holistic conception of human behavior and experience. Regarding the propriety of using interoception in this theoretical frame, I suggest that if methods can be developed to measure sensory impulses in a group of subjects to a certain set of stimuli, it may be possible to utilize those findings to create a means of communication that is both not word based and "nonbody."

Regarding the intersection of body and language in the text, it is important to note that Burroughs often returns to the use of flicker sequences and Reichian thought as a point of embarkation in the *Nova* Trilogy. "The Case for Celluloid Kali" section of *TSM*, for example, is densely packed with allusions to Reich's theories and deliberate flicker imagery. Burroughs briefly departs from his use of the flash bulb as a flicker signifier in order to utilize a more natural image, that of the "flickering Northern Lights" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 69). However, the

Northern Lights in this instance are not, strictly speaking, the product of any natural phenomena; rather, they are the by-product of a pair of flickering goggles (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 69). By creating flicker (which is itself a natural phenomenon, as explained by Grey Walter in 1953) with artificial means, Burroughs links the natural with the manufactured in a way that suggests that man-made flicker can lead to a higher consciousness. This flicker sequence is followed by an explicit reference to the fact that Johnny Yen, a gender fluid performer in the text, was also a Reichian analyst (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 70). By framing this event in terms of flicker imagery Burroughs ties together two of his primary influences: stroboscopic flicker and Reichian theory. He turns to a more direct commingling of flicker and orgone theory when he writes, "In the Flash Bulb of orgasm I see that fucking clerk has stuck his head through the transom for a refill" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 77). Burroughs uses the "flash bulb" to indicate a subject that is undergoing a flicker experience while simultaneously informing the reader, through the use of the word "orgasm", that the subject is being influenced by orgonic energy. This image directly addresses the need for sexual gratification to achieve a Burroughsian transcendence. Through elucidation of his orgone theory, Reich laid the groundwork for much of Burroughs's thinking on this matter. Reich writes, "Freud...held the view that they [various manifestations of neurosis and neurasthenia] were direct manifestations of dammed-up sexuality" (Reich, 1986, p. 88). The sexual imagery that Burroughs uses throughout these texts is clearly an effort to show the reader that sexual liberation is one of the key ingredients for subverting society's control mechanisms. Further, Reich concludes that, "it is not possible, nor is it admissible, to separate psychic and somatic processes" (Reich, 1986, p. 379). This is a key point where Burroughs's anti-Aristotelian philosophy finds a unique connection to Shusterman's somaesthetics. By linking the psychic and the somatic, Reich and Shusterman can provide some informed analysis of the role of the body in Burroughs's texts. Burroughs is subtly suggesting that his reader should investigate these areas of fringe science and also that his readers should look closely at the images that society generates for passive consumption. Additionally, Shusterman writes of the value of sexual practice as a part of his somaesthetic program suggesting that "we can think of the *ars erotica* as art in a truly aesthetic sense" as opposed to "the meaning of the word 'art' as any organized expertise, skill or branch of learning" (Shusterman, 2012, pp. 265-266). This reimagining of the role and value of the erotic could serve to break down the walls of separation between the artist and the audience or as Shusterman notes this will lead to, "challenging the presumption that art must be distinguished from performances in 'real life'" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 266). As Burroughs moved away from providing a straightforward, broadly linear, narrative in his texts he was fracturing the separation between himself and his readers and finding points of connection with them. Thus, when he writes about orgones and sexual practices, Burroughs is working to bring this knowledge directly to the public in order to challenge the ideas around the potential uses for such energy.

### **The Colonized Body and Time Travel**

In "The Mayan Caper" section of *The Soft Machine* the main character discovers a way to travel through time and space. The concept of time travel, as Burroughs envisions it, is a highly somatic endeavor that involves all aspects of the fringe science that fascinated him during this time. As Burroughs is utilizing the medium of a novel to expound and conceptualize his philosophical outlook, it is no surprise that this chapter deals with these interests. Burroughs starts the section by connecting the body to the text when he writes: "I started my trip to the morgue with old newspapers, folding in today with yesterday and typing out composites" (Burroughs, 1992b,

p. 81). This quote places the practice of the cut-up (or fold in) in a setting (the morgue) that is most often associated with the body and the cessation of the relationship between body and mind. This quotation serves a dual purpose: the first is simply instructive in that he is telling his reader how to perform fold-ins with texts; the second is performing a linking maneuver between texts (old newspapers), the body (morgue), and time travel. In fact, Burroughs writes that "when I read yesterday's paper, that is traveling back in time to yesterday" and "I learned to talk and think backward on all levels-- This was done by running film and soundtrack backwards" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 82). Here, Burroughs suggests that backwards time travel is as simple as reading yesterday's news; this idea sets the stage for the function of texts and body in the time travel sequence in this section of the text. Second, Burroughs mingles the idea that systems and mechanisms of control that are functioning at any given time cannot be just altered or upended, but actually erased from the fabric of time. This is important because if someone were to simply dismantle the control machine it would still leave imprints on the psyche of the current population. Hence, it could be reactivated from memory and regain its status as a controlling entity. Burroughs also shows how entrenched the idea of a somatically based transcendence is when he notes that: "I must put aside all sexual prudery and reticence ... sex was perhaps the heaviest anchor holding one in present time" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 82). In this way, Burroughs is bringing the theories of Reich into a discussion about the destruction, or erasure, of the reality script. Since it seems that Burroughs constructs a time travel scenario that is both corporeal and cerebral, he is adhering to Reich's admonition that one cannot separate the psychic and the somatic (Reich, 1986, p. 379). If the protagonist of this section is to successfully travel in time via a psychosomatic process, then the ideal candidate will be free of any sexual repression.

The experience of time travel becomes the perfect vehicle to convey Burroughs's philosophical postulates and interests. For example, his interest in flicker as a tool for radically altering one's consciousness and outlook is developed within this section in the shape of "the best transfer artist in the industry" that is characterized as "a thin grey man who flickered in and out like an old film" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 84). By placing the transfer artist in a flicker experience, Burroughs demonstrates that someone who has mastered time travel has also been subjected to flicker experiments, hence expanding his mind and allowing him to perform a very delicate procedure. Further connecting this idea to Grey Walter, is the fact that the Mayan boy who the protagonist uses to undergo time travel is epileptic. Epilepsy is a condition that can be aggravated by stroboscopic flicker and was a condition that fascinated Walter, who also suggested that a flicker event might have been the catalyst for cognitive evolution in humanity's distant past. Burroughs also merges his cut-up technique with the concept of flicker when he describes the preliminary preparations for time travel: "He posed us naked in erection and orgasm, cutting the images in together down the middle line of our bodies" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 86). By joining photos of two separate entities together, the transfer agent creates a living cut-up on both a corporeal and psychic level. Moreover, since the bodies of these two individuals are fused together, a commingling of the viscera of the two is highly likely. When considering the performative and somaesthetic qualities inherent in the art of photography, Shusterman suggests that "photography's dimension of somatic, dramatic, performative process... is occluded by our one-sided concentration on the photograph itself" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 241). In this way Shusterman states that the process of creating a photograph is as much a piece of art or an artistic expression as the object created. By focusing not simply on the subject of the photograph but on the process and, crucially, the photographer, Burroughs is drawing attention to "the larger complex of elements that constitutes photography as an activity and as an art" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 241). This level of detail around the process of taking photographs in order to create the

mold from which the new entity will be cast, helps the reader to gain a different perspective on the meaning and purpose of photography as a somatically imbued process that calls for great care and precise movements of all the bodies involved. The idea of photography as central to the entire process of time travel is integral to this section. This is demonstrated by the doctor/transfer artist's key assistant "Jimmy the Take" who is a photographer and took incredible care to get the photographs just right, having the subjects come to him "Three times a week" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 86). Further, the photographer is described as a meticulous practitioner of his craft as "he looked through rolls of film his eyes intense, cold, impersonal" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 86). This aligns with Shusterman's concept of the great somatic care that one must possess in order to create an artistic photograph with skills such as, "steadying the camera in one's hands ... one's own bodily position, posture and balance" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 244). By linking the art of photography to the more dangerous process of time travel, Burroughs is telling his reader that film and photographic images are in fact tools of transcendence, freedom, and rebellion. Consequently, this would lead back to the idea of interoception and perhaps suggest that the organs of the two individuals contain intelligence and perhaps memory.

The use of a young man of Mayan ancestry for this time travel project leads to a complication regarding Burroughs's ideas of transcendence; we have a character from an oppressed minority population whose body and memories are colonized to facilitate time travel. Because the Mayan boy is never named and his interests are not addressed, we can see some evidence that Burroughs's somatic project (and his philosophy in general) is open to the criticism that it is self-centered, colonialist, and perhaps even imperialist. These concerns, with respect to the narrative, should take into account the mission of the time traveler – to dismantle the system of control that was in place in ancient Mayan civilizations in order to free future generations. In this way, Burroughs suggests that it is not morally objectionable to sacrifice one being in the service of the greater good, provided that the particular good being served is the destruction of a given society's power over its citizens. This in no way excuses the links of imperialism and colonialism to the story, it serves only to provide context with respect to the scope of this article. The fate of the young Mayan is not clearly revealed in the text and one can only surmise that he died, particularly as the protagonist notes: "I could see the doctor separate the two halves of our bodies and fitting together a composite being" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 86). This serves as an apt metaphor for the genocide of indigenous people at the hands of European colonizers. Perhaps, since the time traveler's body is to be preserved "intact in deepfreeze" and he is told that he can, if he returns, have his body back, the same opportunity may have been afforded to the Mayan boy, although this is not clearly addressed (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 85). However, the repurposing of the bodily tissue from the Mayan boy should not be confused with the character's death. This is precisely because the protagonist mentions, "I came back in other flesh the lookout different, thoughts and memories of the young Mayan drifting through my brain" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 86). For Burroughs it would seem that a person's memories are connected with the body rather than simply residing in the brain. In this way, he is playing with some of the core principals of Western thought. Many of the physical and medical sciences would advocate that our memories are stored in numerous parts of our brain. While it is possible that part of the Mayan boy's brain was co-mingled with the protagonist, given the description it seems highly unlikely. Hence, we must look to another source for the Mayan boy's memories: within the protagonist's combined soma. Thus, the Mayan boy's character is, at minimum, subsumed by the protagonist.

Shusterman's theory that the body is the "locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning" can be utilized as one way of understanding what was happening to the time traveler in this section of the novel ("Somaesthetics and the Body Media Issue" 34).

Shusterman also notes that "any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself". In relation to Burroughs's somatic project of time travel, the days and weeks of being photographed naked and in various states of arousal would lead the subjects to a heightened consciousness of themselves and thus become "conscious of more than the body itself" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 8). By blending the flesh and tissue of two subjects into one new composite being, the transfer agent is facilitating an interoceptive response in the time traveler. This would then create the conditions for the muscle memory of the two subjects to mingle in a way that would reflect Shusterman's somaesthetic theory. Regarding muscle memory he writes, "muscle memory also makes manifest the mind's embodied nature and the body's crucial role in memory and cognition" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 92). This indicates that not only is muscle memory (or motor memory) important for day to day movements of the body, but that the body is central both in creating and retaining memories as well as for thinking and cognition. Shusterman also links muscle memory to the very concept of personal identity writing, "the most basic implicit memory is that of oneself, the implicit sense of continuing personal identity" he further states that when he awakes in the morning he has "an implicit memory (as an implicit feeling) of being the same person that went to sleep the night before" (Shusterman, 2012, p. 92). Hence when the time traveler awakens and has thoughts from the Mayan boy the "implicit sense of personal identity" would likely be complicated and perhaps challenging for this new persona. This then changes the "narrative ground" for the character which plays out not only in his actions, but how the character shifts perspectives during the remaining pages of this section (Shusterman, 2012, p. 92). Returning to the link between photographic process and somaesthetics, the character is now armed with a "vibrating camera gun... a small tape recorder and a transistor radio" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 87). These items, especially the camera, are utilized because the traveler needs "not only the sound track of control but the image track as well before I could take definitive action" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 91). Thus, the traveler is a composite of a person who has been somatically manipulated and someone who (as a photographer) has the knowledge and skill required to wield the equipment to its full capability in order to complete his mission. Thus, as the bodies are being brought together for the purpose of time travel, the somatic conditioning that each participant has undertaken is magnified by the effort of the other party via the retention of memory and cognition in their muscles and viscera (Shusterman, 2012, p. 91). Additionally, the photographic process is redeployed, both as a means of preparing the traveler for his eventual re-molding into a new person, but also as a primary weapon that needs to be carefully put to use so that the mission will be successful. The person wielding the camera gun is constantly cautioning himself to be careful, almost as if the narrative ground and implicit identity that he once possessed are altered into a being that has new and perhaps conflicting motives. In order for this process to be successful, the body must be sentient and receptive to its very core; the flesh must be conscious.

### **The Interoceptive and erotic body**

Interoception, as it involves the response of the bodily organs to external stimuli, was first postulated and codified (along with the related terms exteroception and proprioception) by Charles Sherrington in the early twentieth century. Scientific discoveries that would lead to these neuroscience breakthroughs occurred as early as 1860 when "nerves were identified running with the carotid artery" (Cameron, 2002, p. 4). It would be a stretch to suggest that Burroughs was consciously writing in an interoceptive fashion, however he did attend medical school in Vienna for a short time and – as can be seen in his continued use of the virus as metaphor – he

was not shy about drawing on his reading knowledge in various sciences to make his writing more effective and incisive. Cameron further ties interoception to consciousness when he writes "it appears, however, that a great deal of processing of the sensory information is necessary before awareness occurs ... neural activity occurs outside of consciousness" and "processes that are potentially directly associated with interoception include classical conditioning and emotional learning" (Cameron, 2002, p. 265). What is important for a study of Burroughs is the connection between conditioning and interoception; this is mostly due to the very nature and message of his core philosophical and literary concerns: to show that "the human body itself is a very complex machine ... which is occupied by someone in the capacity of a very incompetent pilot" and to explore how "vested interests ... make sex difficult to obtain. In that way, they keep people always thinking about it, always worrying about it, and it keeps them from causing trouble" (Odier & Burroughs, 1989, pp. 115-116). Burroughs was very aware of the ways that society (and the vested interests in control) utilizes sex and sexuality to keep the masses placated.

This theory is similar to Foucault's views on the body and sexuality and their links to transcendence. Foucault realized that a "country had to be populated if it hoped to be rich and powerful" and that its "future and fortunes were tied not only to the number and uprightness of its citizens ... but to the manner each individual made use of his sex" (Foucault, 1990, p. 26). This is an important aspect in the study of Burroughs's work as a whole, and specifically for the works that he created during his cut-up period. He knew that those in control of society were aware that reproduction leads to economic production, which in turn creates wealth and continuous power for those at the top of the social strata. That is to say, that by privileging heterosexual intercourse over any other means of experiencing pleasure, those in control were ensuring that there would always be an abundance of workers that would toil their lives away in order to create wealth for those at the top. It is possible that Burroughs viewed his own sexuality as a way to resist the programming that society was attempting to foist upon him. While he may have been writing about male/male sexual relations (because that was his primary orientation) it is also possible that Burroughs (who had occasional relations with women) was attempting to place homosexuality (and specifically male homosexuality) at the nexus of his somatic program. However, unlike Foucault, who constructed a reasoned academic argument for his position, Burroughs approached this facet of his somatic philosophy through the use of exaggerated imagery and satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift. Burroughs constructed routines in his text that showed extreme examples of homosexuality much in the same way that Foucault engaged in homosexual BDSM in pursuit of his philosophical aims.

Foucault felt that by engaging in certain practices one could achieve transcendence. He describes his notion of asceticism as, "not in the sense of abnegation but that of an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being" (Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, Gomez-Müller, & Gauthier, 1987, p. 113). Burroughs uses his cut-ups and word collages to explain that his textual images are both representations of the reader, as well as the reader themselves when he writes "Hurry up see?-- Those pictures *are* yourself" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 36). By creating a place in the text where Burroughs tells his readers that they are looking at themselves, the reader is directed to perform an "exercise of self upon self" to begin the work of transcending beyond social constructs and norms. This places the reader squarely within the disjointed narrative and creates a further bond between text, reader, and author. It is through these bonds that Burroughs hopes to destabilize the relationships of power between the individual and society and, more broadly, within society at large.

For Foucault, these ascetic exercises took a myriad of shapes and forms. Most famous was his

experimentation with homosexual BDSM. However, not unlike Burroughs before him, Foucault engaged in these practices as a means to a philosophical end. Considering Shusterman's reading of Foucault in which he notes "Foucault's declared aim is...to break our obsession with sex as the key to all pleasure" and Foucault's own ideas around de-privileging sexually based pleasure, specifically his notion that "the idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure--I think that's something quite wrong" (Foucault, 1994, p. 165). Referencing non-genital based pleasure, he states, "that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies" we can further place Burroughs's intentions within these contexts. While much of his work is focused on male genitals and homosexual contact, it is undeniable that his advocacy of consciousness-expanding drugs and a focus on deriving pleasure from "very strange parts of our bodies" fits the same mold as Foucault (Foucault, 1994, p. 165). We see that Burroughs, through his own struggle with his sexuality, was oftentimes critical of women in general and male/female sexual relations because he saw love as "a con put down by the female sex", a sex which he further claimed was "a basic mistake, and the whole dualistic universe evolved from this error" (Odiar & Burroughs, 1989, pp. 97,116). These ideas play out in *TSM* with the frequent references to male homosexuality and in one of the few places that women appear in the text they are conniving, cannibalistic, and not to be trusted. While Burroughs envisions a war between the sexes in the "Gongs of Violence" section he also notes that the differing sides must come together in the "Baby and Semen market" in order "to exchange the basic commodity which is known as 'the property'" (Burroughs, 1992b, p. 153). The clear implication here is that if the sexes were to only interact in the interest of exchanging semen and ovum, there would be less of a need to seek heterosexual sex for pleasure thus de-privileging female/male sexual intercourse as the primary means of pleasure. Once this de-privileging occurs, at least in a Burroughs-constructed universe, men and women can enjoy authentic existences, thus freeing themselves from both societal and biological mechanisms of control.

## Conclusion

The connections between the works of William S. Burroughs and Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics are clear. Burroughs's work, as explained in this article, is a product of the numerous philosophers, scientists, and charlatans that inspired him. The cultural zeitgeist of the mid twentieth century also led to a great deal of exploration and experimentation for wide swaths of the population. These explorations in the arts and sciences as well as on the fringes of various disciplines provided fertile ground for Burroughs to forge his views of the body-mind as well as ample territory for his experiments. In much the same way, Shusterman synthesizes ideas from both eastern and western philosophical schools and draws on the work of diverse thinkers from across the knowledge spectrum. Thinkers, such as Moshe Feldenkrais and Wilhelm Reich, have demonstrable connections to both Burroughs's project and Shusterman's somaesthetics. This comes as no surprise as the body has always held a central role in western philosophy, as Shusterman notes, "philosophy in ancient times was practiced as a distinctly embodied way of life in which somatic disciplines frequently formed an important part" (Shusterman, 2008, p. ix). Additionally, both Burroughs and Shusterman are unbound by the constraints of their given fields. This freedom gives rise to borderless texts that draw upon, and have relevance across, a vast swath of disciplines thus making a somaesthetic interpretation of Burroughs's work and intellectual history not only feasible but, quite natural. In so doing, they illuminate the continued practice and need to disrupt systems of control via a somaesthetic approach, twisted, or otherwise.

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