

# Burroughs

Rob Zuk, whom I worked with at the Ministry of Transportation, brought in his own computer to use at work. He then invited the whole crew to paint on the monitor and the keyboard—not on the screen itself, nor in a way that would damage the keyboard, of course. I liked his style though I wasn't clear on the range of his action. He was personalizing the machine but he was also allowing others to personalize it with him. He even brought the paints and several brushes. Perhaps he saw it as a kind of performative and collective research into the nature of our relationship to the machine.

As it turned out, only one person dared to offer his own imaginative contribution. Hugh, who is game for anything bold and fun, painted two eyes and a pert red pair of lips so that somehow the Mac Classic looked like an amused female whale. Why, I'm not sure. But I wasn't the only one who remarked on it. Rob added his own touches, but somehow it's Hugh's whale, amused and receptive, that remains in my mind.

Anyone who's seen David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* will vividly recall the transformations various of the typewriters in the film underwent. A typewriter is one of the main characters in the film version of *Naked Lunch*. It turned into a scarab/roach talking bug that spoke from a large asshole located under its wings and was pleased at having fingertips enter deepest concerns into its keyboard face.

The typewriter/bug was the writer's contact with a mysterious organization that revolved around a drug trade. The three drugs it dealt in were Mugwump jism, a black powder ground from the bodies of huge Brazilian centipedes, and the powder used to ostensibly exterminate urban roaches (but the roach/scarabs thrived on it, as did humans—it was, apparently a “literary” high, Kafkaesque, “makes you feel like a bug.”)

Another of the characters looks more like a Mac than a typewriter. This Mugwump is all head and several worm-like protuberances extend from its head. The writer types into the mouth of the Mugwump and, when the Mugwump likes what is typed into it, three different drugs ooze from the ends of its worms. These typewriter/computer head Mugwumps were agents (or double or triple agents?) from either a rival organization or, finally, perhaps, the same cosmic conspiracy in which the roach/typewriter was involved. It was as though these typewriter/computer creatures were agents from an otherworldly realm involved in the control of this one by means of drugs and language and machines. The drugs were reality creators/changers/collaborators.

Elsewhere (notably in *The Job*) Burroughs has spoken of language as a virus, as a pseudo life form that, like a virus, attaches itself to the host and multiplies. An intriguing metaphor, typically sinister and slightly madcap. The metaphor is capable of ‘explaining’ or referring to various things.

For instance, the ways in which language changes are beyond the control of even the French. Language is almost a living presence that we do not acquire at birth but which we learn over time. And the dead, by way of their texts, continue to influence the present from across the way. The otherworldly virus continues to operate from its origins in the other world(s). The metaphor also plays freely with the idea of the collective unconscious. Insofar as language has insinuated itself into every mind, it exercises

a certain power and control over the human race and substitutes itself for a more human collective unconscious.

Perhaps there are different forms of the virus: Chinese, English, French, etc., or, more generally, alphabetic and non-alphabetic. Perhaps the alphabetic varieties give us some hint of the nature of the other world(s) that they originate from in that they tend toward the mechanical development of printing presses, etc., to better reproduce themselves, but also to reproduce the sort of mechanical, artificial intelligence that they originate from. The alphabet as a viral, mechanical invention from another world.

You could say that the otherworld is Plato's place or the land of geometry and reason. Or you could say that it is a place where aliens and artificial intelligences pursue their cosmic/worldly ends. Or anything else you prefer in the way of otherworlds. The Kogi of Columbia believe that there are nine worlds created by the Great Mother.

Burroughs identified evil with "the algebra of need." He has been a junkie most of his life and deals with severe addiction to heroin. Also, he shot his wife dead in Mexico prior to his real writing career and so has had occasion to consider his own lizardly ways. He is a homosexual and has written of women with the sort of fear and disdain that sometimes goes with the territory. His books, notably *The Soft Machine*, are orgiastically violent and bizarre in their swirling cosmic drama and intriguing cut-up consequences. One of the consequences of his cut-up technique is that the identity of the characters in the book become confused to the point where there seems only to be one character.

Despite all this, he has been a great inovator with his cut-up technique and can be both hilariously funny and deeply insightful about technology, the arts, and the source of things. He is a mystic, of sorts. A slightly demonic mystic, but a mystic nonetheless. And his sketches of corruption in both high and low places are well attuned to the century of the holocaust.

I became interested in his work when I was working in radio: Burroughs applied his cut-up technique to audio tape and is one of the seminal figures in audio writing. Also, he has written with insight about the medium of recorded sound. He anticipated the current use of recorded sound in psychological warfare. When the U.S. government blasted the holed-up branch Davidians and the holed-up Manuel Noriega with ear-splitting rock and roll day and night, it was straight out of a Burroughs scenario.

But he has also written about more benevolent uses of recorded sound. He feels it is very difficult indeed to cut the tapes loops that go on inside our heads, to free ourselves from control of various kinds. We are 'soft machines' in more ways than we care to admit. He has made several suggestions about the significance of recorded sound that have undoubtedly had their influence on many of the modern uses of recorded sound in helping people to free themselves from their training. He joins figures like Marshall McLuhan in their intense and imaginative analysis of technology and its shaping of mind and time. Burroughs's innovations involve radical departures both from the status quo of the literary realm and of the typical moral realm. He continues to attract people who have themselves a yen for the unexplored and the wild mind, for an understanding both of the 'primitive' and technology.