

Tales from the Gutter: the Transgressive Fantasy of William Burroughs and Andy Warhol

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Abstract. This study aims to mark the intersecting points visual media and literature deploy to construct the various modes through which transgressive fantasy, as conceived by William S. Burroughs and Andy Warhol, is articulated. Stemming from the artists' experimentation with collage techniques, the research argues that the purpose of adopting such style not only creates cultural allusions but also generates an array of contradictory fantasies and desires, among which the desire for death is most explicitly stated. Despite the apparent discrepancies between Warhol's poeticized representation of death in his Death-and-Disaster series, and Burroughs's morbid infatuation with horrendous imagery in Naked Lunch, the aforementioned works constitute allegorical models of human suffering, developed via the implementation of various collage narrative mechanisms based on the cut. Burroughs's incorporation of radical cut-up technique adheres to „rhizomatic“ narrative forms that operate on multiple levels, from stirring controversies and repugnance to proposing hypnotic obsession with death. Warhol's manipulative use of collage images and repetition, in contrast, is intended to create visual oxymora, which, by revealing a commodified and beautified image of death, attempt to disrupt the audience's perceptions.

Keywords: transgression, collage technique, rhizome, death, desire

Нина Додева. РАЗКАЗИ ОТ ПРЕИЗПОДНЯТА: ТРАНСГРЕСИВНИТЕ ФАНТАЗИИ НА УИЛЯМ БЪРОУЗ И АНДИ УОРХОЛ

Резюме. Настоящото изследване търси сходните принципи, които визуалното изкуство и литературата използват при изграждането на модели на потоци от трансгресивни желания. Проучването се позовава върху експериментите на Уилям Бъроуз и Анди Уорхол с различни колажни техники и цели да докаже, че за двамата автори колажът е не само метод за създаване на културни алюзии, а предимно средство, което насочва критически поглед към негативни за обществото явления. Колажното конструиране на художествени образи в романа *Голият обяд* на Бъроуз и в цикъла с репродукции *Death-and-Disaster* на Уорхол осъществяват производството на противоречиви желания, сред които смъртта е най-категорично заявена. Независимо от

различията при построяването на метафоричния образ на смъртта, Бъроуз и Уорхол разчитат тези желания чрез колажна техника и превръщат творбите си в алегорични модели на човешко страдание. Ако при Уорхол смъртта е визуално де/поетизирана, в романа на Бъроуз тя е болезнена пристрастеност, присъща за всеки художествен образ. Въз основа на направените наблюдения стигам до заключението, че радикалните колажни техники, използвани от Уилям Бъроуз оперират на множество нива, позволяващи навлизането на противоречиви възприятия, от отвращение до хипнотична обсебеност от смъртта, с което препращат към принципа на „ризомата“. В моделите на Уорхол колажът действа като визуален оксиморон: използван манипулативно, чрез повторяеми изображения и наслагвания, смъртта е пресъздадена като консуматорски продукт – тя може да е красива, но и отблъскваща.

Ключови думи: трансгресия, колажна техника, ризома, смърт, желание.

Research/Научно изследване

The current discussion seeks to establish the common mechanisms different collage techniques employ to create new patterns of interaction and construct new meaning. Given that any collage practice incorporates juxtaposition of images, objects or concepts across and between all visual and verbal narrative systems, it might be inferred that this multimodal form plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between visual media and literature. As a powerful transmedial narrative tool, collage enables artists and audiences to approach pieces of art from various perspectives. Focusing on William Burroughs's collage ruptures in *Naked Lunch*, and Andy Warhol's gruesome representations of death in his *Death and Disaster* Series achieved by cropping, superimposition, and repetition, this brief study represents an attempt to outline the key principles of using collage narrative, and, in so doing, to provide an insight into how to comprehend and communicate meaning effectively through the utilization of collage.

It was in early 1960s when William Burroughs introduced the cut-up to the literary scene and passionately proposed it as a powerful compositional technique leading to linguistic dismemberment, narrative subversion, and stylistic formlessness. Being fully aware that the process of unravelling the complex interactions within the cryptic and bizarre messages requires analytical skills and expertise in the technique, Burroughs strongly advocated for the need to adopt the experimental and innovative approach given the array of new meanings it conveyed. Prior to the invention of literary collage, Burroughs had constantly experimented with various collage methods, particularly in the pages of *Queer* and *Naked Lunch* as well as in photography, film, and sound recordings. Not surprisingly, when his friend and mentor, artist Brion Gysin, coincidentally devised and introduced him to the cut-ups, Burroughs envisaged the limitless possibilities they might offer. Driven by his desire to talk in abstractions and produce elusive narratives, he passionately embraced the experimental technique and dedicated himself to further developing

the form. Initially working in collaboration with Gysin and then independently, his literary experiments resulted in the invention of the fold-in, another collage method he later employed in *The Nova Trilogy*. However, it is through the cut-up that he finally managed to crown his continual search for a new medium with success. Indeed, the principle of assemblage and re-assemblage enabled him to enrich his creative writing techniques, to freely express his individual artistry, and develop the distinct elliptical style he had long been striving for.

In its fundamental capacity to juxtapose words and images on the one hand, and destabilise conventional narrative discourse on the other, the cut-up is akin to avant-garde and Dada. As a violent avant-garde collage method, the cut-up enables the author to literally perform a surgical autopsy on the body of any text, be it their own or someone else's, and rearrange the pieces in such a way that „new combinations of word and image“ are formed in lieu of mutilated ones (Burroughs and Gysin 1978: 4). The new connections thus established enhance a constant interplay between images, which, in their turn, generate an array of new insights. The basic principle literary collage follows is similar to that of the editing process since the original material undergoes considerable modifications: from selecting particular pieces to segmenting them into smaller constituents, and combining the latter with other pieces. Rearrangement, another fundamental aspect of the cut-up technique, virtually allows endless twisting and changing of images and words and instigates a process of limitless connections within them. Though the cut-up procedure may seem somewhat arbitrary, slicing and splicing imply a reasoned choice. Indeed, the process does start with a simple cut but does not end with a single join. Given that the cut-up involves various permutations and alterations as well as rearrangement of the new pieces, to a large extent the method entails two mutually exclusive if not antagonistic approaches. The first one, destructive by nature, is intended to challenge all preconceived or subjective notions, whereas the second seeks to establish order from chaos, and, in so doing, to produce completely different patterns that carry new meanings. Put another way, the fundamental principle of the cut-up practice alludes to montage – the basic editing technique in visual arts. It follows that the cut-up and montage, as transmedial narrative techniques, exhibit similar characteristics: they both incorporate juxtaposition or superimposition of images, scenes, designs, shots, or words, which, once compressed in a specific way, can generate multiple messages in a very short time.

Burroughs was convinced that the immediate effect produced by the rearrangement of various texts permits the author to go beyond the bounds of reason. Not only does collage raise limitless possibilities to think in complex association lines, but it also eliminates the restraints imposed by the narrative logic of language. In his interview with Conrad Knickerbocker, Burroughs explicates the efficacy of the cut-up technique and compares it to conventional writing: „cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway“, while at the same

time they break down „Aristotelian dualistic logic, one of the great shackles of Western civilization“ (Burroughs and Gysin 1978: 6). Hence, alongside the expansion of consciousness, literary collage allows indulgence in transgressive fantasies, for it constitutes an act of transgression itself – it rules out preexisting order. More importantly, collage enhances a mental process of repudiation and rejection of all existing notions. As Burroughs puts it, it is „thinking in images, without words“ that is the major step towards the development of a revolutionized consciousness that would limit the power of language as a system of control (2). Because words are void of meaning, they tend to create lexical ambiguity, an argument which Burroughs supports and addresses in all of his works. The construct that language, or, to refer to his own definition, „Word“ is a viral infection that has developed a parasitic relationship with the human body, remains his central preoccupation throughout his career as a novelist and multi-media artist.

Christopher Land argues that Burroughs’s perception of language as „a ‚false‘ appearance of subjective coherence and narrative continuity“ stems from the fact that he envisions the cut-up as a means to transgress this coherence (Land 2005: 459). Land claims that the theory of the word-virus should be interpreted not as „an attempt to represent subjective experience more accurately“ but rather, as essential otherness inherent in „the formation of the subject itself“ (459). Land identifies the cut-up as a response to this otherness: for him the method does not serve to „represent the subjective but to destroy the subject as a subject of linguistic control“ (459). Similarly, Rona Cran observes that the word-virus theory stems from „a basic contempt inherent in Burroughs’s own mind for the body’s weaknesses and the mind’s tyranny“ (Cran 2014: 116). As she further notes, „Burroughs deliberately uses language to perform a metonymical autopsy on the idea of the body, cutting it up with all the flair of a surgeon performing a public dissection in the style of Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632)“ (117). Alongside clusters of phrases with seemingly fuzzy logic, multiple images are rendered in a single sentence or paragraph, and juxtaposition is thus created. Juxtaposition, Burroughs’s favourite technique, adheres to cutting too; so are assemblage, repetition, copying, and splicing – all of them derivatives of the cut. It is for this reason that literary collage becomes his most powerful medium – it allows him to violently carve and remodel the body of his own texts. If the word is a prerequisite for the parasitic existence of the individual, it must be then shunned, cut, dissected, or mutilated: in a nutshell – silenced forever.

However, aside from his infamous theory of language as a virus, there might be another reason behind Burroughs’s almost paranoid preoccupation with collage. Because transgression and negation constitute much of his subject matter, collage practices turn into a radical medium for discrediting the world of reality. Collage begins with a cut, so it is an act of dismemberment, of violence and transgression. In explicating Burroughs’s theory of the viral nature of language, Lydenberg remarks

that it constitutes „a kind of anthropological fantasy“ that allows amalgamation of genres (Lydenberg 1987: 129). Further, the word-virus theory intersperses with his other major themes – those of addiction, control, and manipulation. The latter strongly correlate with the four grand metaphors dominating his oeuvre, namely death, sex, junk, and money. Ihab Hassan infers that the close interrelatedness between them signifies the apocalyptic paradigm of the Burroughsian universe: „first mendacity, then control, finally death“ (Hassan 1993: 55).

A year after the publication of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs started to insist that the novel was involuntary written in the cut-up style, though he did not realize he had come up with the same technique before Gysin devised it. According to Lydenberg, „Burroughs immediately recognised that he had already served an unconscious cut-up apprenticeship in editing and rearranging the voluminous material that finally yielded the published version of *Naked Lunch*“ (Lydenberg 1987: 44). Having acknowledged that most of the sections are written in a haphazard way, Burroughs discerns that they are reminiscent of hallucinatory fragments that allude to cut-ups. From this perspective, the very act of cutting and readjusting pieces of written material relates the writing process to the act of dreaming, an argument, which, from Burroughs‘ point of view, is a „certain juxtaposition of word and image“ (Burroughs & Gysin 1978: 1).

While it is true that the fragmented routines in *Naked Lunch* constitute to a large extent the flow of rhizomatic, hallucinatory-like interaction, it is the assemblage of these arbitrary and unusual bits that entice the reader to cut into the text „at any intersection point“ (Burroughs 2015: 187). Robinson associates Burroughs‘ resistance to adhering to chronological writing with his desire to destabilise the narrative from the confinements of linear narration; nevertheless, „the book‘ s recurrent themes provide a continual thread throughout“ (Robinson 2011: 35). Undoubtedly, what makes the novel a revolutionary rhetoric is neither the lack of narrative continuity nor its gruesome imagery and provocative content, but rather the new form of radical aesthetics it promotes. Robin Mookerjee extends the scope of Burroughs‘ demonic aesthetics and claims that due to its lack of internal logic, the body trope is reminiscent of „a cut-up language, reduced to its parts“ (Mookerjee 2013, 66). Indeed, Burroughs‘ universe does not seem quite pleasurable a realm to enter and experience: demonic beings and scenes cut-in, dystopian places materialize only to then suddenly dissolve in momentary lapses of consciousness until chaos engulfs a horrendous world.

With all these insights in mind, it might be assumed that *Naked Lunch* represents a rhizomatic depiction of the individual‘ s perilous journey to the margins of a hostile, paranoid, godless world, wherein grotesque images of man abound, carnal pleasures germinate, tension cultivates hatred, and anxiety nurtures madness. This collage of psychedelic experiences, schizophrenic revelations, dream immersions, and hallucinatory sequences enhance pervasive feelings of nothingness and empti-

ness and thus create what Lance Olsen calls „a poetics of beautiful monstrosity“ (Olsen 2008: 185). Rona Cran explicates Burroughs‘ s infatuation with collage techniques as being derived from „the thematic notions of cutting and surgery“ and links it to „the visceral violence“ permeating the pages of the book (Cran 2014: 115). She argues that the central character who turns into a collective image of human monstrosity is Dr Benway, a „hilarious and grotesque“ figure (116), who, according to Lydenberg embodies the „impulse of the scientific mind to improve or correct human nature (Lydenberg 1985: 57). Burroughs embraces juxtaposition as the leading collage principle to achieve visual cannibalism. For Cran the effect of juxtaposition enhances the author‘ s quest for spiritual enlightenment and individualism. In her view, the implementation of this radical technique allows the author to „collage his alter egos, his inner struggles, his daily encounters and unique perceptions, his psychological ramblings, and his numerous physical menaces into the structure of a text that logically makes no sense at all, but that psychically is as powerful as Hieronymus Bosch‘ s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*“ (Cran 2014: 108).

Just as Burroughs endeavoured to stir public controversy by assembling collages of juxtaposed images, Warhol employed rather gruesome but authentic images in his *Death-and-Disaster* series with the idea of repudiating society‘ s pervasive obsession with consumerism. Produced in the early 1960s, the pieces included in the series account for approximately seventy works that contain shocking scenes of brutal violence, which had earlier received heavy coverage in the mass media. These range from images of race riots, electric chairs, atomic clouds, political assassinations, suicidal acts, as well as images of victims of car crashes and tuna fish poisoning. Whether appropriated from newspaper photographs or police records, most of the prints represent distorted, transmuted or mutilated bodies that have been replicated disproportionately multiple times on canvas. What unites all these shocking representations, however, is their subject matter: the ubiquitous image of death lurking in American society. To recreate and reinforce the impact of his gruesome fantasies, Warhol utilizes the silkscreen technique and combines it with synthetic polymer paint. Reiterated several times, the macabre images of dead bodies exorcise a nightmarish effect upon their viewers: instead of being repelled by these violent snatches of death, they end up intoxicated. And here is the trick: mechanical repetition, as generally conceived, excludes proliferation of artistic discourse; however, the effect Warhol achieves while subjecting his audience to the gaze, is voyeuristic pleasure and engagement. Diabolical, omnipotent, and deliberately provocative, the images in the *Death and Disaster* series instigate quite disturbing responses: the longer the viewer gazes at the gruesome mutilated bodies and sprouting body parts, the lesser the impact of repugnance becomes.

Like *Naked Lunch*, the paintings and prints in *Death and Disaster* series convey the author‘ s apocalyptic vision of the world. From this perspective, Warhol‘ s works in the series can also be interpreted as a ghastly parody of American me-

dia that celebrates death as a commodified object. Beyond the media's voluptuous desire to control, to modify and manipulate, Warhol detects another impetus: the desire to pervert the human mind, to mute the society's protest and resentment. A vehement opponent of consumerism, Warhol incessantly bombarded his audiences with photographic imagery that blurred the distinctions between original and copy. Superimposition and mechanical printing of recurring images of mutilated bodies emphasize the profound impact his technically produced images make on people – the deeper they delve into psychological sadomasochism, the more malevolent and shockingly violent their antipathy becomes.

Just as Burroughsian, Warholian art too constitutes an unabashed critique of American society. The fact that all death representations in the series account for media cuts of people's suffering is indicative of how manipulatively controllable media can be over the people. Although Burroughs resorted to arbitrary cut, and Warhol experimented with mechanical repetition, the two artists have continually manifested their striving to make a harsh mockery of the mechanical existence of American society on the one hand, and decondition human existence on the other. In Burroughs's own view, the American society of the 60s was preoccupied with the image of death. Not only is the death trope a recurring theme but it is also perceived as „culture hero“. Often depicted as an orgiastic spectacle, Warhol's graphic portrayals of cars crashes reveal death as an exchange commodity just like the car is perceived as a symbol of prosperity, freedom, and plenty. Meanwhile, the dismembered bodies protruding from the broken windows and gaping car boots intensify the dramatic tension and create havoc and turmoil. Lying motionless and numb, arranged as if in an absurd comic strip, they become allegorical symbols of selfishness, apathy, and emotional sterility. Devoid of life, thrown into an abyss of darkness, these mechanically replicated images no longer convey meaningful messages. Death is represented as absence and silence, it is now an evocation of man's inability to bond, to love, to share.

Like Burroughs's kaleidoscopic ramblings in *Naked Lunch*, Warhol's *Death and Disaster* paintings function at multiple levels. First and foremost, they exhibit his attempts to amalgamate two of his favourite techniques – repetition and superimposition which he applies over silk-screen printing on canvass. The procedure involves the extension and enlargement of original photographs, the alteration of the colour scheme, and finally, the coating of silkscreen paint. Augmented reality as well as asymmetry and discord are thus produced, given that the two surfaces fail to provide perfect congruency. Where Burroughs would splice and rearrange arbitrary phrases in sentences and paragraphs, Warhol would repeat an image all over the screen in a haphazard fashion, leave wide areas of the screen blank and preserve all irregularities. This method to a large extent alludes to Burroughsian cuts. Where Burroughs would employ the cut, Warhol would avoid it, but instead, he would repeatedly superimpose colour over the image. His print *Electric Chair*, for example,

features an empty chair, printed on each of ten separate sheets of paper in a different colour scheme. This combo of harsh colours juxtaposes the image of the sombre empty chair and creates a visual oxymoron: firstly, by overemphasizing emptiness and space, and secondly, by forcing viewers to confront death. On the other hand, the recurring image of the empty electric chair also demystifies the very image of death for the latter is presented once as a tragedy and then as an orgiastic spectacle. Warhol's and Burroughs's aesthetic techniques might differ, but the message their works convey is essentially the same: to exploit the notion of death to the point that it is drained from any symbolic meaning. The poetic anesthetization of death seems essential for the projects of both artists.

Nobody has troubled the human mind within the 1960s psychedelic culture more than William S. Burroughs and Andy Warhol. Seemingly dominated by the aesthetics of negation and transgression, the two of them radically experimented with form and content, genre and style to create powerful visual imagery that still arouses controversy and inverts the subjective perceptions of reality. New vistas for the creation of provocative and surreal imagery are thus opened up that come to blur the boundaries between mainstream and iconoclastic art, which, in its turn, breeds unusual kind of poetics and artistry. Burroughs's avant-garde novel *Naked Lunch* constitutes one of the most extreme, vehement denials of the ethos of a barbaric post-war society, whose desperate attempt to camouflage its cynicism with fake morality recognizes no limits. Brimming with scenes of utter chaos and abject personalities, *Naked Lunch* delves into the recesses of the human psyche, thus revealing ominous rituals of unspeakable bestiality. Like Burroughs, Warhol imbues the paintings and prints in his *Death and Disaster* series with shocking scenes of brutal violence: from suicides and road accidents to implied executions, and all these images of violent death convey the artist's apocalyptic vision of the world. In this light, *Naked Lunch* and the *Death and Disaster* series can be interpreted as a ghastly parody of American society's infatuation with death. Yet, what constitutes the uniqueness of their art is neither the dilution of conventionalities nor the deliberate rupture of the pre-established social, moral, and political order but rather the implementation of various collage practices via which transgression is conceptualised. Not surprisingly, the synergism emerging from Burroughsian dismembered texts and Warholian multiple replication of images enhances the duality of the seductive and manipulative power words and images exert over human cognition. Reading Burroughs's cut-up texts, his personal obsessions and style shine through. He cannot help but impose his personal imprint. The same holds true for Warhol.

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