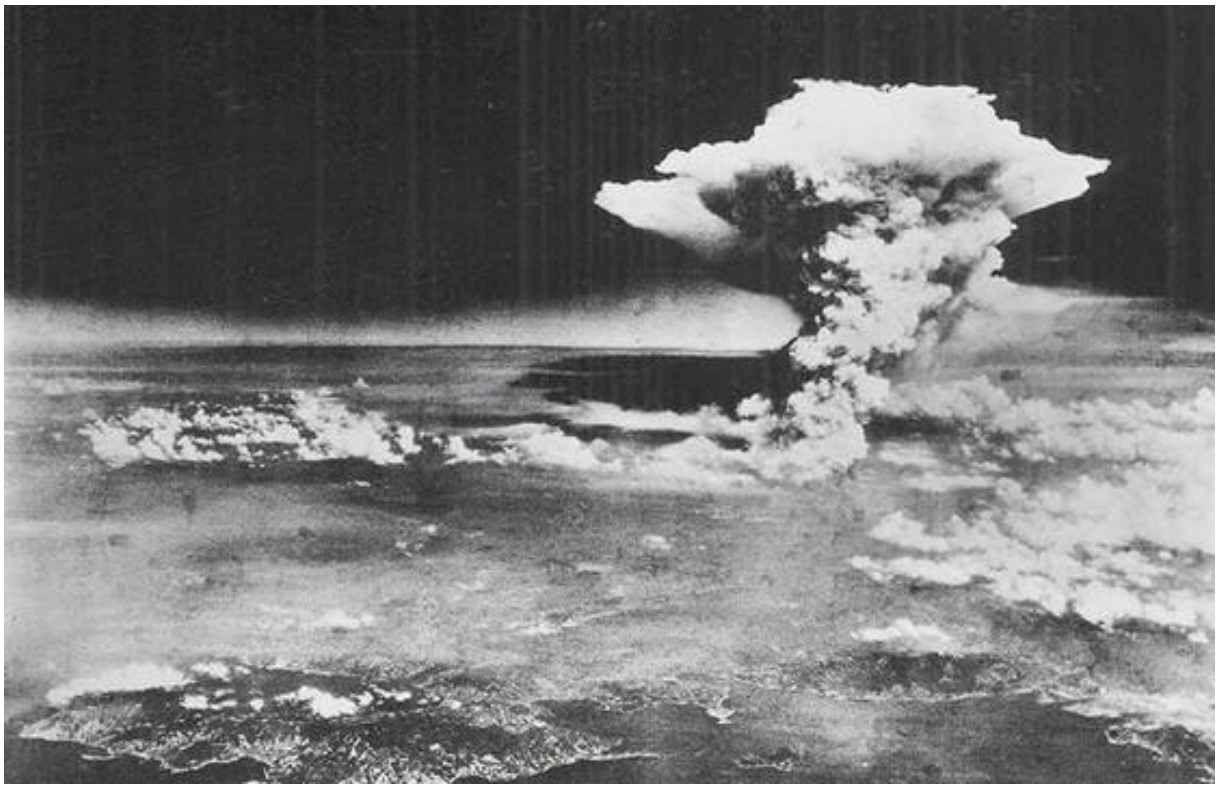
The Cut-up Literature of William S. Burroughs;

Barbarians and the Future



MA-Thesis for Comparative Literature & Literary Theory
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“Top Secret—Classified—For The Board—The Elite—The Initiates— ”

Are these the words of the all-powerful boards and syndicates of the earth? These are the words of liars cowards collaborators traitors. Liars who want time for more lies. Cowards who can not face your “dogs” your “gooks” your “errand boys” your “human animals” with the truth.

(Nova Express, 2)

1. Introduction

I. Why Burroughs, Why Now?

The focus of this thesis is on a mysterious group of beings encountered in William S. Burroughs' (1914-1997) literary works: the Wild Boys. These Wild Boys are a personification of many of the central themes of Burroughs' works, such as homosexuality, masculinity and violence, but also revolution, anarchism and utopianism. As embodiments of all the above themes, the Wild Boys offer much that is of interest in the present day political sphere because they exist as (and express) a reaction to some of the dominant ideological and social conflicts of Burroughs' time. The structure of these conflicts may have changed but they have certainly not disappeared: family structures, masculinity and femininity, the capitalist economic paradigm, pacifism contra revolutionary desires and, last but by no means least, the relation of the West to 'the rest,' and in relation to this, American imperialism and its 20th century crises. Through the Wild Boys, Burroughs outlines an alternative form of social organisation which has its own internal contradictions and pitfalls, but which is ultimately concerned with possibilities of radical emancipation. In *The Wild Boys* (1971), the novel which is named after them, we read a description of a fictitious American general's speech:

> **Camera shows the CIA man, a tape recorder slung around his neck rests on his paunch. Naked youths flash on screen smoking hashish…**
> **"You may say that what happens in a foreign land is no concern of ours. But the vile tentacles of that evil are reaching into decent American homes" … Suburban couple in the boy's room school banners on the wall. They are reading a note**

Dear Mom and Dad:
I am going to join the wild boys. When you read this I will be far away.

"All over America kids like Johnny are deserting this country and their great American heritage suborned by the false promises of Moscow into a life of drugs and vice."

(The Wild Boys, 123)

This extract appears to us mostly as satire or parody of typical American Cold War rhetoric. Beyond that simple observation, however, we see that the speaker, General Greenfield, explicitly associates the Wild Boy movement with Moscow and the Soviet Union. We learn from context around this extract, however, that the Wild Boys have no such affinity. They can be found anywhere in the world. In another novel featuring Wild Boys, *Port of Saints* (1980), Burroughs describes this as follows:

There are about thirty boys here of all races and nationalities: Negroes, Chinese, Mexicans, Arabs, Danes, Swedes, Americans, English. That is, they are evidently derived from racial and national stock corresponding to Negroes, Mexicans, Danes, Americans et cetera. However, these boys are a new breed. (71)

In other parts of the text we read about snake boys, glider boys, roller-skate boys, cat boys and many more subdivisions of this strange collective. From mutation to bodily augmentation to simple costumes, the Wild Boys are varied, and they are mostly described in combat situations, wielding huge bowie knives and improvised weaponry. They appear as an avant-garde of a utopian future with one very peculiar and

controversial detail: the Wild Boys' utopia contains no women. The suggestion made in *Port of Saints* but also in other novels is that masculinity can thrive only through the abandonment of femininity: "From that day to this the wild boys put all thought of women from their minds and bodies. Anyone who joins them must leave women behind." (97) This is, perhaps, the most divisive element of Burroughs' writing with regards to its political interpretations. The role of gender in Burroughs has been frequently discussed, even though for a long time it had been neglected somewhat. As an example of the increased attention that this important theme has received, Jamie Russel's *Queer Burroughs* (2001) contains a powerful emphasis on the masculine/feminine opposition and on Burroughs' representations of homosexuality, as the title of the work might suggest. Russel writes:

> **Much of Burroughs' literary output of the 1950s is characterized by the frustration and confusion that the negotiation of the demands of the effeminate paradigm produced. In comparison, the post-Stonewall novels center on a vision of a new, queer social order based on all-male (and all-gay) communes in which women and effeminate gay men have no place. (…) In place of the dystopian images of social regulation that informed *Queer* and *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs imagines a gay community that is not only free from regulation by the heterosexual dominant but also free from the gender schizophrenia imposed by the dominant. (57-58)**

Precisely the second vision on gender is embodied by the Wild Boys. I would argue that this is a highly problematic element, but that it doesn't invalidate a reading of the texts based on the idea of an emancipatory struggle. What is clear is that Burroughs took a polemic position in the field of gender; instead of calling for increased freedom, tolerance or

(civil) rights for homosexuals through his writing, his response is militaristic and based on a kind of exclusion.

A reading which focuses on the above themes is necessarily a political one, which begs the question: what are the elements of Burroughs' works that motivate such a political reading? An important motive for this is the way in which Burroughs agitated against "control-mechanisms" and the power of "the word" (or language) that the powerful use to remain in control, calling for individuals to overthrow these machinations in a manner which reminds one of the ideals of anarchism: self-governance and dissolution of the state to the extent that all institutional relations are voluntary instead of being imposed from the top-down. Burroughs' fictional works contain plenty of cryptic calls to action, such as this line from *The Soft Machine* (1961), in which the concept of "reality" itself is challenged in the context of Uranium Willy's plan:

> **His plan called for total exposure – Wise up all the marks everywhere show them the rigged wheel – Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe – The Plan shifted and reformed as reports came in from his electric patrols sniffing quivering down streets of the earth – the Reality Film giving and buckling like a bulk head under pressure – burnt metal smell of interplanetary war in the raw noon streets swept by screaming glass blizzards of enemy flak.**
>
> **(144, The Soft Machine)**

The idea of a "reality studio" is remarkable, of course, because it suggests that reality itself is being produced somewhere by someone – it is therefore artificial. Much poststructuralist thought of the 1970's and 80's also considers reality to be artificial, or constructed, the difference

being that Burroughs' characters appear to be quite ready and willing to "storm the Reality Studio" and to destroy this process in order to return to some pre-artificial or natural state, which in poststructuralist theory would usually be considered to be impossible.

The bloody age of colonialism has mostly come to an end, with present day struggles of hegemony taking on a much less overtly colonialist form; the place of homosexuality in the United States is much less confined than it was in Burroughs' time and the open racism of American politics of the 1950's and '60s would not be accepted in the same way nowadays. However, since the financial, economic (and other) crisis that erupted in 2007, now often called "The Great Recession" in reference to the Great Depression of 1929 which Burroughs himself wrote about too, something has become increasingly tangible: the "Reality Studio" has been sputtering and struggling to produce a coherent reality of the kind that was previously anchored in the dream of a global capitalism. The guarantor of this dream was once the United States itself, and the economic and military dominance that emanated from it. The order of global capitalism remains in trouble, but not the kind of trouble Burroughs continuously depicts in his works, namely that of an uprising of (usually masculine) youth intent on breaking free from a manufactured reality. Instead, it seems, all kinds of different groups are stirring simultaneously, but none is quite capable of challenging the "systems of control" to a breaking point. It is interesting, however, to observe the tension that has become more visible in the field of facts, or the reporting of truth, since the controversial election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America in 2016: perhaps the Reality Studio is experiencing some *inner* troubles, instead of being stormed from the outside as Uranium Willy proposes. Burroughs' peculiar conception of a Reality Studio can be interpreted simply as a figurative

“place” in which the views, sounds and other sensory experiences of our lives are somehow scripted and manufactured similarly to a movie, but it can also be thought of as the location where our society’s ideologies are constantly produced and perpetuated. In that last interpretation, institutions such as the press, public and private education, religious and social organisations et cetera would be the constituent parts making up the studio. The way in which one chooses to interpret this Reality Studio, the object of much of the resistance of Burroughs’ protagonists and the Wild Boys, determines also the possible interpretations one can give of the place of resistance within Burroughs’ texts. I will be using the above interpretation which defines the Reality Studio as an enormous interconnected field of the production and maintenance of ideology, which also implies that if such a large construct would be “stormed” as Uranium Willy calls for, the changes brought about could be inconceivably large. In other words, I identify the resistance within Burroughs’ novels as being relatively radical; he is not suggesting minor adjustments to the way things are.

In the second chapter, I revisit the cut-up method in Burroughs by exploring it in relation to early 20th-century Dadaist avant-garde writings that constitute earlier articulations of this method. I hypothesize that Burroughs’ usage of the cut-up, which involves cutting-up texts and rearranging them into new composite forms, gives his novels a prophetic quality which can be found in these 20th century Dadaist avant-garde writings as well. Also taking into account that the concept of barbarism was central to this older avant-garde art, elucidating the function of barbarism in Dadaism will help me show how this concept can be productive in approaching the cut-up in Burroughs’ work. The following chapter will expand on this idea.

The third chapter of this thesis is fully dedicated to the concept of barbarism in relation to culture, literature and more specifically to Burroughs' cut-up works. Here, the concept of barbarism allows me to establish an interpretative framework for his cut-up literature. This concept certainly serves well in describing exactly what happens to the process of meaning-production when literature is made into cut-up literature. My use of barbarism as a framework for approaching the cut-up will be intertwined with my exploration of barbarian figures *within* Burroughs' work, particularly in the form of the Wild Boys. The Wild Boys, as I will show, emulate in a certain way the 'barbaric' function of the cut-up itself in Burroughs. By exploring barbarism both as an interpretive framework for studying the cut-up and as figure with a central function in Burroughs' works, I hope to show why barbarism can be a productive concept for new readings of Burroughs.

2. The Cut-up…

II. Postmodernism or Avant-Gardism?

To introduce to any reader the concept of the cut-up as propagated by 20th century literary authors and artists such as Burroughs and his most consistent collaborator Brion Gysin (1916-1986), it seems necessary to activate a kind of textual awareness in myself and my reader that other literature doesn't require. I am not saying they require a "deeper" or a "superior" textual awareness, but a distinctly *different* one. Whenever I attempt to put into words the affective operations that cut-up literature introduces into the reading process, I struggle, unless I allow myself the leeway of relaxing my writing style, sometimes even incorporating cut-up practices into the theoretical reflections that I write. It is in self-reflexive

works such as *The Third Mind* (1978), in which Gysin and Burroughs use cut-ups to reflect upon the process of cutting-up, that one can see this idea taken to extremes. That text *performs* the cut-up, and in doing so, offers us an investigation into the cut-up. Is it not, after all, counter-intuitive and even hypocritical to write in a rigid and prefigured way about artworks and literature that seeks precisely to question a rigid and prescribed way of writing?

One of the aims of this thesis is to explore the possible ways in which one can theorize cut-ups in academic language. I would suggest that this kind of academic writing is a continuous exercise of appropriation that is perhaps best explained by the mechanism of Jacques Lacan's notion of "university discourse," by which Lacan designates an academic practice that is all too eager to appropriate and domesticate what we could call the radical element(s) in its object of study. In a short text called *Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses* (2006), Slavoj Žižek explains this:

> **Although Lacan's notion of "university discourse" circulates widely today, it is seldom used in its precise meaning (designating a specific "discourse," social link). As a rule, it functions as a vague notion of some speech being part of the academic interpretive machinery. In contrast to this use, one should always bear in mind that, for Lacan, university discourse is not directly linked to the university as a social institution-for example, he states that the Soviet Union was the pure reign of university discourse. Consequently, not only does the fact of being turned into an object of the university interpretive machinery prove nothing about one's discursive status -names like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or Benjamin, all three great antiuniversitarians whose presence in the academy is today all-pervasive-demonstrate that the "excluded" or "damned" authors are the IDEAL feeding stuff for the academic machine. Can the upper level of Lacan's**

> **formula of the university discourse - S2[1] directed toward a[2] - not also be read as standing for the university knowledge endeavoring to integrate, domesticate, and appropriate the excess that resists and rejects it? (1)**

This is an important idea to keep in mind in many (academic) situations, but especially in the study of art, which often seems to be studied particularly for its surprising, outstanding, excessive elements. It is deceivingly difficult, perhaps impossible, to resist the temptation of such appropriation, but it might be feasible to operate with it in the forefront of one's mind, as I will try to do.

What do I mean when I speak of cut-up literature or of the literary cut-up? In material terms, cut-up literature is simply the result of rearranging cut-up remnants of previously extant texts. Cut-ups themselves, however, are not without symbolic significance; to make cut-up literature foregrounds that you are destroying something in the process of creating something, similar to the agricultural process—sometimes mentioned in Burroughs' works—of "slash-and-burn" farming, which consists of creating fertile ground for crops by cutting down and burning previous flora. Burroughs once said in an interview:

> **I think that the novelistic form is probably outmoded and that we may look forward perhaps to a future in which people do not read at all or read only illustrated books and magazines or some abbreviated form of reading matter. To compete with television and photo magazines writers will have to develop more precise techniques producing the same effect on the reader as a lurid action photo. (Odier, 27)**

[1] Knowledge
[2] Objet Petit a

The creation of the form of the cut-up novel necessitates a symbolic destruction of the older forms of the novel. This allows an evocative question: are today's novels, insofar as they belong to this form that has been symbolically "slashed and burned" to give rise to the cut-up novel not, in some way, (un)dead? This question is of course a rather problematic one, seeing as these symbolically destroyed forms of novel are still being written and read more than 50 years later. And the novels we read nowadays are still distinguishable from "lurid action photos", which implies that no true destruction has taken place. Literature, on the whole, is no longer a place of breaking with tradition in the Modernist sense. And yet, in the context of this thesis, I will take the statement seriously, if only because it gives rise to the following question: Why was the novelistic form becoming outmoded, according to Burroughs?

One of the main things that sets Burroughs' works apart from other (experimental) literature is their incorporation of the avant-gardist principle of the collage. By containing cut-up parts of pre-existing texts, rearranged into new forms, Burroughs' texts invest heavily in the element of surprise at the syntactical level, as the following little example will hopefully illustrate: "The Ovens smell of simple facts of the case and i guess won't be much left – little time, parasites – Now we see all the pictures -" (113, The Soft Machine). The reader gets no respite from the relentless pace of the language and may find it hard to slow down and reflect on exactly what is read. The constant hope is that the next sentence will offer some clarification. It is precisely the cut-up element that allows his texts to metaphorically resemble lurid action-photos as opposed to, say, carefully choreographed portrait-photography or landscape photography. These two other kinds of photography might better serve as metaphors for other types of literature, such as literature

that is interested in offering in-depth psychological portraits of characters, or literature that spares no expenses in the description of characters' surroundings, respectively.

Whenever I read critiques of Burroughs' works that present them as a prefiguring of postmodernism, or even an embodiment of it, I am struck by what is left out by such a categorization. In *Shift Linguals: Cut-up Narratives from Burroughs to the Present* (2011), Edward S. Robinson touches upon this:

> **However, numerous other critics, including Frederic Jameson in his essay "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society", cite Burroughs as an early exponent of postmodernism, and identify the cut-ups as exemplifying postmodern literary practices. (…) Burroughs aligned himself with the avant-garde, but it should be borne in mind that the formalisation of the cut-up method predates the coining of the term postmodern. As such (…) Burrough's work can be seen to exemplify postmodernism before a theoretical framework was constructed to accommodate such modes of literature. As I will demonstrate, there are elements of the cut-ups that could be considered to belong to both postmodern and avant-garde frameworks. (Robinson, 5)**

Robinson's observation appears to be accurate, in so far as it allows us to think of the cut-ups as (at least) two-natured. But a problem arises if we read the cut-ups as a synthesis between avant-garde and a kind of pre-theoretical postmodernism, namely, what is the difference between the two? In order to answer this question, it seems necessary to first examine the origins of postmodernism, which are bound up with the histories of both modernism and historical avant-gardism.

If there is a well-known distinction between Modernist art and

works by the historical avant-garde, it is that the avant-gardists emphasized in their works the ways in which art was a part of society, as opposed to a higher occupation that transcends society and its concerns. This latter position is the one commonly attributed to Modernist endeavours. The implicit denial of art's social character allowed Modernist art critique to maintain an arbitrary separation between high and low art, pop-culture and Culture. If one investigates avant-gardist art, does one not notice themes of everyday life, often confronting but nevertheless recognizable to many? Futurists and their warfare, transportation, industrialisation; Dadaists with their ready-mades, such as Duchamp's famous urinal, *Fountain* (1917), displayed in the same way as a sculpture would be, or Surrealists with their fascination for the dream-world that even those who are not initiated into the arts know all too well. And on the other hand, in Modernist art, does one not see clearly a fascination with the so-called purity of Art, in which each art form defines itself by its supposed essential characteristic such as the texture obsession of High Modernist abstract art or the focus on narrative that is still used to define literature to this day?

I am not interested in constructing an art-ideology that unproblematically equates Modernist ideals with avant-gardist ones, reducing the respective poles to "fast friends". Traces of both sets of ideals exist in the cut-up literature of William S. Burroughs, but neither category is a perfect fit for this literature. The cut-up works contain both the Modernist desires for purity of Art and telos or purpose, albeit obscurely, and the avant-gardist "tradition" of anti-tradition. A statement Burroughs often used is "life is a cut-up", implying that to represent the world as-it-is in writing, one must necessarily utilize cut-up text. In this, we can locate the epistemological obsession of modernist literature. Think, for example, of the well-known "stream-of-consciousness"

technique employed by Joyce, Eliot, Woolf and numerous others, designed as a technique which would allow a more accurate representation of one's experiences of the world. This technique plays a significant role in many of Burroughs' cut-ups, occurring often in an "impure" form, rarely obvious, as in this extract from *The Soft Machine*:

> **Old junky street-cleaners push little red wagons sweeping up condoms and empty H caps, KY tubes, broken trusses and sex devices, keif garbage and confetti, mouldy jockstraps and bloody Kotex, shit-stained color comics, dead kitten and afterbirths, jenshe babies of berdache and junkie.**
>
> **Everywhere the soft insidious voice of the pitchman delayed action language lesson muttering under all your pillows 'Shows all kinds of masturbation and self-abuse. Young boys need it special.' faded sepia genitals in the drawer of a tattoo parlor... silver paper in the wind... frayed sounds of a distant city. (93)**

This play with the reader's perception takes full advantage of the effects of the stream-of-consciousness technique, perhaps leading to different results, but nonetheless projecting onto our mind a stream of images that together set the scene, as it were, of an otherwise undisclosed location. These are some of the most obvious incorporations of Modernist technique in Burroughs' works, which (ab)use Modernist "tricks", as it were, to elicit an affective response from the reader; here arguably one of disgust, as we seem to find ourselves in a dystopian scene.

Burroughs' cut-up texts are two-voiced, because they contain the foundational elements of both Modernist and avant-gardist art ideals: Modernist because they perform the act of representation in a manner that is vying for a kind of authenticity of representation, exemplified by

the statement “life is a cut-up”, continuing the pursuit of a kind of representational purity that once led early Modernist authors away from the mode of Realism itself: if life is a cut-up, it can only be accurately represented in literature through the cut-up. And yet, they are avant-gardist because they reiterate this modernist telos in a way that defies much of the tradition that it originated in, and because they often abandon the pursuit of the representation of perception, a central element of Modernist art, and instead present unperceivable scenes in a framework of the perceptible. They are three-voiced, even, if one considers the postmodernist voice to be a departure from the modernist one that does not coincide with the ways in which avant-garde departs from it.

Throughout the decades that are often labelled as the ‘postmodern’ era, roughly the latter half of the 20th century up to the present day, a great number of experimental novels have been written, liberated from a lot of the burdens that narrativity carries within itself, but not necessarily free of narrativity as a whole. This characteristic, narrativity, has had an anchoring function throughout history. But, as Ernst van Alphen explains, this function has faded: “First of all, postmodernism displays a disbelief in what has traditionally been seen as one of the main functions of narrative. Narrative is no longer able to legitimize the meaning of life, of our place in the world” (van Alphen, 483). Without its traditional significance as a tool which anchors our reality, the function of narrative has changed: postmodernist literature uses narrativity to question our relation to reality rather than legitimize or anchor it. This is one of the chief reasons why Burroughs’ works could be called postmodernist. Very rarely do they present a stable narrative; more often than not they pretend to contain one, only to let it disintegrate, often through use of cut-up, and end up producing the “ontological uncertainty” that is so

typical for (this interpretation of) postmodernism in literature.

When van Alphen states that “the legitimizing function of narrative seems to have been confining rather than liberating” (483), he is referring to the fact that narrativity has made a return since the early days of postmodernism in which it was heavily critiqued and fell out of favour, exactly because it lost the legitimizing function that once confined it. This return undoubtedly came as a surprise to many of those that witnessed this period first-hand, and especially those who embraced it fully. The results of this postmodernist critique of narrativity, the dismantling of the traditional values associated with narrativity, has liberated it from a lot of its traditional responsibilities, but it has simultaneously compromised literature’s potential as a tool of resistance. And arguably, the nature of postmodernist critique has even eased narrativity’s return into a late-capitalist society, removing much of the former’s dangerous potential in the process. Authors that today operate within a postmodern world can choose to write in a realist, modernist, postmodernist or any other mode they desire, but I would argue that this choice cannot be quite as revolutionary as it might have been in the past. The bomb has been defused before being planted, so to say. To use a line from Gregory Corso’s poem *The Bomb* (1958): “Not up to man whether you boom or not.” (1) In the previous era, such “bombs” were still imaginable. An author could explode the traditional function of narrativity, shocking the literary establishment, to make something new. Fredric Jameson’s famous critique of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) contains a description of this major change that occurred in our conception of history in the transition from modernism into postmodernism, which might further clarify my above metaphor of the bomb:

> **For I take it as axiomatic that "modernist history" is the first casualty and mysterious absence of the Postmodernism period (...) in art, at least, the notion of progress and telos remained alive and well up to very recent times indeed, in its most authentic, least stupid and caricatural, form, in which each genuinely new work unexpectedly but logically outtrumped its predecessor (not "linear history" this, but rather Shklovsky's "knight's gambit;" the action at distance, the quantum leap to the undeveloped or underdeveloped square). Dialectical history, to be sure, affirmed that all history worked this way, on its left foot, as it were, progressing, as Henri Lefebvre once put it, by way of catastrophe and disaster; but fewer ears heard that than believed the modernist aesthetic paradigm, which was on the point of being confirmed as a virtual religious doxa when it unexpectedly vanished without a trace. (F. Jameson, ix)**

Postmodernism is described as something that came unexpectedly to replace modernism, banishing idea(l)s of progress and telos into the margins. From my perspective, any definition of modernism or postmodernism should take their respective contexts into account. They are not just styles or genres, but rather paradigmatic structures that were driven by (or even defined by) a desire to adapt not only art but human experience at large to its fast-changing surroundings. In this sense, even the postmodernist aesthetic has a type of future-bound orientation, but it lacks a clear destination, a theoretical moment at which it comes to a stop, which for Modernist art would be something like “pure Art”. This description, although it is somewhat too general, makes more sense when we agree on a historical context for both modernism and postmodernism, the one roughly existing as paradigm between 1900 and 1950 and the other, for simplicity’s sake, from 1950 up to the recent past, or arguably, up to now. In many ways, the modernist aesthetic ideology

lives on to this day, not as purely paradigmatic, but nevertheless highly relevant. It is important to consider here the history of the second World War and its most traumatic aspect, the Holocaust, which has fuelled the critiques of the ideology of purity that ended the dominance of the Modernist tradition in the art-discourse unlike any other event.

Modernism and post-modernism do not exist purely in opposition to one another, even though postmodernism appears as a radical departure from modernism in the way Jameson proposes. If the change from modernism to postmodernism is defined by an abandonment of the teleological thought that underpinned the modernist aesthetic paradigm, this implies that one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism is its abandonment of ideas of progress or telos, an alteration, in other words, of one's position in relation to the future. This is a well-known aspect of post-modernity, in which the "grand narratives" have all but lost their end-goal or telos, even if, again, they still present some future-bound orientation. They are still means, but no longer means to stable ends. This is often considered to be the situation of the "radical" Left in politics, nowadays. After all, what stable vision of the future remains when all attempts at socialist states seem to bring about tragedy and, in the end an energetic, if authoritarian, reversal to capitalism, as one could say of present-day China or Russia. The emancipatory politics engendered by Marxist theory, therefore, are no less means than before, but the ends they serve have been drained of the transcendent force they once possessed. This interpretation of postmodernism is far from new (or revolutionary), but it is a necessary one to understand the disappearance of avant-gardism, at least in the revolutionary form it took some 100 years ago, which was *so* engaged with the future that it sought to break the past, in breaking *with* tradition. In Burroughs' works, however, we find remnants of this avant-gardism, especially in the parts

of his texts that deal with the Wild Boys and their struggles against what is constantly described as a coherent but multi-faced dominant culture of strongly prescribed gender roles, family structures and lifestyles: “Who are these boys? Where will they go? They will become astronauts playing the part of American married idiots until the moment when they take off on a Gemini expedition bound for Mars, disconnect and leave the earth behind forever” (83, *The Wild Boys*) The revolutionary theme of leaving behind the earth, language, religion, and most importantly the body, recurs throughout Burroughs’ works.

In *The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s* (1981), Andreas Huyssen questions why in the late 1970’s, arguably when postmodernism was at its most dominant, there was a remarkable rebirth of interest in the historical avant-garde. This avant-garde, consisting most famously of the Dadaïsts, Constructivists, Futurists, Surrealists and quite a few others, seemed to have lost all its radical momentum in the time of World War II. The groups that made up the historical avant-garde can be identified by their chief goal: the breaking of the powers of tradition over Art and society, and the breaking of the arbitrary separation of Art and society. It is fascinating to witness, as Huyssen does, how in the late 1970’s, a time of post-modernism, there is a real urge in the art world to re-embrace the historical avant-garde *as* a tradition of sorts. Part of the problem is, according to Huyssen, that in the US the historical avant-garde has often been confused and conflated with modernism, however unintuitive this might appear from a perspective of European art-studies. The telling difference between the two, I would argue, that while the avant-gardists sought to question art’s separation from society, many modernists held much more traditional ideals of high art. Huyssen therefore rethinks the relation between the historical avant-garde and postmodernist art, noting the

possibility that the European avant-garde of the early 20th century finds its logical continuation in the American counter-culture of the 1960's: "From the perspective of today, US art of the 1960s -precisely because of its successful attack on abstract expressionism- shines as the colorful death mask of a classical avant-garde which in Europe already had been liquidated culturally and politically by Stalin and Hitler" (Huyssen, 31). In this operation, Huyssen rearranges the parts that usually make up the narrative of the historical relations between the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism. Most importantly, he argues that postmodernism can be seen as the "endgame of avant-garde", and thus "not the radical break it often claimed to be." Huyssen considers what the well-known theorist of the avant-garde, Walter Benjamin, might've experienced if he had encountered the re-exposed avant-gardist art of the 1970's:

> **(…) would he simply have argued that the administered culture of late capitalism had finally succeeded in imposing the phony spell of commodity fetishism even on that art which more than any other had challenged the values and traditions of bourgeois culture? Maybe after another penetrating gaze at that architectural monument to wholesale technological progression the heart of Paris, Benjamin would have quoted himself: "In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." Thus might he acknowledge not only that the avant-garde embodiment of anti-tradition has itself become tradition, but, moreover, that its inventions and its imagination have become integral even to Western culture's most official manifestations. (A. Huyssen, 23)**

The important question raised here is whether "anti-tradition has itself become tradition", and if so, whether that tradition has a breaking point that remains somehow obscured by this reasoning. *If* the avant-garde

has itself become tradition (and safely historical), does that mean that its forcefulness, its affective quality, can no longer be produced in the present? I believe it can, even though some channels have been barred by the integration of avant-gardist principles into “Western culture’s most official manifestations.” The cut-up, even though it is a tool available outside of literature as well, remains in the margins within literature on the whole, in the sense that cut-up text itself runs a serious risk of not being considered to be literary at all. It is unavoidably marginal also because the cut-up challenges the standard mode of reading and of interpretation that most literature requires. It is in this sense that Burroughs’ cut-up works can be considered still somewhat avant-gardist, even though they are part of some form of literary canon and of popular culture by now. If anything, Burroughs has not been quite assimilated into “Western culture’s most official manifestations” just yet, even though one could argue that they have found a place within a kind of literary canon of experimental literature.

Huyssen’s point is of great interest to Marxist critique, because it touches upon the ways in which emancipatory struggle itself is constantly in danger of losing its radical qualities by being incorporated into the capitalist system. Slavoj Žižek notes in a short text called *On Alain Badiou and Logiques des mondes* (2007):

> **In pre-capitalist formations, every State, every re-presentational totalization, implies a founding exclusion, a point of "symptomal torsion," a "part of no-part," an element which, although part of the system, did not have a proper place within it - and the emancipatory politics had to intervene from this excessive ("surnumerary") element which, although part of the situation, cannot be accounted for in its terms. However, what happens when the system no longer excludes the excess, but directly posits it as its driving**

force - as is the case in capitalism which can only reproduce itself through its constant self-revolutionizing, through the constant overcoming of its own limit? To put it in a simplified way: if a political event, a revolutionary emancipatory intervention into a determinate historical world, is always linked to the excessive point of its "symptomal torsion," if it by definition undermines the contours of this world, how, then, are we to define the emancipatory political intervention into a universe which is already in itself world-less, which, for its reproduction, no longer needs to be contained by the constraints of a "world"? How are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing? (2)

Žižek points out, with the theoretical help of Lacan, how capitalism incorporates its own radical excess, i.e. (the place of) emancipatory politics. The concept of revolution, here called a “revolutionary emancipatory intervention”, once so central to any and all Marxist thought, is posited as a structurally integral element of capitalism itself, albeit perhaps without its radical quality, although even this element can sometimes be found in the tug-of-war between the two poles, the capitalist one and the one which “although part of the situation, cannot be accounted for in its terms”, the “surnumerary” radical Left. One of the relatively recent revolutions that is arguably interior to capitalism is the digital one, in which we can never be sure if networks like Facebook, Google or Twitter present us with radical emancipatory potential, as was often enunciated around the time of the Arab Spring (somewhat tragically, in retrospect), or whether they are something much more ambiguous.

Each of the formations discussed above, from avant-gardism to postmodernism, in a certain sense seem to exist in an antagonistic relation to capitalism. The avant-garde, although highly varied, was

influenced by Marxist theory and obsessed with a future world free of the industrialized warfare they witnessed. Modernism often made claims of high art, separated from everyday life, that cannot hold true in a world in which art is dominated by a culture industry of sorts, and thus the Modernist aesthetic ideal leads to a rather limited, specialized audience. Postmodernism's relation to capitalism has already been touched upon. Jameson's labelling of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism is a labelling that few postmodernists would embrace with glee. To this extent, all three of these major positions on art share an element of resistance to being capitalized upon by cultural industry as such, but all three can play the role of a "cultural logic of late capitalism."

As Huyssen pointed out, the counter-culture of the 60's can very effectively be interpreted as a continuation of the historical avant-garde that died out in Europe around the time of World War II, if not earlier. Burroughs' cut-up works are an important element of this counter-culture, as was much of the work of his friends and acquaintances of the Beat-generation, leading me to conclude that, of all the available categorizations, avant-garde is probably the most rewarding framework for an interpretation of Burroughs, and the one that also holds the most radical emancipatory potential. The important question is whether Burroughs' work can be/has been assimilated into the capitalist superstructure and is therefore "defused" together with the rest of the avant-garde, according to Huyssen's argument. I claim, optimistically, that there is still an element in the works that is unaccounted for (and which may be unaccountable for), and that element is and has always been the cut-up itself, which is still utterly marginal in our present-day society. It appears to me as one of the artistic operations that is most resistant to being integrated completely into a liberal and ultimately capitalist art-discourse, because it defies narrative conventions and

realist representational methods, and in some ways it even defies interpretation altogether. It is no wonder that many people to this day, when Burroughs comes up in conversation, ask questions along the lines of: what is the place of originality or creativity in cut-up works? What is the role of the author in this process? Is he/she who cuts up other texts and rearranges them truly an author? In short, the cut-up works often raise the typical questions that much literary theory at some point has had to deal with. In *What Is An Author?* (1969), Michel Foucault's well known text (which was transcribed from a lecture) about the role of the author and the authorial figure's relation of privilege and power over interpretations of their work, we read the following: "In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears"(102). This offers one approach to Burroughs' texts, as they seem to foreground, especially in comparison with conventional narrative texts, the disappearance or evaporation of the author as a coherent source of originality and meaning. Burroughs commonly replied to questions around originality with regards to the cut-up by claiming that *life is a cut-up*, which implies that any originality or creativity itself is a result of a kind of mental cutting-up of images and texts resulting in new arrangements, and as such, is only a more self-conscious state of mind that is not radically different from our day-to-day experiences. By stating that consciousness itself operates as a kind of cut-up process, which raises the cut-up from the level of an artistic practice to an epistemological hypothesis, Burroughs truly positioned himself as avant-garde. From this perspective, we can better understand Burroughs' own "mission", which he quite concisely explained in *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*, Daniel Odier's compilation of interviews and extracts published in 1974:

> **When people speak of clarity in writing they generally mean plot, continuity, beginning middle and end, adherence to a "logical" sequence. But things don't happen in logical sequence and people don't think in logical sequence. Any writer who hopes to approximate what actually occurs in the mind and body of his characters cannot confine himself to such an arbitrary structure as "logical" sequence. Joyce was accused of being unintelligible and he was presenting only one level of cerebral events: conscious sub-vocal speech. I think it is possible to create multilevel events and characters that a reader could comprehend with his entire organic being. (35)**

What this tells us is that Burroughs was consciously trying to "approximate what actually occurs in the mind and body of his characters", or in other words, he was trying to represent with a certain authenticity the experiences of his characters. In fact, Burroughs claims here that his approach to representation is more valid precisely because it does not adhere to what is called here "logical sequence." It is also noteworthy that Burroughs claimed his reader could "comprehend with his entire organic being" the characters and events in a work of literature, but this remained hypothetical at this point. It is another indicator of the avant-garde inspired pursuits that we can find within his works.

III. Cut-up Poetics

Not all of Burroughs' widely read works contain cut-ups. Works like *Junkie* (1953) or *Queer* (1951, published in 1985) are of a more realist style. Even his most famous work, *Naked Lunch*, was written before he and his acquaintances started experimenting purposefully with the cut-up

technique. If we follow the line of reasoning attributed to Brion Gysin, Burroughs' most famous collaborator, cut-up in literature is the mirroring of an evolution that occurred within painting in the early parts of the 20th century: "Writing is 50 years behind painting"[3] (The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin, 1). This remark was to become one of Burroughs' most famous arguments for why he started using the cut-up method in his writing. In a great number of interviews, Gysin is presented as the one who brought the technique to Burroughs' attention. Thus, simply put, even though Burroughs is often associated with the cut-up, even sometimes thought of as its originator, it is better to think of this re-appropriation of the technique pioneered by, among others, the Dadaists, as a result of an artistic collaboration. In one of the earliest substantial pieces of their cut-up work, *Minutes to Go* (1960), you can find contributions by Beat-authors and poets Sinclair Beiles and Gregory Corso as well, but their commitment was of a more temporary kind. It is Gysin and Burroughs who created some of the most important texts within the cut-up sphere. In claiming that literature lagged behind painting for 50 years, Burroughs expresses a harsh critique of the dominant literary styles and forms of the interwar period, since they fall into this 50-year period. In other texts, Burroughs locates the first experiments with cut-up in literature in works such as those by Joyce, John Dos Passos (1896-1970) and Tristan Tzara (1896-1963). This suggests to me that there is a difference between these authors' experiments and those performed by Burroughs and Gysin. Otherwise, the claim made about literature in relation to painting becomes false, since the first cut-ups *would have been* made about 50 years before

[3] The short essay *The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin* can be found in *The Third Mind,* but it is also sometimes read individually. Another quote is: "The cut-up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years."

Burroughs' experiments, even according to the author himself, if we accept the works of Dadaïsts as early manifestations of the cut-up idea.

Nowadays, when something is regarded as avant-garde art, it is often so because it breaks with tradition in some creative way, as I've detailed above. In the bloody decade of the 1910's, avant-garde had a supplementary meaning: these artists were at the forefront of utopian thought and ideals. Even in the case of Dada, the (in)famous group of poets, painters, writers and other artists who were radically opposed to the war and all that (they theorized) had led to it, you can find a rather explicit utopian ambition. Their artworks did not fit seamlessly within any tradition, consisting of 'ready-mades', collages and often alienating writings. It can be said that Dada sought to change art, the public's stance on art, and society as a whole all at the same time. Below is a quote from Tristan Tzara, in which he directs a kind of anger at 'logic' itself:

> **People think they can explain rationally, by means of thought, what they write. But it's very relative. Thought is a fine thing for philosophy, but it's relative. Psychoanalysis is a dangerous disease, it deadens man's anti-real inclinations and systematises the bourgeoisie. There is no ultimate Truth. Dialectics is an amusing machine that leads us (in banal fashion) to the opinions which we would have held in any case. Do people really think that, by the meticulous subtlety of logic, they have demonstrated the truth and established the accuracy of their opinions? Even if logic were confirmed by the senses it would still be an organic disease. (Tzara, 9)**

The intensity of the piece in which I found this extract remains at this pitch; throughout the entire text Tzara tries to convince the reader that "DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING". This claim is, in fact, the very

title of Tzara's text. This radical resistance to any tradition, even ones that are often considered tools of cultural analysis and, arguably, resistance, such as dialectics and psychoanalysis, is typical of Dadaïsm. One must take care not to generalize artistic movements like these too much, but overall it seems correct to state that Dadaïsm, as the embodiment of anti-tradition, operates by a specific 'logic' that even prevents it from incorporating dialectics or psychoanalysis. Tzara's position reminds us of the way Burroughs spoke about the cut-up method earlier, when he said that "things don't happen in logical sequence and people don't think in logical sequence."

One of the most relevant works by Tzara in the context of this debate is "*(How) To Make a Dadaist Poem*" (1920), a poem or perhaps an instruction which, as the title suggests, explains certain elements of Tzara's and Dadaist poetics. It is often quoted, and perhaps doesn't shock anyone anymore, but it is important to include it here because it is one of the most transparent and simple explanations of the cut-up method in writing, and it emphasizes the countercultural impulse that lies at the heart of the cut-up:

> **Take a newspaper**
>
> **Take some scissors.**
>
> **Choose from this paper an article the length you want to make your poem.**
>
> **Cut out the article.**
>
> **Next carefully cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them all in a bag.**
>
> **Shake gently.**
>
> **Next take out each cutting one after the other.**

Copy conscientiously in the order in which they left the bag.

The poem will resemble you.

And there you are--an infinitely original author of charming sensibility,

even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd.

Tzara, here, makes a claim that is still controversial to this day, and one that was important in debates within post-structuralism, namely: the author is not the source of the work. Tzara's short instructional "poem" focuses on the process of, and the possibility of, self-expression through a broad conception of authorship, a position which he opens up for everybody, while acknowledging the existence of a "vulgar herd", presumably referring to those who would dismiss as non-art those products of Dadaist poetics, and who would vehemently defend the Author as quasi-sovereign in relation to the text and its meaning.

A more in-depth look at cut-up writing in Burroughs shows just how different it can be from regular writing. In *The Soft Machine* (1968), we find some of Burroughs' most consistent and obvious usage of the cut-up technique. In many of his other texts, the cut-ups are sporadic or they are so integrated within other bits of more conventional narrative that it is possible to miss them or to mistake them for strange grammatical errors. *The Soft Machine*, however, consists for a large part of cut-ups. The following extract exemplifies Burroughs' use of the cut-up as inspired by the older stream-of-consciousness style made famous by the Modernists:

Saw the murder words in the guide's head transparent and I couldn't move back seat dreaming paralyzed like my mother couldn't move paralyzed dream me talk me jack me off from

her bed of distant fingers a woman with red hair dead of course her image flashed in the guide's eyes as the wrench fell and I was in the 'bearer' already feeling around to make myself the home the white score, we call it murder words like frantic fish in the shrinking body pool slow motion saw the heavy wrench fall and took the pictures from his eyes in the white flash and the guide did not know he had a hitch hiker until he his knowledge of English summoned more words that he knew and his Arabic only a thin shell around the lodger mud cubicles with blue painted walls his thin black body twisting sodomy shadows from the long masturbation nights of Columbus Ohio. (166)

Not much further detail is given about the described murder-scene, and we never quite find out the person whose point of view we read. The extract is very dense, in the sense that it describes murder, the memories of a guide, a hitchhiker, the death of a red-haired woman and the "long masturbation nights of Columbus Ohio." Where regular narrative text offers one a more- or less complex thread to follow, Burroughs' cut-up texts offer many threads after another, but very few of them lead to any conclusion in the traditional sense.

Cut-up texts like the above contain a kind of exploration of their own limits, because they stretch the definition of what constitutes a text to a breaking point. They run the "risk" of discouraging their readers of reading them at all. Take for example this short extract from Odier's collection of interviews with Burroughs, in which a text quite explicitly struggles with itself:

(…) indispensably congruent multiplicity of otherness perspectives concomitantly banal irrelevant concentrates with orifices gritty interstices rectilinearally inaccessible. These jewels gathered from one of the periodicals admittedly subsidized by the CIA. If you see the function of word as extension of our senses to witness and experience through

the writer's eyes then this may be dubbed blind prose. It sees nothing and neither does the reader. Not an image in a cement mixer of this word paste. As a literary exercise I pick up the Penguin translation of Rimbaud and select images to place in congruent juxtapositions with this colorless vampiric prose which having no color of its own must steal color from the readers such contractually accessible linguistically structuralized preparations on blue evenings I shall go down(…) (104-105, Odier)

If I try to summarize this short piece of text I am forced to speak in descriptive terms. The text starts with a summing up of words later called 'blind prose' which is said to introduce no images into the mind of the reader ("It sees nothing and neither does the reader.") After the narrator gives his analysis of this "word paste" he proceeds to "pick up the Penguin translation of Rimbaud" and to interlace the "blind prose" with fragments of the symbolist poets' highly colourful and suggestive poetry, such as "blue evenings", resulting in what the narrator seems to imply is no longer blind prose.

Burroughs frequently references Alfred J. Korzybski in interviews, lectures and essays. Korzybski was a Polish-American thinker in a field one could call philosophy, although I'm not convinced that Korzybski considered his work part of philosophy. Although his field of study is in some ways highly relevant for literary studies, linguistics and philosophy, his works are somewhat hard to find and not commonly known. Two large works, *Manhood of Humanity* (1921) and *Science and Sanity* (1933) and various smaller texts form a collection of works that is exceedingly difficult to place into a single academic niche. Korzybski himself called his field of study General Semantics, but it is probably best explained as a study of the affect of language. His works can be understood in relation to that of Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), who

recognized three elements of a semiotic: the sign, the object and the interpretant. Korzybski's theory incorporates the idea that, as Peirce stated, "every thought must be interpreted in another", and as such "all thought is in signs" (C.S. Peirce, 253). The following is an extract in which Korzybski positions himself quite clearly in opposition to binary thought:

> **In mankind's cultural evolution its current abstractions became codified here and there into systems, for instance the Aristotelian system, our main concern here. Such systematizations are important, for, as the *Talmud* says, 'Teaching without a system makes learning difficult.' In analysing the Aristotelian codifications, I had to deal with the two valued, 'either-or' type of orientations. I admit it baffled me for many years, that practically all humans, the lowest primitives not excluded, who never heard of Greek philosophers, have some sort of 'either-or' type of evaluations. Then I made the obvious 'discovery' that our relations to the world outside and inside our skins often happen to be, *on the gross level*, two-valued. For instance, we deal with day *or* night, land *or* water, etc. On the living level we have life *or* death, our heart beats *or* not, we breathe *or* suffocate, we are hot *or* cold, etc. Similar relations occur on higher levels. Thus, we have induction *or* deduction, materialism *or* idealism (...)**
>
> **In living, many issues are not so sharp, and therefore a *system which posits the general sharpness of 'either-or'*, and so *objectifies 'kind',* is unduly limited; it must be revised and made more flexible in terms of 'degree'. This requires a physic-mathematical 'way of thinking' which a *non-*aristotelian system supplies. (Selections From Science and Sanity, xxxiii)**

Korzybski's theoretical work is, in its own way, avant-gardist, because he states quite often that his intent is to change the way human beings

interact and deal with emotions or affect, through rethinking language and our systems of logic. He seems to have been fairly optimistic with regards to the possibility for humanity to reconsider how its everyday logic is “unduly limited”, which is something that is echoed in Burroughs’ texts at certain points. Burroughs’ characters often resist what Korzybski called “the *is* of identity”, or the idea that one can identify within language all that someone or something *is*. A dog is only a dog to the extent that our mind constructs the category of dogs, but as Korzybski would say, every dog is fully unique and irreducible in the same way that a group of 5 persons whose names are all Alfred cannot justifiably be reduced to a group of Alfreds. Korzybski’s work can, in this sense, be interpreted as a provocation or a challenge to mankind to break from the systems of association and categorization (e.g. something is *either* this *or* that) that, he argues, are holding back the entire species. This position is an avant-gardist and utopian one because it posits a future society which is radically different from ours in a good or desirable way. Burroughs’ cut-up texts can also be interpreted in this way, without categorizing it as either (narrative) literature or something else, like a kind of poetry or an artistic experiment that is not literature, and I think that this is an approach that the presence of the cut-up itself necessitates.

3. …Barbarism…

IV. Barbarians and History

> **A highly placed narcotics official tells a grim President: “The wild-boy thing is a cult based on drugs, depravity and violence more dangerous than the hydrogen bomb.” (The Wild Boys, 151)**

The barbarian, either outside the walls of 'our' civilization or within ourselves, connotes violence. The barbarians are perceived as a threat, not just because they are violent, but also because they can focus their aggression beyond mere random destruction, and their strengths are our own perceived weaknesses. They are the scissors, if you will, that threaten to cut up our paper Empire. Etymologically stemming from an emulation of the unintelligible sounds that the language of foreigners supposedly made from the perspective of the ancient Greeks, sounding like *bar-bar*, the barbarian was conceived by the Greeks as a human being who simply lacks the tools to communicate with the civilized man. Any interaction with a barbarian would be perceived as marked by complete and utter mis- or noncommunication. However, as is often the case with such problematic stereotypical categorizations, there have also been positive appropriations of the term. The historical avant-gardes I discussed before, such as Dada, are an example of this. They intentionally occupied the position of the barbarian towards established cultural conventions about Art. Burroughs can also be viewed as such.

In cultural analysis, the terms barbarism, the barbarian(s) and barbaric have in recent years grown in relevance. As Maria Boletsi notes in her book *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (2013):

> **Revisiting underexposed aspects of barbarism unravels its potential operations in language and other media without circumventing its violent history in Western discourses and without rendering it "harmless." In the gaps and tensions between its various meanings, between its history and present uses, and between its formal meanings in language and its effects in speech, one can trace possibilities for doing different things with this concept in the space of literature, art, and theory. (2)**

It is precisely one of these possibilities that I wish to engage with: barbarism in literature, in the form of the *cut-up text.* In establishing a connection between these two terms, one makes certain decisions and assumptions about what the terms 'stand for', what they imply and bring about. Reading the cut-up operation as a barbaric operation, I do not only attribute 'barbaric' elements to the cut-up, but also do the opposite: I imply that barbaric acts are acts of cutting-up. In the following pages, I will compare my own use of the term 'barbarism' with others, in an attempt to delineate my use of barbarism in this thesis more rigorously in relation to specific traditions of use of this concept. After this short but all the more necessary operation, I will attempt to show what kind of productivity is made possible by reading the cut-ups as a form of barbarism.

The word "barbarian" is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a human being that is "of or relating to a land, culture, or people alien and usually believed to be inferior to another land, culture, or people" or as "lacking refinement, learning, or artistic or literary culture." In other words, it is a word that is defined by what it isn't or by a lack. Its etymology supports this: it is thought to come, as I mentioned before, from the non-words uttered by those foreign peoples the ancient Greeks encountered from elsewhere, which sounded something like "bar-bar" to their ears. This etymological background is interesting, because it means that we are dealing with a word which carries within it the idea of misunderstanding. I would propose the following multi-layered definition of the barbarian: a figure misunderstood and unintelligible; a figure understood to be the antithesis of civilization. In a way, then, the barbarian *is* understood (as antithesis), but this understanding requires an unwillingness to understand the other's language (or perspective) in an attempt to produce a more stable view of the self, reinforced by the

observed flaws in the other. More generally, the barbarian represents the inability of a civilization to consciously incorporate into its structure those elements that provoke unintelligibility and misunderstanding, and thus, it is a word uttered by the civilized upon encountering something they do not understand (or are unwilling to understand).

The mobilisation of the concept of barbarism within a consumerist society or within the confines of a self-proclaimed civilization is more often than not embedded in reactionary or exclusionary practices rather than in acts of resistance to hegemonic power. In fact, as has been argued aplenty, barbarism often functions as a means of legitimizing civilization by the civilized. As Boletsi notes: “The legitimacy of an Empire [...] is grounded in the construction of the barbarians—an external enemy that generates ‘nightmares of impending attack’ and justifies escalations of military violence” (63). In the current political climate in “the West” the figure of the barbarian is most commonly invoked in a reactionary manner, used to justify many military interventions in a manner that resembles the well-known use of the trope for the justification of colonialist practices in the past.

In Burroughs’ descriptions of the Wild Boys, we can see how the American generals and other officials view the Wild Boys as mere wild men or savages without of a culture of their own. The differences between the tropes of the wild man and the barbarian are many, but chief amongst them is the idea that the barbarian has a culture and perhaps a civilization, if inferior, of its own, whereas the wild man does not. The figure of the barbarian, by the grace of its possession of a culture of its own, also possesses the means to fight back in ways that the wild man could not. All the various focalisations and perspectives that Burroughs’ characters and narrators cast upon the Wild Boys leave us unsure of whether they are closer to wild men, as their name might

suggest, or to barbarians, as the more positive descriptions of, for example, their military prowess might suggest. The Wild Boys seem to see themselves as a superior cultural formation, but the dominant sees them as a cultureless threat to their own culture.

One of the most obvious examples of the mobilization of the trope of the barbarian for purposes of power-struggle is the United States and its allies' War on Terror in the Middle-East. It is obvious that this is a war between two or more parties, neither of which can be reduced, even though attempts are made, to the trope of the wild man; they both have a notable culture. In fact, it is what we might call the strength of their culture which is a major problem for both parties. The Wild Boys can also be read like this; they are described as having their own traditions, their own ways of communicating, their own (sexual) rituals and even their own way of reproducing. They are also brought into being initially by the discontent that young men experience, which is caused by the dystopian governance that exists in the world of Burroughs' texts. The status quo that the Wild Boys seek to destroy can be described as a caricature of the global capitalism our own societies have grown into in the past centuries, a process going on to this day: "At Tent City a top-level conference is in progress involving top level executives in the CONTROL GAME. The Conference has been called by a Texas billionaire who contributes heavily to MRA and maintains a stable of evangelists" (34, The Wild Boys). This world of Burroughs' fiction is populated by those in control, those under control and those young men who break free to join/form the Wild Boys. It is easy to see that this construction isn't necessarily time-bound or specific to the time in which it was written about. Reading his texts with a focus on their use of the trope of the barbarian, which the Wild Boys in my view exemplify, allows Burroughs' cut-up texts to be read as a critique of repressive political systems, from

Burroughs' time to the present. In other words, the function of the Wild Boys, as I will show, emulates in a certain way the 'barbaric' function of the cut-up itself in Burroughs; where the cut-up threatens the stability of the role of narrative in literature, the Wild Boys threaten various elements of American culture which it experiences as fundamental to itself.

It is often the case that the figure of the barbarian is used as a plot device in fiction, as it is in politics, serving as mirror for the civilized protagonist or simply serving as antagonist. Perhaps you are familiar with the poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904) by Constantine P. Cavafy(1863-1933)? Here it is:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?
The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.
What laws can the senators make now?
Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today

and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some who have just returned from the border say there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution. (Cavafy,15)

In this poem, the barbarians serve as an (as of yet) absent cause of critical reflection for the civilians. They question the conduct of their superiors and leaders under rumours of the coming barbarians, expressing their surprise at the sudden decadence that their orators display. I interpret the conduct of these leaders within the poem as caused by fearfulness and self-preservation, although it could also be argued that they actually await the coming of the barbarians with excitement. It should be noted that the poem does not actually tell of the arrival of the barbarians. In fact, one of its key features is this perennial postponement of their arrival. At the end of the poem, it is suggested that the barbarians have evaporated or have, perhaps, never existed at all, purely having been a phantasmatic source of anxiety for the rulers of Rome:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come. And some who have just returned from the border say there are no barbarians any longer.

It is this role that barbarians often seem to play in fiction. What fascinates me about this is the dual nature of the barbarian; as a phantasmatic threat to civilization and as a very corporeal or physical one. In Cavafy's poem, both of these options are present, because throughout the poem

the reader is in expectation of the eventual arrival of the barbarians who seem to possess so much force that violent resistance is out of the question, and diplomacy is immediately prepared. The revelation that ‘there are no barbarians any longer’ can be interpreted in many ways. Perhaps they did indeed evaporate; perhaps they left to threaten someplace more “civilized”, perhaps they were never there and were only imaginary, or perhaps they have been assimilated by the Empire and have replaced the rulers so quickly that the citizens do not even realize it. It is not impossible to conclude that, at the end of the poem, the barbarians have become part of the empire, and thus ‘civilized’.

This endless interplay between their (non-)existence and their in-/exteriority is highly relevant for a reading of avant-gardist art like that of Burroughs. This is because this type of art is to a large extent defined by its play with in-/exteriority; it is only avant-garde art if it stands with one foot in a tradition (that which motivates people to ask that common question: *is* this art?) and with the other stands elsewhere. One of the interesting considerations that Dadaïst art requires you to make is exactly this one: is this artwork I’m seeing interior to (part of-) or exterior to (outside of-) the Arts, or culture, as I know it? Does Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q*. (1919) truly exist as Art (or, within the discourse of Art) or is it something else? And the most satisfying conclusion would likely be that Dadaïst works are both part of a tradition and fiercely independent of any established interpretative framework at the same time. Similarly, Burroughs’ works are cut-ups of many famous texts, something which suggests that they are part of the tradition of the novel, simply because they are in dialogue with them. And yet, the reader will struggle if he assumes a more traditional reading attitude towards these works. One aspect of their ‘barbarism’, then, is the idea that they require a new type of reading attitude to even try to interpret.

Some of the functions of the cut-up as a form of barbarism can be better understood through an exploration of the function of the 'barbarian' figures within Burroughs' works: the Wild Boys. The Wild Boys themselves become a more detailed group throughout a number of novels, although they are also revised and changed throughout these texts. They are not, in other words, a one-dimensional countercultural force. They evolve continuously and groups often develop different traits independently of one-another. They are all homosexual and, from a conservative perspective, utterly immoral, often described as having sex on the corpses of the US soldiers they just cut-down with huge bowie knives. Here is one of the origin stories that could be considered the to be the starting point for the Wild Boys, although there are others:

> **Spring in Marrakech is always uneasy each day a little hotter knowing what Marrakech can be in August. That spring gasoline gangs prowled the rubbish heaps, alleys and squares of the city dousing just anybody with gasoline and setting that person on fire. They rush in anywhere nice young couple sitting in their chintzy middle-class living room when hello! yes hello! the gas boys rush in douse them head to foot with a pump fire extinguisher full of gasoline and I got some good pictures from a closet where I had prudently taken refuge. Shot of the boy who lit the match he let the rank and file slosh his couple then he lit a Swan match face young pure, pitiless as the cleansing fire brought the match close enough to catch the fumes. Then he lit a Player with the same match sucked the smoke in and smiled, he was listening to the screams and I thought My God what a cigarette ad: Clambake on a beach the BOY there with a match. He is looking at two girls in bikinis. As he lights the match they lean forward with a LUCKYSTRIKECHESTERFIELDOLDGOLDCAMELPLAYER in the bim and give a pert little salute. The BOY turned out to be the hottest property in advertising. Enigmatic smile on the delicate young face. Just what is the BOY looking at? (The Wild Boys, 143)**

The extremely violent scene described in the above extract fascinates its narrator who, from the safety of his closet, observes everything. The fragment begs certain simple questions, such as: why is the narrator in a closet in someone else's living room, holding a camera? Why the immediate association with advertising and capitalism? And, perhaps more urgently, where is the 'humanity' of each of these characters? Anger and horror are replaced by smiles and advertisement opportunities. None of these things are ever explained within the text. It seems very significant that this narrator, who is apparently a shrewd advertiser or at least someone with money in mind, is so blind to the violence he witnesses. I interpret this scene as a statement about the violence that capitalism brings into being and then fails to understand in its own language. The scene continues as follows:

> **We had set out to sell cigarettes or whatever else we were paid to sell. The BOY was too hot to handle. Temples were erected to the BOY and there were posters of his face seventy feet high and all the teenagers began acting like the BOY looking at you with a dreamy look lips parted over their Wheaties. They all bought BOY shirts and BOY knives running around like wolf packs burning, looting, killing it spread everywhere all that summer in Marrakech the city would light up at night human torches flickering on walls, trees, fountains all very romantic you could map the dangerous areas sitting on your balcony under the stars sipping a Scotch. (The Wild Boys, 144)**

Again, the narrator interprets extreme violence and quasi-religious zealotry as *romantic* instead of finding it, at least, somewhat problematic. It is quite possible to read the above extracts as a strangely fitting

allegory for the rise of religious violence and extremism in our present time. They offer a narrative in which extremism has come into being through capitalist machinations, and has then become 'too hot to handle'. It is not an unusual argument to make nowadays that capitalism and by extension foreign interventions by capitalist nations are one of the key constituents of the rise of fundamentalism. But, interestingly, the narrator admires the Wild Boys' faces and mercilessness at multiple points. Their faces 'young pure' and their smile enigmatic certainly suggest admiration. Although this admiration could be ironic, it is likely when taking into account the recurrent themes of violence in Burroughs that there is a legitimate admiration and perhaps desire for the Wild Boy's radical violence. Of course, the above extract doesn't go so far as portraying the rise of the Wild Boys as a total revolution, because the narrator tells us we could "map the dangerous areas sitting on your balcony under the stars sipping a Scotch." This leads us to an important element of the Wild Boy mythos, which is the fact that, throughout Burroughs novels, we never know for sure whether they will be victorious, or whether their "creators", those whose behaviour led to their uprising, are too powerful. As is the case with many of Burroughs' characters and events, one's interpretation of them can differ wildly depending on which description of them one reads. This ambivalence, however, is a key part of their barbarism, because, as we also saw in Cavafy's poem, in the case of the barbarian as in the case of the Wild Boys it is often the mere idea of their advance that pushes civilization into action: as more and more young boys and men move away from "civilization" to join the Wild Boys, figures like General Greenfield which I mentioned in my introduction feel pressured to mobilize their forces and to fight the Wild Boys.

V. Cut-ups as Barbarism

If the Wild Boys, as barbarian figures, carry an insurgent, revolutionary energy, this energy also runs through the cut-up, viewed as a barbarian practice. The word barbarism can also be used to describe the very practice of cutting-up, of taking texts from elsewhere and fragmenting them in what can be seen as a violent act. To cut-up the poems of Rimbaud, which seem so carefully crafted and measured, seems offensive, in some ways. The initial response from a Rimbaud scholar or enthusiast would likely be one of doubt and irritation. And yet, perhaps after the initial reaction a more positive one might follow, because of the realization that the oeuvre of Rimbaud is both historical and delineated *and* open to manipulation and alteration by modern readers so as to multiply its usefulness and influence from simply material to read and write *about*, to material to write *with*.

A theoretical framework that can be invaluable in reading Burroughs is that of post-structuralism. The connection between Burroughs' theories and those of important poststructuralist theorists is not made often, perhaps because it seems so obvious, or maybe his works weren't very widely read by thinkers in this field. A piece of cut-up text carries a sense of 'incompleteness' within itself that cannot be undone. Cut-up texts make their reader acutely aware of his/her desire for meaning or interpretation, because they resist this desire and, arguably, reflect it back. What makes cut-up texts suitable for a post-structuralist reading, then, is a denial of structure.

Jacques Derrida's well-known lecture translated as *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences* (1978), in which he examines the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and different interpretations of *interpretation* itself, opens as follows:

> **Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an "event," if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural—or structurality—thought to reduce or to suspect. (1)**

Cut-up texts can perhaps be considered as events, or at least "eventful" in this sense: they feature *that* which structure is "thought to reduce or suspect", and they feature it plentifully. Derrida claims, furthermore, that a structure limits the so-called *free play* or "freeplay" (as it is spelled in the text) of its elements because it has a center which limits and prevents this freeplay from being functionally infinite:

> **No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.**
> **Nevertheless, the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible. *Qua* center, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden. (1)**

This is a key poststructuralist argument against the structuralist paradigm from which the field emerged. With regards to literature, one could say that the narrative text is a structure that, though not entirely devoid of freeplay, is certainly regulated by a centre that is unchanging or constant. And any structure, or in our case, any narrative text, obeys the gravitational pull, as it were, of this centre, no matter how freely its

elements seem to have been put in place. Cut-up texts, then, serve as illustrations for this idea, because they enable the negation of this centre when and if they are fully cut-up, that is, purely consisting of words in random, non-syntactical, order such as, say: reject walking nomenclature be shake entropic militancy. However, few readers or authors would be interested in such a text. Instead, in order for them to become cut-up novels or poems, structure, as Derrida defines it, must be reinstated ever so minimally by the adherence to a centre; a centre that defines the transition from cut-up language into cut-up literature.

Cut-ups can thus be seen as the negation of structure, but always only to a certain limited extent, because they are consistently combined with regular prose throughout Burroughs' works. Theorizing the cut-ups *as* barbarism – a concept that often signifies total destruction - can be somewhat of a dead-end in this sense. They do represent a breaking down of the mechanisms that make narrative prose into what it is, but an equally important element, at least for the way in which Burroughs uses cut-ups, is the reconstitution of at least trace-levels of narrativity. The following extract from *The Ticket That Exploded* (1968) is selected because it exemplifies very well the extent to which the cut-up texts tread into mystical or even delirious-sounding language, therefore breaking in major ways with literary and narrative conventions:

> **For i have known fires – Isn't time is there left, cool finder running on our ticket that exploded, larval circumstances at far end of the creek? And these dogs knew nothing shifting the dominion of circumstances – What bronze mold blooms in aging roots? – response in the fading body beside you? (71)**

Not much can be said about who speaks here, or to whom the many questions are posed. And yet, a few lines later we read: “Bradly’s canoe of paper-thin black wood grounded on an island of swamp cypresses”(72). This, of course, signals one of the many sudden returns to narrative form that occur throughout the cut-up novels. The return to such forms does not invalidate the ‘destructive’ function of the cut-ups, but in fact gives the cut-ups increased potential for being disruptive. That is, the very presence of normal narrative elements in the texts activates the ‘barbarian’ function of the cut-ups because these narrative elements create that which the cut-ups can disrupt and even destroy. In the next chapter, I will attempt to interpret what I previously called the mystical character of the language that often results from Burroughs’ cut-up experiments, and how this relates to my emancipatory and political reading of his works. The role of the Wild Boys in this mystical element of the language of Burroughs’ novels is strangely limited, because interestingly, many of the descriptions of their rituals and characteristics are actually described in a documentary or journalistic style:

> **A tall boy black as ebony steps onto the rug. He scans the sky. He walks around the rug three times. He walks back to the center of the rug. He brings both hands down and shakes his head. The music stops. The boys drift away. It was explained to me that the ceremony I had just witnessed was performed after a battle in case any of the boys who had just been killed wished to return and that those who had lost their hands might wish to do since the body is born whole. However most of the spirits would have gone to the Blue Desert of Silence. (160, The Wild Boys)**

The fact that descriptions of the Wild Boys seldom coincide with extensive cut-up use is difficult to explain. Perhaps because the Wild Boys are one of the more unique elements of the world that Burroughs describes there was a tendency to write about them mostly in linear narrative. Whatever the case may be, if we assume that the Wild Boys inhabit the same sphere as those things described in cut-up language, they are not unrelated to each other.

4. …and the Future

VI. Barbarism, Cut-ups, and the Future

> **It is The Human Virus. (All viruses are deteriorated cells leading a parasitic existence… they have specific affinity for the Mother Cell; thus deteriorated liver cells seek the home place of hepatitis, etc. So every species has a Master Virus: Deteriorated Image of that species.) The broken image of Man moves in minute by minute and cell by cell… Poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity, all symptoms of The Human Virus. *The Human Virus can now be isolated and treated.* (Naked Lunch, 141)**

The idea that every species has a "Master Virus" which is a "Deteriorated Image of that species", and that there is therefore a "Human Virus", is a remarkably provocative way of diagnosing a certain set of problems that humanity undeniably struggles with. "Poverty, hatred, war, police-criminals, bureaucracy, insanity" are symptoms that are usually viewed as related but separate problems, but the above quote theorizes that they have the same viral origin. The last sentence suggests this virus can be "isolated and treated", but how?

The concept of the barbarian Other often stands in relation to a

future, or an expectation of a possible future, in which the barbarians have arrived. Whether that image of the future is desired or feared, as is so ambiguous in Cavafy's poem, doesn't necessarily matter for this point; what matters is that the barbarians always carry a strong image of a radically different future with them. In order for me to even conceive of that argument I am deeply indebted to a work by the French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy called *Economy & The Future* (2014). As you've seen in Cavafy's poem, as soon as the barbarian-to-come dissolves, civilization enters into a crisis that is hard to fathom but very meaningful within our modern times. In his book, Dupuy hypothesizes that Economy, with a capital e and without any article before it, has consumed –and has come to embody— our politics and our religion. This claim rests on the observation that Economy has started to play such a disproportionately large role in our lives that it has started to become, as I would call it, the master-signifier which has started to appear as the origin of all authority or sovereignty. The acceleration of capitalism and consumerism brings with it radical insecurities and precariousness in our experience of our relation to the future. The relation this process has to violence resonates clearly from the history of the 1930's and even the 1910's. Various "theological" claims, such as the one that the economic growth and progress proceeds through expansions and contractions, mirror the reading of bird-flock formations in order to predict events in the Roman Empire. They are the fictions that are mechanically necessary for the system to function and for human subjects within it to retain some hold on the future. The fact that banks function, at an ontological level, purely in relation to the future (in terms of projected growth, debts et cetera) is another element that accentuates the eerie similarities that the Economy has to theological conceptions of reality, in which life on earth is validated by a future-to-come. To recognize the function that Economy

and religion share in relation to the future reveals a deep ideological process which is similar to the process by which one culture might construct another as barbarian as I described earlier. Both of these processes are mechanisms of self-justification through an unwillingness to accept similarities, or through the construction of differences, be it between one culture and another or between Economy and religious attitudes towards the future that Dupuy describes.

Many capitalist consumers nowadays, myself included, would consider themselves to be atheists and would likely be somewhat startled by the idea that the space religion occupies in people's lives can be subsumed by Economy. In other words, capitalist ideology does resists being identified as belonging to a religious category, preferring itself to be associated with empiricism and science. In the realm of politics, for example, we have all heard the term 'austerity' being used a lot in recent times. Interpreted in the quasi-religious framework of Economy that I just sketched with the help of Dupuy's work, austerity, which is the limitation of wealth and "freedom" for those who are considered to have proven themselves as being "undeserving" by the dominant gaze, takes on the form of a martyrdom imposed from without. At the most cynical level, it is proof of the sadistic dimensions of political power. Belief is strong in the idea that those who have sinned before the Economy must repent. The only reason why this idea has a place in the paradigmatic discourse of Economy is because markets, existing in the end only as an enormous community of human beings, collectively respond to it. That the belief in self-punishment is so pervasive both in monotheistic religions of the West and in the minds of people themselves, is telling for the way in which Economy assimilates old religious ideas into its own structure.

In a chapter called *Economy and the Problem of Evil*, Dupuy discusses the phenomenon that he calls “the naturalisation of evil”:

> **The great moral horrors of the twentieth century brought into existence a new order of evil that was the exact opposite of the one Rousseau had described. Vladimir Jankélévitch called Rousseau’s conception an “antropodicy,” which is to say a theodicy in which man is substituted for God. In the new conception, the primacy of God (or “nature”) was restored, to the point that it now became possible to speak of the naturalisation of evil.**
>
> **In 1958, the German philosopher Günther Anders travelled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to take part in the Fourth Wold Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs. After many conversations with survivors of the catastrophe, he noted in his diary: “Their steadfast resolve not to speak of those who were to blame, not to say that the event had been caused by human beings; not to harbour the least resentment, even though they were the victims of the greatest of crimes—this really is too much for me, it passes all understanding.” And he added: “They constantly speak of the catastrophe as if it were an earthquake or a tidal wave. They use the Japanese word, *tsunami*.” (Dupuy, p. 4-5)**

Rousseau had proclaimed that violence, even that violence which is known as natural violence, such as earthquakes or floods, exists as violence only because of humanity, and thus not God or “nature” but humanity itself, at a fundamental level, is responsible for it. The irony that arises in the situation described above is, of course, that violence orchestrated by distinctly human agents is in the above quote conceived of in the same way as a tsunami. The factor that unites catastrophes such as a tsunami with that of the explosion of a nuclear bomb over Hiroshima in 1945 is their law-destroying character for those who suffer it. Walter Benjamin calls this type of violence *divine violence*, in contrast

to law-establishing violence that, in his *Critique of Violence*, is called *mythic violence*. In Derrida's reading of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, called *Force of Law* (2002), we read the following:

> **The concept of violence (*Gewalt*) permits an evaluative critique only in the sphere of law and justice (*Recht, Gerechtigkeit*) or the sphere of moral relations (*sittliche Verhältnisse)*. There is no natural or physical violence. One can speak figuratively of violence with regard to an earthquake or even to a physical ailment. But one knows that these are not cases of a *Gewalt* able to give rise to a judgment, before some instrument of justice. The concept of violence belongs to the symbolic order of law, politics and morals—of all forms of *authority* and of *authorization*, of claim to authority, at least. (Derrida, 265)**

When interpreted as such, we can say that the type of violence that is associated with the "great moral horrors of the twentieth century", as Dupuy calls them and with which I certainly agree, is experienced as a type of divine or natural violence because it evades or even destroys the power of any system of law that is not the law of God or nature itself. Any attempt to bring to justice, or at least to "court", these events, would expose the law in its final impotence. Arrested Nazis, responsible for the horrors of the Holocaust, can be brought before the law only, in spoken terms, for crimes of a lower order, never for the Holocaust in its totality. From a formal perspective, it is the network, or the system, of which they were a part, that denies the law some of its capacity for judgment. It is in this light that Adolf Eichmann, for example, could not be officially convicted for killing anyone, instead being judged for various other elements that together made the Holocaust into what it was, specifically the organisatory function he had fulfilled.

We intuitively know, of course, that there is a difference between a tsunami and the detonation of an atomic bomb, but this difference is at certain points eclipsed by what they share: they are law-shattering forms of violence. Taking Rousseau's humanist position into account, we can say that all violence finds its origin in none other than humanity, be it in the case of a tsunami or in the case of the Holocaust, and also in the case of the fictional violence of the Wild Boys, but their radical difference resides in how they appear before the law. The fact that the Holocaust and the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are conceptualized in a similar way by people who were witness and victim of them emphasizes the gap that exists between the Cartesian notion of the thinking subject on which so much in our society *thinks itself* to be grounded in and the inconsistencies that appear upon closer inspection. As Dupuy stated in the quote I used above: "the primacy of God (or "nature") was restored, to the point that it now became possible to speak of the naturalisation of evil." (4-5)

The Wild Boys come into being as a response to what Burroughs considers to be symptoms of "The Human Virus." In a way, they are Burroughs' fictional remedy to the very real violence that he attributes to the Virus: poverty, hatred, war, et cetera. The Boys are fiercely loyal to each other, ready to sacrifice themselves for their collective pursuits, and they are freed of language, or The Word, which is the primary system of control utilized by those *in* control. In this way, they are a group of hand-crafted, imaginary, future human beings that have evolved past any vulnerability to the Virus. It is essential to note that the Wild Boys are perhaps most fundamentally a critique of the traditional family structure that informed the American Dream, and the organisation of (American) society for a long time. The idea that a husband, a wife and some children together constitute the ideal family unit which drives society (and

perhaps more importantly Economy) onwards towards growth and improvement, isn't new, but it is a typical subject of critique in the 1960's counterculture that Burroughs was a part of. In some interviews, Burroughs referenced Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich's thesis about the origins of fascism and specifically Nazism, as detailed in Reich's work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), which blames strict family structures and specifically the so-called 'authoritarian family' for making possible the rise of Europe's fascist regimes:

> **To comprehend the relation between sexual suppression and human exploitation, it is necessary to get an insight into the basic social institution in which the economic and sex-economic situation of patriarchal authoritarian society are interwoven. Without the inclusion of this institution, it is not possible to understand the sexual economy and the ideological process of a patriarchal society. The psychoanalysis of men and women of all ages, all countries, and every social class shows that: *The interlacing of the socio economic structure with the sexual structure of society and the structural reproduction of society take place in the first four or five years and in the authoritarian family.* The church only continues this function later. Thus, the authoritarian state gains an enormous interest in the authoritarian family: *It becomes the factory in which the state's structure and ideology are molded*. (29-30)**

Reich's point, which combines psychoanalysis and Marxist ideas, about the origins of fascist power, emphasizes the importance of the very early years of a child's upbringing in an 'authoritarian family', or in other words, a family with a strong leader in the father and a loving mother who serve to reproduce a variety of traits such as sexual anxiety, obedience to authority and emotional dependence on a mother figure. These are the same traits that the Wild Boys rebel violently against and that Burroughs often ridicules in his texts. The Wild Boys are often described as young

men or boys who left their (authoritarian) family to join the group. It is no wonder that they eventually develop a way of reproducing through a ritual that requires no women, thus avoiding the traditional family structure altogether. It is ironic, however, that they shed this burden of an authoritarian family in favour of a remarkably violent brotherhood of fellow men. By doing this they arguably avoid what Reich theorized had been the catalyst of the rise of German fascism, but they substitute for the family an organisation that somewhat resembles a militaristic order that, even though it is not hierarchical, nonetheless requires total dedication and self-sacrifice. However, I will argue that their non-hierarchical structure is what differentiates them from an authoritative military structure and imbues them with emancipatory, revolutionary force.

The Wild Boys are also the theoretical answer to the question: why does power, on the whole, insist on having its own (nuclear) destruction at its fingertips? And why does this not infuriate those who are *not* in such positions of power further? It seems as though even those who are in power, and presumably you and I too, are perfectly capable of finding our footing in a world that has come to seem, especially since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, utterly ephemeral. Perhaps we find it easy to adjust to this state of being, because we are aware that in this way, humanity as a whole starts to mirror our own bodies, which have always been temporary. Especially in the secular age of postmodernity, and with the ever-present knowledge of the Holocaust, the atomic bomb and other “tsunami’s”, each in their own way manufactured by mankind and suffered by mankind. In the fictional universe of Burroughs’ novels, the Wild Boys try to resist the constant precariousness that comes into existence through the very invention of nuclear bombs and industrialized genocide by attempting to leave the human body behind, and in doing

so, curing themselves of the Human Virus. In *Queer Burroughs*, Jamie Russel asks: “After spending so much time fantasizing bodily autonomy, freedom from regulation, and a masculine identity, why should queer heroes want to leave their phallic, male bodies behind?” (157) To answer that question, I argue that leaving their bodies is the only answer they have to the immense potentiality that is humanity’s nuclear self-destruction. The following quote from *The Wild Boys* is ironic, in this respect: “A highly placed narcotics official tells a grim President: “The wild-boy thing is a cult based on drugs, depravity and violence more dangerous than the hydrogen bomb. (151)”” In what way the Wild Boys could be more dangerous than the hydrogen bomb remains unclear, although it seems clear that the above quote is a parody of how conservative politics would’ve viewed the 1960’s countercultural forces of which Burroughs was a part, which were characterized by strong pacifist and anti-nuclear sentiments.

VII. Conclusions

> **Let tyranny reign for a single day, and on the morrow not one patriot will be left. How long will the despots' fury be called justice, and the people's justice barbarism or rebellion? How tender one is to the oppressors and how inexorable against the oppressed! (Robbespierre)**

Burroughs, along with many of the Beat- and hippie-generations, often protested in their own ways against the possibility of nuclear war; a threat which, as I would argue, came into existence through competing imperialist desires. The most well-known examples are the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the United States used the *threat* of nuclear destruction in North Korea during the war they fought in the early 1950’s too. The power guaranteed by having a monopoly over nuclear

bombing technology might've disappeared since then, but the technology itself is present underneath the surface of many of today's large-scale diplomatic crises and negotiations, even if just in the form of accusations or suspicions. It is still the ultimate bargaining tool, akin to the Apple of Knowledge, between the God of the Old Testament and humanity as Adam and Eve: it is never to be used, or eaten, but this prohibition itself is a way of using, or eating from, it. The legitimacy of modern empires is sustained by the very possibility of imminent destruction of themselves and others: a barbarian threat, to be sure, and an unambiguously feared one at that. The fact that nuclear destruction is a theme that is navigated in the same novels that are also cut-up novels, novels about Wild Boys and multibillionaires, generals, mass-media and guerrilla warfare and the so-called Nova Mob is incentive enough for me to reread Burroughs' work as an exploration not just of "systems of control", but as proposals for radical change and a different future: "All out of time and into space. Come out of the time word "the" forever. Come out of the body word "thee" forever. There is no thing to fear. There is no thing in space. There is no word to fear. There is no word in space" (151, *The Soft Machine*). Burroughs hints at an existence outside of, or without, language and the body, the two being somehow connected, here. Elsewhere, he describes language as a virus, which resonates with the previous idea: if language is a virus affecting the body, one must leave both behind.

The trope of the barbarian as embodied by Burroughs' Wild Boys is a utopian and avant-gardist mobilisation of a figure often invoked as agent of dystopian change. His Wild Boys are neither the first nor the last positive appropriation of this figure in the name of change, but they are a striking one. The aims of the group as a whole are difficult to grasp, and sometimes distinctly problematic, such as when they exclude women not only from their reproductive rituals but even from their afterlives in the

Western Lands. Any reading of their activities and aims cannot neglect this element, but we must also recognize the other objects of their ire: authoritarian family structures, which Reich claimed lay at the root of fascism; bureaucratic and military obedience, which lies at the root of the constant precariousness of “mutually assured destruction” and the continued existence of the nuclear bomb and the other elements that perpetuate the Human Virus as Burroughs posited it. Another element that makes the Wild Boys stand out even more when we read Burroughs’ work today is their similarity, on the surface, to modern day terrorists or extremists. A present-day reader *knows* that the Wild Boys cannot be references to modern extremists, but it is nonetheless startling to notice that the Wild Boys are not only guerrilla fighters who utilize hit-and-run tactics against a much larger and well-equipped force, but that they are also commonly described as fighting in the deserts of North Africa. In the end, therefore, the Wild Boys are a problematic, masculine, comical but violent force of change in Burroughs’ works. A reading which seeks to locate the emancipatory element within Burroughs’ texts solely in the Wild Boys might come to the conclusion that the latter are, in the end, too problematic and incommensurable with a just conception or idea of utopia. Even though they seem at times to be a successful force of emancipatory change, they *only* consist of teenage boys. This is, perhaps their most tragic element too, because it limits their true appeal to a very small percentage of human beings to the exclusion of so many. There is, however, one more thing I wish to discuss and that is Burroughs’ use of the cut-up as a prophetic tool, which I feel might redeem the texts from an emancipatory perspective. Dupuy explains prophecy as follows:

> **We would say today that the word of the prophet had a *performative* power: in saying things, he brought them into being. Mind you, the prophet was well aware of this. One might be tempted to conclude that the prophet had the power to which political revolutionaries aspire: he spoke so that things might change in the direction that he wished to impress upon them. But this would be to overlook the fatalistic aspect of prophecy, which reads out the names of all those things that will come to pass, just as they are written down on the great scroll of history, immutably, ineluctably. Thus Jeremiah(13:23): "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." Evildoers, the biblical prophet says, are doomed forever to do evil. (Dupuy 32)**

It is this fatalistic aspect of prophecy that Burroughs' texts challenge, through their cut-up form as well as through their content. The cut-up imperative resists fatalism by encouraging the reader to violate and alter the text. In this sense, the cut-up is anti-prophetic. But, at the same time, Burroughs presented the method as a prophetic one when he stated, as he commonly did: "*cut-up the present and the future leaks out*." When the biblical prophet ascertains that "the Ethiopian" cannot "change his skin" nor "the leopard his spots," it becomes clear that the prophet has not read about Burroughs' Wild Boys, which take all sorts of forms and colors throughout the texts. And lastly, Burroughs' texts sometimes have a prophetic aesthetic to them, for example when Uranium Willy orders us to "storm the Reality Studio." The entire Wild Boy uprising arguably takes the form of a prophecy in this sense as well. This paradoxical quality of the texts, which through their use of the cut-up are anti-prophetic but nonetheless incorporate prophetic elements into their content, is perhaps one of the most remarkable things about them.

Whether or not cut-up text truly has some kind of prophetic powers,

as Burroughs sometimes claimed it did, I hope to have presented a convincing argument for why Burroughs' cut-up novels are just as relevant today as they were 50 years ago. A war is no longer being fought in Vietnam, in fact, Vietnam is now quite a pleasant tourist-destination, as I experienced recently. A war is, however, being fought in other parts of the world, a war which is often called the "War on Terror." From within a Europe that has come to appear just as fractured as it was in the past, I write about barbarism and the Wild Boys from an emancipatory and a revolutionary perspective. Not in the hope that the "Middle East", too, will be a pleasant tourist destination for the West in 50 years, but in the hopes that the *ouroboros* that is empire (and perhaps humanity itself) might one day stop eating its own tail and look towards what lies ahead instead of what lies behind it.

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