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William Burroughs, the infinite groundbreaker

A series of talks and an essay collection bring us the author of *Naked Lunch*

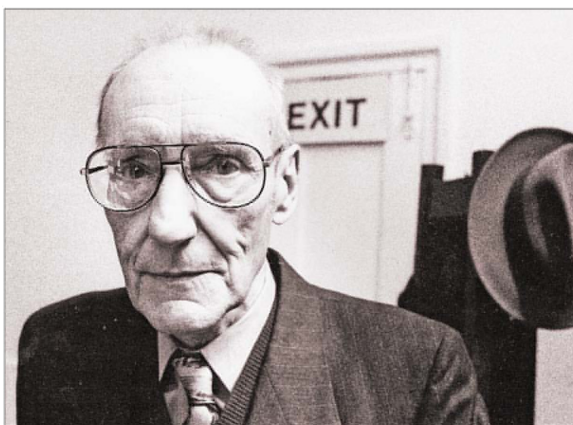
BY ANA LAURA CARUSO
Translated

Twelve years after his death in 1997, William S. Burroughs is talked of solely as a writer. Yet he was much more than that. Burroughs was a US novelist, essayist, painter, filmmaker and spoken word performer. His work influenced many generations of artists of all kinds. A primary member of the Beat Generation, he was an avant-garde author who affected the whole of popular culture.

While some regard him as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, others consider him overrated. Prominent admirers of Burroughs's work have included rock critic Lester Bangs and authors J.G. Ballard, Charles Bukowski and Alan Moore. Both the New Wave and, especially, the cyberpunk schools of science fiction are indebted to him. Whatever else he was, William Burroughs was surely an intriguing figure. He used his first gun at the age of 8, cut off his little finger at 25, started experimenting with drugs at 30, and shot his wife dead at 37 while playing a drunken game of "William Tell" at a party. He later said, "I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan's death."

Caja Negra has recently translated and published *The Electronic Revolution*, a collection of essays by Burroughs (see box). The publishing house called experts of different disciplines to talk about Burroughs' influence on music, visual art, films, and literature. The seminar opens today and will last through Saturday 31. This is a unique opportunity to look at all sides of Burroughs's work simultaneously.

Guest artists feature Enrique Symons, Oliverio Coelho, Rafael Cipolini, Pablo Marín, Pablo Schanton, Alan Couris, and others. Regarding music, critic Pablo Schanton said that he would talk about the manipulation of sound by some bands of the post-punk scene during the 70s and 80s. "The act of cutting up tapes and creating loops



William S. Burroughs.

has a strong reference to Burroughs," says Schanton. This was the case of Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle. "Cabaret Voltaire took the book *The Electronic Revolution* as a bible," he says. "During the 90s, DJ Spooky—best known as The Subliminal Kid—was also influenced by Burroughs." As a matter of fact, he borrowed his stage name from the character The Subliminal Kid in the novel *Now Express*. In addition, Schanton says that he will refer to the history of bands such as The Soft Machine or Steely Dan as well as the reason why Burroughs's picture is on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's*.

As for written words, writer Oliverio Coelho will talk about the influence of William Burroughs in Argentine literature. "I will talk about the merging point between some local writers and Burroughs," Coelho says. According to him, Marcelo Cohen, Néstor Sánchez, Ricardo Zelarayán, Carlos Gamero, and Os-

valdo Lamborghini are in tune with Burroughs. "Lamborghini deals with written language in a very anarchic way; Marcelo Cohen has created a whole new language," Coelho explains. "These writers break with tradition in literature just like Burroughs did."

Language, says Burroughs, is a virus and certain speech acts have contagious effects. "You cannot remain unchanged after reading any of these writers," Coelho says. "The impact of their books doesn't have to do with the plot but with experimenting with a whole new language. And it's not just a provocation; it has a political and aesthetic significance," he says. "These writers are strongly committed to a cause, it's not just playful or pop," he concludes.

Nevertheless, Coelho thinks that it's almost impossible to find such a groundbreaking writer as Burroughs because "everything is aimed at selling in the marketplace nowadays." He takes *The Naked Lunch* as an example and says, "I cannot think of any other writer who has experimented in such a way with language."

Film critic Pablo Marín talked further on the influence of Burroughs

per) and cutting it in pieces with a few or single words on each piece. The resulting pieces are then rearranged into a new text. The rearranging of work often results in surprisingly innovative new phrases. In films, we can think of Jean-Luc Godard's films. He used to cut out in the middle of a scene and thus broke with the tradition of a linear way of telling a story. Godard—and also Michelangelo Antonioni—tried to highlight the editing cuts between shots.

Fold-in is the technique of taking two different sheets of linear text, cutting each sheet in half and combining them, then reading across the resulting page. So fold-in is basically making use of other writers' texts. Burroughs, for instance, combined one of his texts with a text by Genet and created a whole new text. This procedure has to do with home footage—making a film out of other people's films and get rid of any previous ideas on what a film should be like.

How do you manage to do so and keep a dramatic structure?

The films we are going to show in the seminar are very experimental—you may say that all of

filmmakers from the Nouvelle Vague did the opposite from Godard and tried to make shots last as long as possible. Or else Andy Warhol, who filmed the Empire State building during eight hours. It's difficult to apply a concept from literature to films.

What about Argentine films?

There's a filmmaker from Rosario city, Gustavo Galuppo, who could have been part of the seminar. He works with images from classic and home films, and then he edits them to create a whole new meaning.

What are the two trends in experimental filmmaking?

There are a lot of filmmakers from the US who started experimenting in the 1920s with ready-made and continues throughout the 50s. Most US filmmakers, like Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner and Wallace Berman, are visual artists who knew Burroughs and worked with him. Berman was the editor of a magazine and Burroughs was one of the contributors. We might talk about an artistic movement, because the work of visual artists of that decade was in tune with that of writers. In the case of Austrian filmmakers, they made use of certain techniques but their work was not as groundbreaking as that of US artists. Most of the films that are done nowadays are like this, many of them don't produce such a strong impact. They just work with the legacy of their predecessors. There are films like *Zelig*, by Woody Allen, that make use of footage from other films and documentaries. Jürgen Belles *Rumpelstilzchen* opens with found footage from a 1955 film version of the Brothers Grimm story. What Belle did was hanging the film from a tree branch so it is marked by layers of residue, chemical traces, scratches and blotches. What you finally see are a lot of colours. Anyway, as I said before, it's almost impossible to create an avant-garde piece of art nowadays because art enters a cycle in which everything is the same and innovation is difficult.

THE ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION

Ed. Caja Negra, Buenos Aires, 2009

The Electronic Revolution is an essay collection

by William S. Burroughs. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a collection of essays on the influence of Burroughs on music, visual art, films, and literature. The second part is a collection of essays on the influence of Burroughs on the electronic revolution. The book is a unique opportunity to look at all sides of Burroughs's work simultaneously.



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What's the difference between experimental and traditional filmmaking? Experimental filmmaking is a form of filmmaking that breaks with the traditional rules of filmmaking. It is a form of filmmaking that is not concerned with telling a story or creating a dramatic structure. It is a form of filmmaking that is concerned with exploring the possibilities of the medium.

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WHERE & WHEN

CCMOCA (Montes de Oca 169), Thursday 22 to Saturday 31. Tickets: \$5.

Today: William Burroughs: Films, music, and spoken word. 7:30 pm. Tickets: \$5.

Tomorrow: The influence of William Burroughs on the electronic revolution. 7:30 pm. Tickets: \$5.