

An Analysis on Pornographic Experience in William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*

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William S. Burroughs (1914-1997) was more than just a homosexual who got away with murdering his second wife, Joan Villmer, after shooting her in the head. However, William Burroughs's misogyny, misanthropy, and drug addiction flavour the literary works that made Burroughs a significant figure in American letters in the twentieth century. Burroughs was a renowned novelist, predominant member of the Beat movement.

Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* provides a contestatory account of the sexual and pornographic that clearly transforms hidden, private sexual action into a public, external experience that achieves the utilitarian ideal of mutual social visibility. At the time of its publication in 1959, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* was faced with censorship due to its legal designation as an obscene work. While the novel was met with some critical praise, many traditional humanist detractors critiqued its experimental style, which was often deemed lacking in literary accomplishment. Though popularly considered a novel, *Naked Lunch* consists of a more experimental collage- like array of fragmentary sequences loosely linked by the intermittent presence of the narrator-protagonist and agent, William Lee, Burroughs's presumed literary persona. The novel's events occur in various fictional locations representative of extreme forms of social organization, including the bureaucratic- totalitarian Freeland Republic, and the more thematically central Interzone, a denationalized, deinstitutionalized space of radical freedom in which the structures of control ingrained within individuals reassert themselves through various acts of violence and sadism. Burroughs's thematic emphasis on freedom and control is infused with the imagery of the addict and dealer, a symbiotic relationship that depends on one's desire for control and another's desire to be controlled. As per Burroughs's stated intents, many critics have approached the work as a critique of systems of hierarchy; since Burroughs considers language to be the fundamental form of control and compares its irreducible unit, the word, to a virus, *Naked Lunch's*

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fragmentary and direct style is generally considered an experimental assault on the perceived latent control that asserts itself through forms of narrative and traditional literary devices such as metaphor.

Like Bellona, the central urban locations of *Naked Lunch* pose difficulties for accurate cognitive mapping. The market in the central area of Interzone, one of the novel's primary settings and an extrapolated vision of Burroughs' environment in Tangier, is described in terms that suggest a lack of planning:

All houses in the city are joined. Houses of sod- high mountain moguls blink in smoky doorways- houses of bamboo and teak, houses of adobe, stone and red brick, South Pacific and Maori houses, houses in trees and riverboats, wood houses one hundred feet long sheltering entire tribes, houses of boxes and corrugated iron where old men sit in rotten rags cooking down canned heat, great rusty iron racks rising two hundred feet in the air from swamps and rubbish with perilous partitions built on multi-levelled platforms, and hammocks swinging over the void. (90)

Similarly, Interzone's Plaza is related in language that evokes the very antithesis of good urban planning, the maze or labyrinth, the design of which is intended to disorient the individual, although here it emerges more spontaneously as a result of lack of planning:

All streets of the City slope down between deepening canyons to a vast, kidney shaped plaza full of darkness. Walls of street and plaza are perforated by dwelling cubicles and cafes, some a few feet deep, others extending out of sight in a network of rooms and corridors. At all levels criss- cross of bridges, cat walks, and cable cars. . . a maze of kitchens, restaurants, cubicles, perilous iron balconies and basements opening into the underground baths. (45-46)

For the most part, however, these cities are conveyed to the reader through descriptions of the sexual activities that occur within their confines. In this sense, the sexual appears to precede the physical environment as a more accurate indication of spatial orientation. Within Interzone, a single, vast building:

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The rooms are made of a plastic cement that bulges to accommodate people, but when too many crowd into one room there is a soft *plop* and someone squeezes through the wall right into the next house—the next bed that is, since the rooms are mostly bed where the business of the Zone is transacted. A hum of sex and commerce shakes the Zone like a vast hive. (149)

Though Interzone's landscape is presented as completely indistinct and unmarked, the concentration and public presentation of the intimate seems to result in new perceptible social and spatial configurations akin to Ferguson's characterization of artificial utilitarian social structures.

The uses of sexuality in *Naked Lunch* demonstrates Burroughs's use of the body in a positive, constructive manner. In the extant criticism on Burroughs by both his detractors and champions, however, sex is described in overwhelmingly negative terms, a characterization which is perhaps a product of Burroughs's popularly perceived dismal vision. In *Naked Lunch*, these comments largely respond to the notorious "Blue Movie" scene, a section of the novel which involves depictions of violent sex and hangings.

Speaking in traditional "moral" terms, John Tytell states that "there can be no justifying explanations of the significance of the Blue Movie sequence, but only an appreciation of its ecstatically kinetic . . . depiction of violence... only the speed of flashing sensation" (9), quoted by Robin Lydenberg's *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs' Fiction*, while David Lodge in "Objections to William Burroughs." broadly objects to the novel's "...violence, squalor, and perversion" (76). Burroughs's more enthusiastic critics, by contrast, uphold this negative motivation, although framing it in more analytical, descriptive terms. Lydenberg states that the Blue Movie Scene "tries to take the thrill out of sexual violence" (12). Reading *Naked Lunch* alongside the writings of the Frankfurt School, Timothy S. Murphy in "Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs" contends that Burroughs "... brings copulation out into the open and reveals it as a control process" (91). Ihab Hassan in "The Subtracting Machine: The Work of William Burroughs" proposes that in *Naked Lunch*, "sex is usually violation" (55), and an expression of the "extinction of life" (56), while Katherine N. Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* similarly observes a great deal of pervasive "sexual nausea" (21).

Burroughs encapsulates the more positive function of sexuality in *Naked Lunch* most palpably with the sentence, "Signal flares of orgasm burst over the world" (174). Amidst the disorienting spaces presented in the novel, the orgasm is associated with clarity and generally affords the subject a far-reaching, panoptic view shared with sexual partners and observers. In scenes of sexual activity, the narrative transitions from Burroughs's characteristically hallucinatory and fragmented style to the unmistakably concrete description of the pornographic, and finally resolves in the moment of orgasm, which is rendered as a disconnected imagistic "mosaic," an attempt to convey a glimpse of absolute space, which Lydenberg alternatively refers to as "moments of intense clarity" and "direct naked seeing" (15).

In "Hassan's Rumpus Room," a sequence focusing on an orgiastic party in Interzone and deemed somewhat reductively by Murphy as "a parody of the commodification of homosexuality" (76), surreal sex-death rituals presented in pornographic detail lead to such panoptic experiences, as the narrative moves from the immediate and limited surroundings of the room – "Gilt and red plush. Rococo bar backed by pink shell... Windowless cubicle with blue walls. Dirty pink curtain cover the door" (63, 65) - to vast expansive space congruent with the advent of sexual activity-

"A vast still harbour of iridescent water. Deserted gas well flares on the horizon. Stink of oil and sewage. Sick sharks swim through the black water, belch sulphur from rotting livers, ignore a bloody, broken Icarus" (64).

As the scene progresses and Hassan increases the level of sexual activity with the cry, "Freedom Hall here, folks! . . . *Let it be! And no holes barred!!!*" (66), the mapping function of sex becomes more concrete:

Two boys jacking off under railroad bridge. The train shakes through their bodies, ejaculates them, fades with distant whistle . . . Train compartment: two sick young junkies on their way to Lexington tear their pants down in convulsions of lust. One of them soaps his cock and works it up the other's ass with a corkscrew motion . . . Both ejaculate at once standing up. . . The train tears on through the smoky, neon-lighted June night. Pictures of men and women, boys and girls, animals, fish, birds, the copulating rhythm

of the universe flows through the room, a great blue tide of life. (68-69)

The interconnectedness of various orgasms here implies a graspable, intentional coherence and contrasts with the fragmented style that characterizes the majority of the novel. As Ferguson states in her discussion of utilitarian social groups, from which she contends pornography derives its means and motives, one key feature is the promulgation of "visible order," here seen in the intricate relationship among various individuals (15).

Several critics responding to *Naked Lunch* and Burroughs's body of work more generally have insightfully investigated Burroughs's critique of Western hierarchy and binarism, particularly the prevalent concept of mind - body dualism. In doing so, however, they have taken the additional step of somewhat contradictorily interpreting the aforementioned moments as suggesting disembodiment, wherein consciousness physically leaves the body and the strictures of a subjective framework. In one example, Lydenberg first faults psychoanalytic critic Serge Grunberg for "his reluctance to imagine, or to recognize as anything but failure and self-delusion, the possibility of life without a body or without a unified subject" (22), and subsequently contends that *Naked Lunch* contains

. . . concrete embodiments of every possible imbalance and abuse within this dual system: from paralyzed bodies numbed by the abstractions of religion and romance, to paralyzed minds imprisoned by the body's physical cravings . . . the tyranny of the body turns the life energy of sex and sensory experience into the mindless mechanical responses of pure need . . . the sex addict is alienated from his own body, his own desire. (28)

Hayles similarly observes, through the lens of informatics, the concept of disembodiment at work, as she states, "The junkie's body is a harbinger of the postmodern mutant, for it demonstrates how presence yields to assembly and disassembly patterns created by the flow of junk as information through points of amplification and resistance" (42-3). Beyond the obvious difficulties of modelling such a phenomenon, these critics overlook the cognitive function achieved here through the subject's contact with the physical. In opposition to such a form of binarism and the traditional structures of metaphor that the critics attack, Burroughs presents the sexual pornographic moment

as a fully integrated mind -body experience, in which the physical is used as a means to mental cognition.

In stark opposition to the freedom and permissibility of Interzone, where sex functions as a tenuous mechanism for spatial orientation, is the totalitarian- bureaucratic Freeland Republic, where the efficient, sadistic Dr. Benway, "... a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control" (19), has implemented a plan intended to spatially disorient the city's inhabitants in an effort to control them. Broadly, Benway poses a challenge to individual and group cognition through the institution of "an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy." Consistent with Lynch's theory of mapping, Dr. Benway has ordered the obliteration of common markers of spatial orientation: "All benches were removed from the city, all fountains turned off, all flowers and trees destroyed" (20). Noting the potential for sexual activity as a method of orientation, however, Benway also analogously institutes a ban on sexual solicitation: "No one ever looked at anyone else because of the strict law against importuning, with or without verbal approach, anyone for any purpose, sexual or otherwise" (20). With these parallel actions, Burroughs draws a distinct functional equivalent between physical locationing dependent upon external objects, and a sexual mapping that relies on the external perceptibility of the sex act. As Frances Ferguson posits in "Why Is This Man So Angry?"

"Pornography [is] the interest in the ways in which people's bodies come to be increasingly tracked in relation to other bodies" (368). By suppressing the possibility of creating social and visual perceptibility through sexual action, Benway reduces the level of relevant intersubjective knowledge among the citizens of Freeland.

Benway further solidifies the connection between abstract forms of control and physical unnavigability when he returns to the labyrinth trope, stating that "... the possibilities are endless like meandering paths in a great big beautiful garden" (25). Benway's ultimate goal of abolishing recognition and sexual community is realized in one of the novel's closing sequences in which Carl Peterson, a homosexual patient, walks out of "sexual correction" treatment: "A homosexual tourist looked at him and raised a knowing eyebrow." Returning his glance, Carl sees "something ignoble and hideous reflected back in the queen's spayed- animal brown eyes" (161). Benway's treatment effectively reduces the way in which Freeland's inhabitants can perceive any notion of the social totality through the sexual.

In contrast to the brutal separation of public and private zones within the

Freeland Republic, Burroughs demonstrates the radical effects of their melding through the pranks of the roguish agent A.J, whom Murphy accurately characterizes as a "critical subversive" of instrumental reason (86). A.J.'s tentative identification as a member of the "Factualist" party connotatively implies a desire for objectivity and places him as one opposed to systems of control through obfuscation, such as Benway's plan to institute "an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct" (19). In one prank, A.J. releases the Xiucutl, an aphrodisiac bug, "on the opening night of the metropolitan." The ensuing scene is rendered in metonymic, visible, sensory - oriented detail:

Screams, breaking glass, ripping cloth. A rising crescendo of grunts and squeals and moans and whimpers and gasps . . . Reek of semen and cunts and sweat and the musty odor of penetrated rectums . . . Diamond and fur pieces, evening dresses, orchids, suits and underwear litter the floor covered by a writing, frenzied, heaving mass of naked bodies. (124)

A similar occurrence takes place at the opening of the Escuela Amigo, a delinquent school for boys in which A. J. presents a sexually suggestive statue. Here, A.J.'s imposition of sexual perceptibility upon formerly obscure, largely bourgeois social domains provides an alternative means of "order," which effectively captures the role of pornography within these novels.

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