

MA Dissertation:

"The American Dream Machine:
The Anti-Systemic Fictions of Coover, Thompson, Burroughs & Acker,"
by Tereza V. Novická

Ms Novická's MA dissertation explores the tropes of aspirationism and transgression as manifest in the writing of key post-War American authors for whom the "American Dream" represents the major *dystopian* myth of our time; authors of a political and philosophical incisiveness, and of a stylistic boldness, to match the task of critiquing the decadence of America's "western" cultural hegemony, from the Eisenhower era to Reaganism. Burroughs, Coover, Thompson and Acker are among the singularly most innovative and important "American" writers to emerge from the Cold War, though it is their accomplishment to have attained the status of singularly "un-American" in their refusal of the parochialism and literary chauvinism, for example, that has characterized such aspirants of the Great American Novel as Mailer, Roth and Bellow. Consequently their reach and relevance in our own time is far greater.

As critics, polemicists and satirists of both statist and corporate capitalism, these four writers – some overtly, others circumstantially – participate in a broader "theoretical" project whose common antecedent can be found in the European avant-garde, in that line of social critique running from Dada, via Surrealism, to Absurdism, and whose articulation provides a foundation to the major works of Bataille, Foucault and Debord, among others. Acknowledging this common genealogy, Ms Novická eschews a parochially "disciplinary" approach to Burroughs, Coover, Thompson and Acker, refusing the narrow ideological frame of reference often implied by the nationalist idiom of "American Literature," instead pursuing the "interdisciplinary" affinities of these writers and thinkers themselves – whether implied or boldly stated in their texts. In the intersection of Burroughs, Acker, Debord and Bataille in particular, there is a mutually ramified stance vis-à-vis the "productivity" of writing, of "literature" and "thought," that is both incisive and unrelenting, and which is articulated not merely as subject-matter but as textual-matter: writing that is "generative" without being straightforwardly reducible to the "work" of Literary or Philosophical commodification. Coover extends this into the realm of facticity in the "reporting" of political post-truth *avant la lettre*, while Foucault's critique of the history of reason, though at times fraught with contradiction, at the very least exposes the expropriative machinery at work in the "constructive" social normalization of deviance and transgression – including that of transgressive or "deviant" literatures etc.

Ms Novická's dissertation is topically and structurally focused and well justified, and is of relevance to contemporary discussions about the status of "writing" within an increasingly commercialized English-language literary marketplace, bolstered by institutional cartels of worthless "literary criticism" preoccupied with self-justification rather than self-critique. Implicitly, Ms Novická's dissertation questions the ideological motives behind the institution of Literature itself and of a "literary critical" project which eschews the responsibility of critiquing its own operations as an instrument of cultural normalization. The dilemma, here, is how to begin to critically approach the writing of Burroughs, Coover, Thompson and Acker without succumbing to such institutional entropy. Ms Novická makes a worthy attempt at addressing this problem while in addition drawing useful parallels between the grotesque evangelists of political fiction that populate much of Burroughs', Coover's, Thompson's and Acker's writing, and the fictional politics of the present day: demanding, thereby, that we ask again the question of criticism's status in the wake of fifty years of the "society of the spectacle." Knowing what it is, is it stubborn optimism or mere bad faith that sustains its institutional labour?

I hereby recommend this dissertation for defence, with the recommendation for a grade of "excellent."



Louis Armand
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