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The American Dream Machine:
Anti-Systemic Fictions of Coover, Thompson, Burroughs, and Acker

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Chapter One – The Limits of Transgression in the American Dream Machine

The antagonistic oppositionality between nature and culture, instinct and reason, transgression and limits has always been the compelling impulse for critical thought, suggesting an inherent conflict within society where divergence, not harmony, is the order of the day. The artificially created bipolarity of dualized concepts, ideas, mindsets, and discourses is the self-perpetuating driving force in the power dynamics between these adversarial forces which pit the sacred against the profane, good against evil, normal against pathological, all in the name of power. Transgression represents a self-contradictory principle complicit within this power play (despite its drive to destabilize dichotomic binary logic), paradoxically requiring both affirmation and denial of the limits it violates. Its subversive intent is deeply contingent on the adversarial (transgressed) force recognizing it for what it is – the identification must be mutual.

There is no blueprint for how transgressions manifest; they react to specific socio-political and cultural contexts with tactics tailored to an arguably anti-systemic impetus inherent within this violating practice. One can identify excess as a unifying concept that pervades transgression. It exceeds limits; it is excessive in exaggeration, travesty, destruction. This impulse to transgress belongs to anti-rational modes of thinking and experience, modes that challenge these boundaries of systematic logic. Along with the paradigm shift at the end of the nineteenth century that with Friedrich Nietzsche's game-changing proclamation, "God is dead," came to mark a radical re-evaluation of long held "universal" values and orders, criticism of "collective" experience becomes imperative in a world where the margins now percolated into the center of critical attention and hitherto ignored groups of people regained the traction to challenge dichotomic social norms that either normalize or demonize behavior based on its utility for the preservation of an ordered society.

Transgression cannot function without the existence and precedence of the limit, and is dependent upon human experience existing not in the realm of limitlessness, but one of limits. These restrictions, via social norms, a sense of morality and mortality, and individual capabilities, are necessary for functioning within society, and this social bond carries with it, as Georges Bataille's understanding of (inner) experience entails, an inherent desire to transgress these limits in light of the ultimate finitude, death. Human existence revolves

around "an exasperated attempt to complete being"[1] in face of mortality and other limitations. By inciting permanent crisis, transgression averts the stagnation of cultural growth. Simultaneously, it participates in the corroboration of limits and "reminds us of the necessity of order"[2] – not because chaos must be subjugated to this order, but because without the identification of boundaries, there can be no distinction between the two. The rules must first be prescribed and imposed to allow the act of transgression to take place and define itself against these limitations. Transgression and order do not deny, but complement each other, as "transgression is a component of the rule."[3] Transgression is thus a process dependent upon the very systems and orders it infringes to validate its practice as subversive through the identification of limits, which determine the mutual struggle for power through recognition by both opposing forces.

1.1. Georges Bataille's General Economy of Non-Productive Excess

Transgression is the driving force of an economic model of excess proposed by Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (1949)[4] that readily fits into the late capitalist economy despite also contradicting its principles. Bataille drew on anthropologist Marcel Mauss's noted concept of gift-exchange – *potlatch* – in Aztec tribes, which, unlike the profit-driven sale of European commerce, was a sacred practice. This potlatch, while "a means of circulating wealth,"[5] is not a bargain but a symbolic show of power. North American Native tribe leaders of non-capitalist societies would either give or sacrifice highly-valued commodities to their rivals, binding them to this simultaneously destructive and productive exchange due to its principle of excess and escalation of this excess to avoid losing reputation and the respect of the rival. Bataille saw in this nonproductive exchange "the purpose of humiliating, challenging and obligating [a rival]"[6] to return the gesture with a gift of additional value than its predecessor. For the giver, the gift represented "a sign of glory," and "[b]y giving, one exhibited… one's power"[7] primarily through the sacrifice or destruction of wealth, and additionally by forcing the rival "to *play*" the game.[8]

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[1] Georges Bataille, *The Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 89.
[2] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) 7.
[3] Jenks 7.
[4] Georges Bataille, "The Gift of Rivalry: Potlatch," *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy: Volume 1 Consumption*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
[5] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 67.
[6] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 67.
[7] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 65.
[8] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 63.

In order to extract, not relinquish, power from this sacrifice or destruction of wealth, the gift-giving (the expenditure) must be done ostentatiously and "take on the meaning of an acquisition."[9] The rival must be acknowledged and "gifted" openly and publicly. The power is paradoxically acquired "from the fact of *losing*"[10] – this seeming loss obligates the recipient to regift the original giver with a more valuable gift (or larger sacrifice, destruction) in order to nullify the rival's power and consolidate their own power. The potlatch appears nonproductive in its excessive destruction of wealth but symbolically is profitable to both involved parties as long as they perpetuate the cycle. This paradoxical process of power play involves "a reckless expenditure of vital resources"[11] – the initial destruction, not acquisition (or even consumption) of useful wealth, results in the ultimate sovereignty (or status or rank). Through loss there is gain.

Bataille thus develops a theory of excess that runs contradictory to the values of production, utility, efficiency, and profit of a closed (capitalist) economy. The potlatch presupposes a non-productive surplus of resources whose ostentatious "squandering… becomes an object of appropriation... [and] what is appropriated in the squander is the prestige it gives to the squanderer… and which determines his rank."[12] This means the surplus/excess is wasted for the contradictory purpose of acquisition. By making the utilization of resources in an economic sense unproductive, to an extent nihilistic, in that they are wasted or destroyed, the players of this game engage in a power struggle based on the *accursed share* used non-productively: squandered luxuriously (the spectacles of festivals, feasts, monuments) or destructively (sacrifice and/or warfare expenditures, both monetary and in human casualties).

"[G]uaranteed excess"[13] is the guiding principle in Bataille's general economy, not use-value (profit), and the rejection of utility avoids reducing its operations to a simple binary system of production and consumption, embodying instead the volatile, unstable, pressurized dynamics "of the creative disposition of human energies (which is mostly erotic, or violent, or both)."[14] This excess (energy) cannot be used productively except on a symbolic level; it can be wasted because it has no (strictly economically) profitable objective attached to its use. The potential for the manifestation of this accumulated excess is explosive and asserts "transgression as a way of expending its energy; thus we have war, murder, cruelty, sacrifice,

[9] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 69.
[10] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 70.
[11] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 71.
[12] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 72.
[13] Jenks 102.
[14] Jenks 101.

torture,"[15] all purposeful as mechanisms of control. Bataille's general economy model is driven by the desire for power, not economic profit.

1.2. Michel Foucault's Theory of Power Relations

In Bataille's and Michel Foucault's understanding, transgression is not an oppositional force, but one that functions in the space of liminality – not denying and overpowering limits, but maintaining the continual power struggle over the (two-way) identification of these boundaries. In a 1971 interview, Foucault characterized power as "that which the ruling class abandons least readily and recaptures on the first occasion..."[16] perpetuated by "the institutional apparatus[es] through which society ensures its uneventful reproduction."[17] The functioning of society is embedded in the impetus for power: "power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a supplementary structure over and above 'society' whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. [...] A society without power relations can only be an abstraction."[18] On the other side of the spectrum, Foucault also puts forth the necessity to identify the inner fascist desire within each individual "that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."[19] Studying the forms of resistance to authority can reveal the workings of power relations[20] as well as the interdependence of limits and transgression: a limit must be crossable to fulfil its existence, and transgression is purposive only if it violates a limit that is not mere "illusions and shadows."[21]

Foucault destabilizes binary oppositionality in this piercing imagery of transgression and the limit:

> Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which… gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside… and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this

[15] Jenks 102-103.
[16] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 232.
[17] Foucault, "Revolutionary Action" 224.
[18] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2001) 343.
[19] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Anti-Oedipus," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001) 108.
[20] Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 329.
[21] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980 34.

> space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.[22]

Foucault's vivid imagining of the dynamics between transgression and the limit rejects an impenetrable dichotomic understanding of the two and instead highlights their inherent intersectionality and complicity. The spiral principle brings the two forces into play with each other and allows the same escalation that propels Bataille's transgression as manifestation of excess. They can never stand in isolation, and the threat of the opposing force gives rise to its adversary. The recognition, enforcement, and transgression of limits embodies the perpetuation of power dynamics that function on the basis of oscillating leverage and allow momentary positional advantage. The liminal space of transgression-limit produces a continuous rift that allows a mutual flow, a mutual infection between the two polarized forces that propel the dynamo of power.

1.3. The Fictionality of the Anti-Systemic Impulse

Foucault's conceptualization of power relations and Bataille's theory of *potlatch* and its entailing principle of excess as productive destruction, when projected into the workings of the transgressive drive of writing against the Establishment, sheds light on the self-destructiveness and complicity of the dissenting intent. The power relations arising from *potlatch* presuppose the ongoing perpetuation of the exchange-game, failing to trump the opponent or forfeiting entirely resulting in humiliation and loss of respect. To assert power, one is obliged to play and obliged to force the rival to play as well. Intentional escalation, extravagance, and exceeding the limits become the measure of power, and transgression thus implicates itself within the power dynamics of Bataille's principle of excess, manifesting as violence, destruction, obscenity, madness. The incessant pushing of the boundaries of acceptability are a show of power (or at the very least of the desire for power) in transgression generally, and in writing that can be regarded as transgressive this applies to challenging the normative restrictions of discursive practices (functioning as control mechanisms for societal institutions), and literary conventions that monopolize the expression of experience (and representation of reality) within the limits of rationality. The ritualistic escalation of excess in the form of destruction can however lead to the self-destruction of transgressive intent.

There is never stasis within this system which functions on the perpetuation of crisis: its preservation depending precisely on the tension between tentatively opposing forces continuously working against (while with) each other. Transgression then represents an

[22] Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" 35.

integral drive of these dynamics; part of the system despite its anti-systemic intent. It is "a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality."[23] The forcefulness of transgression wrenches open closures, contaminates boundaries, and floodlights the contested space of liminality that has always been there.

Literary texts located within this practice of transgression do not stand in isolation, despite attacking social constructs of collectivity and consensus. Transgressive writing as well inevitably functions on a basis of extended (and demanded) solidarity, the transgressive writer appealing to the collective values or standpoint of like-minded critics of the status quo. As will be illustrated in the analyzed texts, the discussed authors seem to display a nostalgic call for justice, somehow shocked and outraged by the system (against which they fight) transgressing its own rules. This inverted call to order betrays the fictionality of the anti-systemic intent which can become a self-destructive tendency if not reconciled to its own complicity in the "spiral" or "potlatch" power play.

Within this theoretical framework of Bataille's and Foucault's power dynamics, the selected texts – Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) and *The Nova Trilogy* (1961-1967), and Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) – will be analyzed through Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, Bataille's theorization of taboo, and the Situationist *détournement* practice. Each of these writers employs a distinctive agenda of anti-systemic transgression in their texts, launching a *systematic* assault against regimes of control while demonstrably complicit within the power struggle inherent to challenging this adversarial status quo maintained by institutional authority. All the texts betray the paradox of transgression in its self-destructive drive.

The four authors wrote critically of control systems – Coover and Thompson in regards to the claimed monopoly on objectivity by mainstream media outlets and the populistic discourse of the Establishment fueling its spectacularization of reality, Burroughs and Acker additionally concerning the manacles forced onto modes of expression by taboos, conventions, the laws of language. The writers launch an offensive on the rhetoric and discourse used by the criticized institutions to subvert expropriative subjugation through hyperbole, parody, and excess, while putting the system's hypocrisy on magnified display, exposing the integrity of institutional power as the farce that it is.

[23] Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression" 50.

1.4. The American Dream Machine

The selected writers all write against classifications of experience imposed by power structures – the government, media, corporations, bureaucracies, institutions (psychiatric, penal system, judicial system, police force, academia) and against the concept of the moral majority (and variations of the silent majority, the presumed majority) and consensus of opinion: useful fictions for the populistic consolidation of political power. The Culture Industry, or American Dream Machine, a conceit for these interdependent power structures, oversees this massive operation, exploiting the concept of the "American Dream" as a potent manipulation scheme for asserting institutional control.

1.4.1. Variations on a Theme: The American Dream-Myth

The American Dream myth is an ideal prostituted by its propagators—the media and capitalist institutions, both flourishing in postwar America. Coined by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931, the myth is described as

> … that dream of a land in which life should be better... for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. […] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.[24]

The characteristics of the American Dream thus arise as equal opportunity for success, equal access, equity, the possibility of upward mobility. This obviously echoes the U.S. Declaration of Independence, especially the right to the pursuit of Happiness regardless of coincidental ethnicity, wealth, and class status. Virtues of industriousness, self-reliance, and the self-made man concept arise from the mid-nineteenth century manifest destiny of pioneers braving the "undiscovered" territory beyond the Western frontier (disregarding the indigenous peoples of this willed *terra incognita*).

However, something that tends to be eclipsed by these aforementioned ideals, but is grounded in Adams' embodiment of the Dream, is the guarantee of a fair society that, like a pillar, will hold up these ideals and transform them from a mere dream into a deserved reality. This proposed equity and just society, unfortunately, is not the reality of America; instead at the helm is the capitalist American Dream Machine Inc. that produces the Dream for the re-affirmation of its own existence. Institutionalized racism and discrimination means that the marginalized (people of color, women, transgender people, people with disabilities, non-citizens) have more difficult access to facilities, housing, education, safety, work

[24] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1931) 404. Second edition.

opportunities, etc. In other words, the "system that ultimately serve[s] the interests of a very elite few"[25] does not draw an equal starting line.

Nevertheless, the dream-myth came to symbolize an essential, unalienable part of American society even in times of political and economic upheaval throughout the 20th century, the focus oscillating between its materialistic and idealistic aspects to serve the interest of the Culture Industry. In the 1920s, embedding the American Dream within a capitalist economy was essential for the American political establishment due to the global spread of Bolshevism. What better way to bind Americans to the free market than through home and property ownership[26] and all the self-perpetuating consumerism it entailed? President Calvin Coolidge deemed homeownership a patriotic duty that would stabilize the economy and national politics. By 1932, a quarter of a million owners had lost their homes and thirteen million Americans their jobs.[27] The hopeful, optimistic illusion of achievable success in the face of bleak reality, "the belief in the value of the common man,"[28] was comforting for many Americans affected by the Great Depression.

In the thirties, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration helped bolster the failing economy and widespread unemployment by introducing the New Deal, creating millions of jobs, improving the infrastructure and public facilities (schools, roads), and regulating the market.[29] The Great Depression had tainted the ideals of the Dream, when suddenly industriousness did not suffice. Just as the majority of American dreamers believed that individual hard work, perseverance, and application of the self are the foundations for achieving the Dream, so is it the failure of the individual to apply themselves to success. Mark Fisher identifies "responsibilisation" and "magical voluntarism" as leading tactics of the hegemony in maintaining control over the population, which is led to believe that they alone are at fault for and deserving of their (economic) failures, shifting the blame from systemic structures onto themselves.[30]

Affordable suburban housing mushroomed in the fifties, aided by The Housing Act of 1954 offering good mortgage conditions,[31] and the iconic single-family house[32] complete with

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[25] John Archer, "The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 25.2 (2014) 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24347714>
[26] Archer 10.
[27] Tracey Mollet, "'With a Smile and a Song …': Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale," *Marvels & Tales* 27.1 (2013) 112. <www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/marvelstales.27.1.0109>
[28] James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2012) 198.
[29] Lawrence R. Samuel, *American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012) 19-20.
[30] Mark Fisher, "Good for Nothing," *The Occupied Times*, 19 Mar 2014, 15 Jan 2017, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>
[31] Samuel 57.
[32] Archer 8.

white picket fence, car, dog, and 2.5 children was born and ingrained into the stereotypical materialistic representation of the American Dream, whose potential came into full bloom after the Second World War, where it was viewed as a sort of secret weapon against and differentiation from Soviet Russia's communist ideology. Following the Great Depression and during World War Two, the patriotism inherent to nationalist struggles demanded a bonding idea to bring Americans together and give them a sense of purpose during a time of economic, social, and political strife. This bolstered exceptionalist tendencies and the capitalist system in America.

A massive propagandist effort arose on both sides of the general political spectrum to promote their ideals as the only true way of free life. Ownership is a key component of the Dream indebted to capitalism, and in the USA, "any major deviation from that script [was] a cause for concern if not an outright assault to our national creed."[33] The (materialistic) American Dream promoted by the Establishment was regarded as the only correct government-sanctioned path to happiness, and those who chose not to participate in this mass hallucination were deemed subversive and potentially dangerous. The appearance of the hippie movement in the late sixties heralded a more spiritual, yet short-lived manifestation of the American Dream, rejecting its materialistic layer in favor of focusing on humanity and community. The sixties saw the culmination of the civil rights movements with speeches by Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X subverting the American Dream's function within the African-American context, recognizing in it "an American nightmare."[34]

President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" vision that gave rise to social programs like Medicare and Medicaid that exist to this day was also balanced out by the escalation (of military expenditure, casualties) in the Vietnam War. National anti-war protests, the assassinations of 1963, 1965, and 1968 of prominent civil rights proponents John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., respectively, and the Watergate scandal nourished the disillusion of the counterculture with the status quo and Establishment. President Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan due to his pessimistic outlook on the American Dream, declaring America in a state of "malaise," whereas Reagan was optimistic about America's future, "work[ing] to associate the American Dream with conservatism and the Republican

[33] Samuel 7.
[34] Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, 2017, 5 Apr 2017, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-ballot-or-the-bullet/>

Party."[35] Grounding the Dream once again in consumerism and highlighting its materialistic aspect as its proxy, the American Dream became a quintessential Republican catch phrase.

At the same time, the 1980s brought the drug war, escalated racial segregation, inner-city poverty, mass incarceration, and governmental apathy in light of the AIDS epidemic. Reality was becoming more and more detached from the creed of the Dream, and "the Dream's foundation in the Protestant work ethic and self-improvement eroded and was replaced by an ethic of self-preservation, social survival, and individualism."[36] As Howard Zinn remarks, "the preservation of a huge military establishment and the retention of profit levels of oil corporations appeared to be twin objectives of the Reagan-Bush administrations."[37] Reagan decontrolled oil prices and used cuts in social program benefits and benefits for the poor to pay for an increased military budget. As both the Democrats and Republicans had connections to corporations, it was in their interest to garner public support for cutting financial aid to the poor. In accordance, tax cuts for the rich (above $400,000 annual salary) were not called "welfare" but "tax reform."[38]

A corporative market continued to influence the American Dream in the nineties with the transformation of the ideal of individual freedom and equal opportunity into a corporate ideal of unconditional consumerism, embedding it within our society of the spectacle. The credit and mortgage industry gave rise to the housing bubble which finally burst in 2008, and the aftermath of the Great Recession revealed the underbelly of the American Dream Machine, exposing those who had exploited the Dream and its believers into achieving their own success – the corporations and investors – and subsequently bailing them out scot-free. The foundations of homeownership, a key aspect of the Dream, were unveiled as built upon a quagmire of exploitation, not "the mythic application of thrift and discipline."[39]

The American Dream can thus function as a nationalist bond, a symbol of hope, a substitute for religion, or a "site of… contestation"[40] that can reveal the flimsy foundations of the myth and the socio-political system within which it is embedded. The Dream is a product of nationalism and persists to this day as a recognizable, typical trait of "American-ness," a national creed, a vestige of mythical bygone days of glory and limitless opportunity.

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[35] Michael C. Kimmage, "The Politics of the American Dream, 1980 to 2008," *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, eds. Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) 32. <www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt97n.5>

[36] Samuel 10.

[37] Howard Zinn, "*Chapter 21:* CARTER-REAGAN-BUSH: THE BIPARTISAN CONSENSUS," *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), online version <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncarebu21.html>

[38] Ibid.

[39] Kimmage 35.

[40] Archer 20.

Seductive precisely for its simplicity and illusion of ease, the Dream evokes a false sense of easier times with black-or-white, either-or morality, when success was based solely on character, agency, and ability. The product may be unoriginal, unexceptional, and unfulfilling, but the marketing is above par. American may not be the greatest country in the world, but it is the greatest marketer in the world of its most popular commodity. The corporatization of the Dream, powered by advertising, patriotism, and populism, ensures the Dream's abiding position within an inescapably spectacularized society.

It is its amorphousness that has allowed the American Dream to retain its standing position as a key concept of American exceptionalism, exploited for manipulating (not only) Americans into a false sense of prospective success despite the system being stacked against the majority of dreamers. Spoonfeeding the American public this fairytale can produce responsibilisation and blind patriotism, but also criticism and questioning of the status quo. This subversive approach to the American Dream and exceptionalism can be located within American literature that transgresses this spectacle and grounds the illusion to a darker reality than the one promoted by the mythology of the American Dream. Transgressive fiction not only criticizes and subverts the system, it frequently aims to dismantle the system altogether.

1.4.2. The Control Mechanisms of the Culture Industry

The American Dream Machine's regimes of control amount to its fabrication of the American Dream, American exceptionalism, and the American eternal war on abstractions as perpetuation of its power dynamics. The potentiality of the American Dream is used as a tool for propaganda in political campaigns and advertising, while its mythical nature is used as an excuse in face of economic, political, and social collapse. The Dream as simplistic fantasy of making it big time despite all the odds stacked against you just too tempting to give up for many people. A tension arises here between the Protestant work ethic associated with the Dream and the oppositional fatalism of chance, where the industriousness of the individual clashes with the desire for a miraculous divine intervention. Hence working hard to better one's situation can co-exist with winning the jackpot in the lottery as polar (or intersectional) embodiments of the dream-myth. No matter the ambition, considering the Dream as "a state of mind… an enduring optimism,"[41] its own ambiguity perpetuates its mythic power. It is comforting to passively accept the idea of success being possible for everyone, an aspiration isolated from all socio-political context that could (and would) negatively influence this

[41] Sandra L. Hanson and John White, *American Dream in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) 3.

Dream. The ability to absorb many (contradictory) meanings gives rise to the concept's "progressive, utopian character at the heart of it all."[42]

The amorphousness of the dream-myth is a major factor in perpetuating its ongoing existence and testifying to the resilience of the concept, universally enabling believers to mold their individual aspirations onto this formative structure. Capable of embodying both industriousness and its contradictory principle of *deus ex machina*, both idealistic and materialistic, shared yet particular, this ambiguity arises from the collective production – or "collective somnambulism"[43] – of the myth through the American Dream Machine, ensuring that there can be no one universally recognized and confirmed version of the Dream.[44] Yet it endures as the embodiment of the so-called American way of life, "accommodating of virtually any preconception or agenda,"[45] serving both the hegemony and subversive movements that keep the machinery up and running, but also its believers. The Dream remains relevant because there exists a significant portion of dreamers who *keep* it alive; they believe in the illusion despite knowing (or not knowing) that it is ingrained within the American mindset of primary ambition as a fundamental, determining fiction.

Capitalism works in the name of capitalism, not any socio-political ideology, and it exploits the Dream for the sake of profit. The credit and mortgage industry in the U.S. enables the pseudo-democratization of the American Dream, allowing immediate access to its materialistic manifestation across class spectra (with potentially devastating consequences, e.g. the Great Recession). A capitalist society implicates everyone in consumerism; no matter how "ethical" the consumerism may be, it still sustains the system. On the one hand is the necessity of playing the power game, on the other is the illusion of choosing to do so.

While Baudrillard posits consumption as the driving force of capitalism (in opposition to Marx's focus on production), Bataille locates an alternative current in the escalation of excess (surplus). The American Dream Machine perpetuates itself under the auspices of a capitalist economy through the characteristics of the American Dream-myth by means of propaganda, populistic rhetoric, institutionalization, and not just appropriation of dissent, but transgression itself, the system's most effective method of maintaining power. Transgressive practice is part of the order, revealing the pretense of institutional authority on all things moral:

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[42] Samuel 6.
[43] Louis Armand, "All That's Solid Melts into Weird: Coover | Thompson | Garcia | Chaffee," *Videology* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2015) 257.
[44] Samuel 4.
[45] Samuel 4.

> Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed. We feel like laughing when we consider the solemn commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' followed by a blessing on armies... No beating about the bush: murder is connived at immediately after being banned! [...] If the prohibition were a reasonable one it would mean that wars would be forbidden and we should be confronted with a choice: to ban war and to do everything possible to abolish military assassination; or else to fight and accept the law as hypocritical. But the taboos on which the world of reason is founded are not rational for all that.[46]

This violation of the taboo of violence *by* the imposing authorities signals the crossing over from order to disorder (from reason to irrationality), the latter re-affirming and validating the necessity of the former. Within Bataille's general economic model, military expenditures and warfare are one possible manifestation of excess (resources, energy): destructive materially, but symbolically productive of power.

The Star Wars program came to embody such ostentatious squander during the 1980s, when the CIA exaggerated the extent of Soviet Russia's military mobilization to bolster the public's support for increasing the military budget at the expense of financing social programs. The program involved expensive testing of a space anti-missile shield, faked results, and ultimately was never realized.[47] Many costly and failed military projects emerged during this time of renewed patriotism, including a $1.5 billion nuclear warhead submarine (useful only in the event of an actual nuclear war). Both Democrats and Republicans held a bipartisan stance regarding foreign policy during the Cold War years, fueled by a common enemy, manifesting in a huge military budget as well as clandestine support of foreign right-wing dictators or tyrannical regimes.

American exceptionalism is more the tool of patriotic propaganda than a rational attempt to determine the uniqueness of the American nation, "there [being] nothing exceptional about exceptionalism,"[48] as most countries tend to create national myths. The singularity attributed to the so-called manifest destiny of the American pioneers disregards the racial dimension of national identity politics, romanticizing as it does the expansionism to the west and the conquering of frontiers in spite of the accompanying genocide of Indigenous American tribes.[49] American exceptionalist tendencies have further given rise to self-destructive politics of Nativism (ironically), isolationism, and McCarthyism. Anti-immigrant

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[46] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001) 63.
[47] Howard Zinn, "*Chapter 21:* CARTER-REAGAN-BUSH: THE BIPARTISAN CONSENSUS," *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), online version <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncarebu21.html>
[48] Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 14.
[49] George Shulman, "American Exceptionalism Revisited: Taking Exception to Exceptionalism," *American Literary History* 23.1 (2011) 74. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/413857>

attitudes, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, institutionalized racism against people of color (citizens and non-citizens alike) all attest to national identity politics being founded on differentiation and the "demonizing [of] difference as otherness."[50]

This dichotomic oppositionality is subjected to a caustic critique in Coover's hyperbolization of the already escalated Cold War rhetoric of the 1950s in *The Public Burning* and in Burroughs' attack on institutionalization as a control mechanism of the Establishment in the grotesque control machines of his texts. The Red Scare partially gave way to the War on Drugs, officially initiated by President Richard Nixon in 1971,[51] declaring drugs "public enemy no. 1" – this becoming the subject of Thompson's diatribe in *Fear and Loathing*. As the next big installment in this series came the War on Terror, announced by President George W. Bush in 2001 following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, furthering Thompson's disillusionment with the state of affairs in the U.S., which was subsequently "At War now – with somebody – and we will stay At War with that mysterious Enemy for the rest of our lives…"[52] The nature of terrorism and revolution becomes a focus of Acker's *Empire of the Senseless*, revealing its appropriation by the system. In this ceaseless American war with the amorphous enemy, one scapegoat is replaced by another while the American government and capitalist economy remain intact and as powerful as ever, exploiting patriotism and American exceptionalism for the "good of the nation." The only exceptional thing about the U.S.A. is its preservation of a continuous, simulated threat within the eternal war on abstractions, its establishment's exceptional marketing of the American Dream, indicted by an increasingly surreal reality as false advertising, and the exceptionally self-destructive drive propelling the power dynamo of the federation onward (or is it backward?).

Transgressive writing works against the monopoly of the American Dream Machine, exposing the dark side of the Dream as an unfeasible fiction promoted as reality, a pre-permitted ideal imposed by a capitalist, spectacular society. Instead of euphemizing reality, transgressive writing provides an acute social critique of the machinery powering this Dream, hyperbolizing its discourse of control. At the same time, anti-systemic texts are a *component* of the machinery. The transgressive agenda and freedom of choice (to transgress) are an illusion fabricated by the capitalist Moloch, which readily appropriates any dissenting

[50] Shulman 74.
[51] This demonization of drugs functioned as a useful tool for institutionalization and control already well back in the "tranquilized fifties," as depicted in Burroughs' texts.
[52] Hunter S. Thompson, "Fear and Loathing in America," *ESPN*, 12 Sep. 2001, 20 June 2017, <proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?id=1250751>

discourse, art, or activism. The only truly relevant criteria for art in a capitalist society is profit potential (utility), and the Culture Industry is quick to adapt to transgressive assaults and usually succeeds in expropriating transgressive art into marketable iconography of dissent. There is in fact nothing easier for the Culture Industry than to spotlight subversive experimental art and thus render its dissenting intent null and void. Mainstreaming and marketing the art further denigrates its claim to a principle of transgression.

The paradox of transgressive writing lies in the obligation to play the game, to engage in the power-exchange of outmaneuvering the Establishment's recuperative tactics in order to assert its purpose. This contingent power of the powerless is usurped by the powerful, transgression becomes normalized, art corporatized. In face of this imperialistic manifest destiny, what remains but to draw the curtain, exposing the Wizards of Oz, the masterminds behind the American Dream Machine, and launch the crusade?

Chapter Two – The Cold War in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977)

Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) re-presents the Rosenberg trial in 1953, where the married couple was found guilty for espionage and subsequently executed. Grounding modern society in the spectacle, the text re-situates the execution as a public electrocution to take place in the middle of Times Square, New York City, with millions of spectators present to watch 'the show.' The events of the days leading up to the execution are narrated primarily by the then Vice President Richard Nixon, with chapters narrated in the voice of an omniscient 'Chronicler,' first-person Uncle Sam, and interjections of the Rosenbergs themselves, with dramatic interludes. This mélange of narrative voices self-critically embodies the discourses of institutional power and that of transgressive forces, all complicit within the power struggle inherent to the mediation of history.

The novel attempts to subvert the way in which reality is mediated by the hegemonic establishment targeting (what it construes as) its mainstream audience; the conveniently "silent" majority. This representation changes in time with a differing historical and socio-political context (and correlative zeitgeist stemming from this ever-changing constellation of 'current events'). Coover infiltrates this narrative of governmental agenda, based on the systematic subjugation of citizens (spectators) into uniformity. He emphasizes "the collective mind of America... acted out in ritualistic manner by the entire nation"[1] which embodies and allows the scapegoating and lynching of the Rosenbergs. By hijacking the rhetoric of Cold War hysteria prevalent in the USA during the McCarthy Era and warping it into a more polarized version, highlighting its reductive nature, Coover reveals the chaos of reality, the contingency of perception of this reality, and the danger of regarding one of its infinite interpretations as the only 'truthful' and 'right' ultimacy. Nixon's character brings up the issue himself:

> What was fact, what intent, what was framework, what was essence? Strange, the impact of History, the grip it had on us, yet it was nothing but words. [...] What if we broke all the rules, played games with the evidence, manipulated language itself, made History a partisan ally?[2]

The Public Burning reveals that there are no universal truths out there; there is only the power struggle over limits that invites transgression.

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[1] Richard Walsh, "Narrative Inscription, History and the Reader in Robert Coover's 'The Public Burning,'" *Studies in the Novel* 25.3 (1993) 334. <www.jstor.org/stable/29532957>

[2] Robert Coover, *The Public Burning* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2006) 92. E-book. All subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.

2.1. The "true power of the Word:"[3] The Cold War Rhetoric, the Red Scare, the Role of the Chronicler

The novel is an intricate mélange of different types of historical texts, registers, and styles: from maxims, slogans, advertisements, lists, newspaper headlines, tabloid articles, letters, memoir entries, to poetry, songs, and plays, embodying "a kind of linguistic slapstick of wildly clashing dictions..."[4] As Coover remarks, *The Public Burning*

> was made up of thousands and thousands of tiny fragments stitched together... I was striving for a text that would seem to have been written by the whole nation through all its history ... I wanted thousands of echoes, all the sounds of the nation.[5]

This heteroglossia is found primarily in Uncle Sam's voice and the Chronicler narrative that painstakingly assembles the puzzle from fragments that fit together to form a consistent, yet contingent whole that fits into the propagandist discourse of the American government during the mid-century Cold War context. Coover's montage-like narrative is not arbitrary, and he admits to "using collage as a very rational constructive process"[6] in the vein of the Situationist *détournement*, specifically by re-situating the Cold War rhetoric into a hyperbolized context (remaining within the domestic realm of the American front) to highlight its extreme nature. This rhetoric, however, becomes contaminated by the very Other it attempts to repress in the voices of the Rosenbergs and Nixon, and this "ultimately devalues the hegemonic regulation [the Chronicler] attempts to exert."[7] Nixon's eventual skepticism over this narrative exposes the "provisional status of any design, the presence of randomness just beyond the book's covers."[8]

The inclusion of varying narrative voices in the novel attempts to avoid justifying any perspective as unequivocal. All the narratives are contestable, and they often subvert or self-ironize their own authority (especially the ones presenting the official political discourse) through hyperbolization. At the beginning of the novel, one might presume the narrative will offer a sympathetic view of the Rosenbergs, the anti-establishment anti-heroes, or a denigrating portrayal of Nixon, but these expectations are inverted. Through his intense self-

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[3] Coover 92.
[4] Lance Olsen, "Stand By to Crash! Avant-Pop, Hypertextuality, and Postmodern Comic Vision in Coover's The Public Burning," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.1 (2000) 62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111610009603126>
[5] Robert Coover, quoted in Geralyn Strecker, "Statecraft and Stagecraft: Disneyland and the Rosenberg Executions in *The Public Burning*," *Critique* 42.1 (Fall 2000) 71.
[6] Larry McCaffery, "As Guilty as the Rest of Them: An Interview with Robert Coover," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.1 (2000) 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111610009603130>
[7] Olsen 65.
[8] Olsen 64.

reflection, Nixon's character becomes more three-dimensional (and thus more sympathetic) while his narrative also satirizes his mindset. The Rosenbergs are distanced in the 'official' narrative and are primarily viewed through the lens of the polarized discourse of Red Scare panic (the voice of the Chronicler, Uncle Sam). When they do speak for themselves, their voice is dramatized to a performative degree, signaling falsehood.[9]

The character *TIME* reveals a self-damning claim to universality by asserting that "objectivity is an impossible illusion… *only* through the frankly biased and distorting lens of art is any real grasp of the facts—not to mention Ultimate Truth—even remotely possible" (Coover 208). He asserts the potential of subjectivity to unequivocally achieve universally acknowledged "Truth." The media in *The Public Burning* are shown to be aware of their manipulative power in presenting events as "truth" despite this ultimacy being always obviously filtered by varying discourses and designs. Mainstream American media in the 1950s, an era of heightened Cold War polarization between the East and the West, "became… little more than public stenographers,"[10] prone to relating what politicians and public figures had said verbatim, not questioning the ideological tint of the utterances nor the ideological bias in presenting this polarized discourse to the public. Government officials framed historical events to their benefit and the media accepted this narrative, mediating it further to the public as presented by the Establishment.

This official discourse is continually presented throughout the novel via the viewpoint of 'the Chronicler' who embodies the binary logic of an epic, all-knowing sensibility. Despite this omniscient voice construing a sense of objectivity through the presentation of disparate pieces of data, it soon becomes clear that this narrative actually represents Cold War American propaganda. At first glance, what the narrative of the Chronicler chapters shows is an attempt at a panoptic overview of post-World War II world events, tracing the development both in the Western and Eastern hemisphere, "a snapshot of world history at a particular moment."[11] History though being always a construct, an embellishment of fact with fiction, its narrativization always functions within an ideological framework. The Chronicler's narrative highlights the chimerical nature of the binaries of objectivity-subjectivity, truth-falsehood, and fictionality-reality in his 'us/them' rhetoric. He relays the "score" of the Phantom's versus Uncle Sam's supporters and the increasing "odds" (Coover 14) stacked against the purportedly American way of life. President Truman's "Point Four" program may

[9] Walsh 339.
[10] Theophilus Savvas, "'Nothing but Words'? Chronicling and Storytelling in Robert Coover's The Public Burning," *Journal of American Studies* 44.1 (2010) 176. <www.jstor.org/stable/40648695>
[11] Savvas 174.

be "spreading the American Dream upon the Yahoos like manna" (Coover 14) following the war, but the U.S.A. faces the Red Scare nevertheless, the enemy balancing out the power struggle by, too, going nuclear.

The Cold War can be seen through the lens of Bataille's general economy as one of the most long-standing, self-perpetuating escalations of excess in the bid for global influence. The nuclear bomb, a real game-changer during World War II, ultimately drew the power struggle to a standstill once Western allies lost this singular trump card in 1949 to Soviet Russia. In *The Public Burning*, Uncle Sam laments over Russia's returning blow to his untoppable masterstroke to extinguish all attempts to challenge his global dominion, "*Thar she blows, goddamn it, our just and lasting peace with honor in our time, shot to shit…*" (Coover 15). This equilibrizing reciprocation by the publicly acknowledged rival drew the score even, but additionally dealt a damaging blow to the U.S.A.'s domestic security in the form of "[t]he enemy within" (Coover 15) which had revealed the secret of the atom bomb and set off a witch hunt for 'un-American' communist spies. "The worst to be feared," as President Eisenhower announces in his 1953 inaugural address featured in the novel, "and the best to be expected can be simply stated: / the worst is atomic war… the best: / a life of perpetual fear and tension" (Coover 102).

The Prologue, comprising Judge Irving Kaufman's verdict upon the Rosenbergs, proclaims that "...by your betrayal *you undoubtedly have altered / The course of history* to the disadvantage of our country!" (Coover 21-22). This passage embodies the inevitable appropriation of this historical event through the lens of hysterical Cold War discourse, while actually, "history remains at all times but a palimpsest of opinion."[12] The judge projects a speculation about the consequences of the Rosenberg's "betrayal" of the USA, this rhetoric promptly picked up by contemporary media and presented as a ready-made fact and universal truth, not mere hypothesis and ideologically-tinted projection. Nixon himself readily adopts this sentiment, musing over the "new Era of Peace" that (purportedly) inevitably would have arrived had the Rosenbergs not thwarted "our possession of the ultimate weapon and our traditional American gift for self-sacrifice" (Coover 57). Nixon's rhetoric becomes immediately suspect due to such proclamations of exceptionalism and hubris, but it reflects a historical reality that embodied this demonizing atmosphere that convicted the Rosenbergs and turned them into scapegoats for the cause of American exceptionalism.

The Cold War rhetoric utilized by the American government is self-perpetuating, deliberately divisive (implementing the dichotomic notion of "us/them") and confrontational

[12] Savvas 179.

towards the construed Other to instigate the fear of communism, and most importantly, a heightened adherence of Americans towards national identity and a policy of containment. Uncle Sam pushes his "Sons of Light and Darkness" (Coover 56) propaganda every chance he gets, this polarizing rhetoric lifted directly from President Eisenhower's 1953 inaugural address,[13] dramatized in *The Public Burning* as poem "The Vision of Dwight David Eisenhower," parts of which the President also performs at the carnivalized public execution:

> ...forces of Good and Evil are massed and armed and opposed
> as rarely before in history.
> [...] The forces threatening this continent strike directly
> [...] at the very ideals by which our peoples live!
>
> *Freedom is pitted against slavery;*
> *lightness against the dark!*
>
> [...] this treasure of the spirit
> must be defended above all
> with weapons of the spirit:
> our patriotism,
> our devotion,
> our readiness to sacrifice.
> (Coover 100-101, 105)

Uncle Sam demonizes the "Sons of Darkness" as "violators of the Covenant, defilers of the sanctuary..." (Coover 62), and the public enemy of Uncle Sam, the Chronicler, and Nixon (as proxy) becomes embodied in the Phantom, present as the ideology (the communist ideology, but really, it could be *any* ideology) against which these characters of *The Public Burning* define their identity.

More than an actual critique of communism, their common goal is to preserve and assert power within the eternal American war against a "mysterious Enemy," dashing "all hopes for Peace in Our Time,"[14] as Hunter S. Thompson so timelessly remarked on the verge of the U.S.A.'s War on Terror decades later. The elusive Cold War Phantom mutates into the specter of terrorist threat in the present day, where the level of irrationally-driven panic embedded within the Cold War American propaganda continues to manifest in its modern-day variation of anti-terrorist rhetoric within the Western world, verging on implementing extreme measures in order to fight the extremeness of terrorism. The escalation of hysteria aimed against the targeted enemy, in the present day focused on the Islamist terrorist threat, betrays

[13] Dwight Eisenhower, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: 1953: containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president, January 20 to December 31, 1953* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005), *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, 20 May 2017, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/4728380.1953.001>

[14] Hunter S. Thompson, "Fear and Loathing in America," *ESPN*, 12 Sep. 2001, 20 June 2017, <proxy.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?id=1250751>.

that the power dynamics have been thrown off-kilter. Preceding this unsettling radicalization on both fronts, the populistic rhetoric of Uncle Sam in the context of *The Public Burning* Red Scare of the 1950s propagates heightened patriotism and a demonization of differences in defence of the (supposedly) exceptionally free American nation, or more precisely, in the attack on Public Enemy No. 1, the menace of communism, "the archenemy of the whole human race… [...] They call him Sudden Death and General Desolation, half cousin to the cholera and godfather of the Apocalypse!" (Coover 218).[15] In light of Uncle Sam's apocalyptic portrayal of the future, "the perilous fight, the evil hour," Nixon wonders whether the Rosenbergs could be "the very trigger… for the ultimate holocaust" (Coover 219) of nuclear war.

The seemingly heteroglossic narratives of both the Chronicler and Uncle Sam promote the sentiment of "America's entire culture participat[ing] in the construction of a hysterical narrative that cast the other as the archetypal enemy."[16] In tune with this control mechanism of ideological dominion, the Chronicler proclaims:

> no sooner has Uncle Sam, virtually single-handed, won the war and saved humanity but what he's out inventing the United Nations, unleashing television, laying a dose of freedom and morality on the Hottentots, funding the World Bank, and humbly taking over the world for its own good... (Coover 14).

The Chronicler undermines his own authority and claims to objectivity with statements such as these by blatantly presenting the ideology of American exceptionalism that fuels his narrative as "Truth," whereas it is just one of many exploitations of history.

Uncle Sam is a self-perpetuating product of American folk consciousness as well as its purveyor, "an amalgam of every popular hero from David Crockett to Superman"[17] along with his integration of past presidencies (both appearance-wise and policy-wise). He serves as the nation's cheerleader, ringmaster, his rhetoric embodying a warped, grotesque variation of American exceptionalism:

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[15] Uncle Sam's enumeration continues: "He's… that mysterious fearsome force which from time immemorious has menaced the peace and security of mankind and buggered the hopes of the holy… [...] the Creator of Ambiguities, out to conquer the world… enslave it to his own Utopian ends! [...] the darkness fearful and formless… savage, anti-everything, the maker a deserts and the wall-eyed harbinger a deevastation whose known rule a warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions! [...] the arch-degenerate! alien to us in ever' way—habits, hopes, blood even—and he infects everything, our litterchur, art, religion, games, deemocratic system and free enterprise, with the pizen… of his evil sinister influence!" (Coover 218).

[16] Marcel Cornis-pope, "Rewriting the Encounter with the Other: Narrative and Cultural Transgression in *The Public Burning,*" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.1 (2000) 42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111610009603125>

[17] Walsh 336.

> It is our manifest dust-in-yer-eye to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplyin' millions, so damn the torpedoes and full steam ahead... we cannot escape history! Boliterate 'em we must, for our cause it is just what the doctor ordered, logic is logic, that's all I say, and remember, if you will not hear Reason, she will surely rap yore knuckles! I tell you, we want *elbow-room*—the continent—the *whole* continent—and nothin' *but* the continent! And—by gum!—we will *have* it! (Coover 11).

The cacophony and heteroglossia of the carnivalesque can be found in Uncle Sam's rhetoric and this extempore speech, a fusion of maxims, slogans, idioms, proverbs, and nationalistic jargon, overlapping and infiltrating the succeeding catchwords, showcases the priority and underlying, subversive drive of Uncle Sam's expression – motivational patriotic rallying – at the expense of disintegrating semantic and syntactical logic. And while Uncle Sam may seem endearing and harmless with his crackpot declarations, he ultimately works for "the system," a puppet master ventriloquizing the ideological drive of the American government during the Red Scare.

2.2. Sacrifice, The Carnival

Regarding the public 'exorcism' of the Rosenbergs, the Chronicler notes in the first chapter that "such a communal pageant is just what the troubled nation needs right now to renew its sinking spirit. Something archetypal, tragic, exemplary" (Coover 8). The Chronicler speaks for the American public, the apparently "troubled nation," as though representing it, while it is the Establishment itself which generates this hysteria and imposed "sinking spirit" to assert its political power through sacrifice. Within Bataille's *potlatch* concept,[18] sacrifice is one possible manifestation of excess used as a power play. Through sacrifice, a large-scale destruction of resources can be avoided, ensuring "the community is saved from ruination. The *victim* is given over to violence."[19] The victim, "[o]nce chosen, … is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption."[20] Within Coover's novel, the Rosenbergs play the role of the sacrificed victims in this excessive consumption that manifests as both carnival and spectacle, the two concepts intertwined.

The ostentatious squander as excess in Bataille's general economy theory can demonstrate as festivals or carnivals, which "were an outpouring not only of blood but also of wealth in general. Each one contributed in proportion to his power and each one was offered

[18] See Chapter One, "1.1. Georges Bataille's General Economy of Non-Productive Excess."
[19] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy: Volume 1 Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991) 59.
[20] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 59.

the occasion to display his power."[21] The carnival of the public "burning" of the Rosenbergs on Times Square, "Uncle Sam's purification-by-fire spectacular" (Coover 300), becomes such an occasion to showcase the power of "the above-board American Power Structure" (Coover 303) which permits this regulated anarchy and restrained transgression. The havoc

> doesn't signify there's been a weakening of the faith, a drift into the dominion of darkness—on the contrary, it's as though it's all coming together here tonight in a magical fusion, the world of the sacred locking onto the world of the profane..., and all these provocative confluences are not only possible, but necessary. (Coover 275)

Folk culture can manifest as "[*r*]*itual spectacles*: carnival pageants,"[22] and the carnival inverts social order, parodying its institutions' processes of law-making, trials, sentencing, and penalties. It "mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions,"[23] while rituals and social (and moral) codes are mocked. The purported transgressions (minor in scale) acted out within the realm of the carnival are contained within its limits, prescribed, and *required* to sustain the carnival, which is not a relinquishing of power by the ruling group at all, but rather a re-enforcement of "the existing pattern of things. [...] It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable."[24] The carnival works as a variation of Bataille's non-productive excess which must find manifestation in ostentatious squander. This expenditure, while seemingly wasteful and destructive, actually functions profitably for the hegemonic institutions that allow transgression on their own terms, on their own turf. By granting this license to transgress, the provider insures themselves against unrestricted chaos. Banning this regulated disorder could cause the suppressed transgression to dissent against the order covertly, breaking free of the control of hegemonic structures.[25] Within the carnival, transgression becomes the norm.

Circus-like re-enactments of American history precede the execution of the Rosenbergs, "the official feast look[ing] back at the past… to consecrate the present,"[26] featuring "Billy" Faulkner, Winston Churchill, and a myriad of American iconic figures "all doing skits, singing songs, dancing in chorus lines, miming the high drama of building a nation and taking over the world" (Coover 280). Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers prepare a dance routine inspired by the Rosenbergs' Death House letters, "Irving Kaufman… and Irving

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[21] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 64.
[22] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 5.
[23] Bakhtin 10.
[24] Bakhtin 9.
[25] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) 167.
[26] Bakhtin 9.

Saypol have been asked to re-enact, as a kind of curtain raiser to the contest, some of their routines from the trial" (Coover 281), Supreme Court Justice William Douglas is spanked onstage, Secret Service agents covertly participate as performers within the skits, and Senator Joe McCarthy inevitably grabs the microphone, promising "to kick the brains out of anyone who protects Communists!" (Coover 306).

Uncle Sam, the sponsor, instigator, and moderator of this auto-da-fe, "comes riding up from behind the crowd, out of the Disney menagerie tent, astride the gigantic GOP elephant, its red-white-and-blue crown studded with spangles that spell out Long Tom Jefferson's article of faith: WE ARE ALL REPUBLICANS!" (Coover 303). Despite all efforts, the regulated circus is breached by demonstrators with clemency petitions, proclaiming the Rosenbergs' innocence, but are subdued (all around the world) by the omnipotent Uncle Sam. Within the realm of the carnival, "the revelation of the true self is disallowed,"[27] but when Uncle Sam is forced by Nixon to bare himself (quite literally), a massive blackout ensues, giving rise to

> widespread madness, dissipation, and fever, an inelegant display of general indiscretion and destruction, corruption, sacrilege and sodomy, … tipped and scattered chairs and pews, incest, desecration, tangled bodies, rampant nihilism, bestiality, liberated freak shows, careless love and cheating hearts, drunkenness, cock-sucking, and other fearsomely unclean abominations, all of it liberally sprinkled with soot, snot, and pigeon shit—not exactly Cotton Mather's vision of Theopolis Americana! What a mess! (Coover 326-327).

These riotous transgressions embody the fusion of "the exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane... all drawn into the same dance."[28] The crowds engage in a mass orgy before the executions take place, the Supreme Court judges skid around in elephant dung, the event transforms into a chaotic circus gig rather than an orderly, 'dignified' execution. The public location of the execution and public access also of course desecrate the ramifications of law. At the scene, "the rigid, the authoritarian, the univocal are relaxed, subverted, fractured. [...] realism gives way to... mimetic uncertainty, the feel... of a circus world"[29] where laws and transgression complicitly intertwined function together on a mutual basis of asserting power. The execution on Times Square represents merely "a simulation of carnival disorder,"[30] while the underlying motivation of the Establishment-sanctioned entertainment is "the consolidation

[27] Jenks 162.
[28] Bakhtin 160.
[29] Olsen 64-65.
[30] Walsh 337.

of anti-communist norms and the punishment of transgression"[31] that functions outside its containment.

The reversed subversive elements present in this tableau are those that infiltrate the system-powered and regulated circus before the aforementioned panoptikum occurs: the puppet of Uncle Sam with a Hitler moustache mounted upon the electric chair, and an official slogan – "America the hope of the world" (Coover 9) – being graffitied and warped into a negative declaration; ultimately, "America the joke of the world!" (Coover 32). These subversive acts "mark a continuous linguistic and ideological slippage away from the official order of history."[32] Nixon, a ventriloquist dummy of the official discourse, himself embodies the carnivalesque in his grotesquely depicted bodily excretions, odor, run-down looks, and ultimate public exposure, standing upon the execution stage with his pants pulled down.

As Nixon the character suggests, the reason the government can get away with such an outrageous breach of taboo and common decency (promoted by the very structures that violate it) is presentation: "Times Square, the circus atmosphere, the special ceremonies: form, *form*, that's what it always comes down to! In statesmanship get the formalities right, never mind the moralities—why did I keep forgetting that?" (Coover 64). The hypocritical Establishment transgresses its own rules, but this transgression is necessary for propelling the dynamo of power. The bizarre, phantasmagorical spectacle of the public burning, grounded in escalating excess, embodies the grotesque. The hysteria within the American Cold War discourse masquerades grotesquely behind an illusion of objectivity, a claim to moral superiority, and ideological drive of national exceptionalism. Nixon's revelation echoes the sentiment of Uncle Sam, who just a few pages back asserts "the fatal slantindicular futility of Fact! Appearances, my boy, appearances!" (Coover 61).

2.3. The Spectacle

Guy Debord characterizes the spectacle as "[e]verything that was directly lived [and] has receded into a representation."[33] In *The Public Burning*, history is presented as drama: real historical events are re-presented as performances, as showcased in the previous section. The execution of the Rosenbergs can be regarded as a watershed moment in American "hystery," fulfilling the function of "a script, the finale of an act in the circus of history, which satisfies America's expectations of pattern in its perceptions of itself."[34] History is mediated to the public through an ideological lens beneficial to the Establishment, those in power who wish to

[31] Walsh 338.
[32] Cornis-pope 44.
[33] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005) 7.
[34] Walsh 340.

remain in power. Within this structure, a public execution of American citizen spies, while an extreme manifestation of history as performance, finds plausibility.

Debord presents the spectacle society as based on appearances and performance – on representation – not substance. Accordingly, "[i]f former economies relied on possession, then the economy of the spectacle relies on impression."[35] This ties directly to Bataille's notion of (escalating) excess as a means to asserting power. Those in power must keep this perpetuum mobile of the spectacle going and keep upping the ante to cater to the rising demand of the public. *The Public Burning* incorporates this principle of *potlatch* and travesties it by providing entertainment through the Rosenbergs' public execution. The outflow of excess, manifested in the carnival, requires a sacrifice, a victim, a scapegoat, and the Rosenbergs fit the bill. Debord's "inversion of life" into "the nonliving"[36] is here met both literally and figuratively – the Rosenbergs are killed and the substance of their execution is reduced to a reality show-like form of entertainment with an evident overtone of political deterrence. Symbolically, the execution is a show of power by the American government to Soviet Russia and domestic dissent alike. Through the sacrifice of the Rosenbergs and transgression of its championed morality, the U.S.A. is symbolically protecting its "*freedom's holy light*" (Coover 330).

In *The Public Burning*, the power of appearance and performance takes over precedence over substance. For instance, the performance given by politicians is more important in securing power and respect amongst voters than any implemented policies, experience, expertise, or credentials. Nixon finds himself standing with pulled-down pants upon the stage where the Rosenbergs are to be executed, a potentially career- and life-ruining moment. Well-aware that "the fate of a great country can depend on camera angles" (Coover 36), he manages to capitalize upon this instance of disgrace and delivers a speech that incriminates not only himself, but the entire American public, drawing power from their acceptance and appropriation of his humiliation. Within this carnival, Nixon presents his situation as a baring of the truth and calls for everyone, including Uncle Sam, to unmask and reveal their 'true' self.

The public burning of the Rosenbergs in the Time Square, the spectacle of the century, is a logical conclusion to the dramatic nature of the preceding trial. Irving Saypol, the prosecuting attorney in the Rosenberg case, used ideologically skewed discourse "to make what might later seem like nothing more than a series of overlapping fictions cohere into a convincing semblance of historical continuity and logical truth – at least long enough to wrest

[35] Olsen 57.
[36] Debord 7.

a guilty verdict from an impressed jury" (Coover 83). Even Nixon eventually comes to the presumption that "[m]aybe the case against the Rosenbergs had been a complete fabrication, beginning to end" (Coover 239), but their guilt or innocence are irrelevant within the spectacle society for whom reality is pre-mediated and turned into entertainment that keeps the public under the control of the official structures.

Tellingly, for instance, a movie-goer stumbles out of the cinema after seeing the film *House of Wax* and forgets to remove his 3-D glasses. He implicates himself within the spectacle of reality, blurring the lines of the non-real and real. Just like Slavoj Žižek argues that the protagonist of the 1988 movie *They Live* realizes he is viewing the world through the lens of capitalist ideology,[37] so does the spectator of *The Public Burning* realize the spectacular nature of his surroundings. The movie-goer superimposes the apocalyptic spectacle he saw in the movie onto the scene of the execution on Times Square, conflating the two together into "the final spectacle, the one and only atomic holocaust… it's in the script" (Coover 187). He faces the "recognition that mediation has turned reality into a cartoonish B-film… simulation comes to feel like the real thing, and the real thing comes to feel like a very bad dream."[38]

2.4. Nixon

Nixon, designated the emissary for the "Sons of Light" (Coover 14) by Uncle Sam, is most revealing in his self-conscious awareness of himself as the mouthpiece of official hegemonic rhetoric, while also confronting and identifying with the Other (for Nixon, both Uncle Sam and the Rosenbergs). His defensive self-justifying claims expose the liminality of his position and the tenuous push-and-pull dynamics of transgression and limits. The inconsistency and unreliability of Nixon's narrativization of events forces the reader to realize the inevitable bias of imposed discourses within narratives of history. Additionally, it is the task of the reader to distinguish the two versions of Nixon – Nixon as a character in *The Public Burning* and the "rigid designator"[39] of Nixon in real life (the actual world); an impossible task, given the clearly fictionalized insight into Nixon's mindset within *The Public Burning* that unsettles the (frequently demonized) public image of real-life Nixon by humanizing him. In order to feel the impact of this consolidation, the reader must integrate the historical (the real) with

[37] In the documentary film *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), dir. Sophie Fiennes.
[38] Olsen 60.
[39] Frank L. Cioffi, "Coover's (Im)Possible Worlds in The Public Burning," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 42.1 (2000) 35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111610009603124>

fictional (the unreal) reality – one's own perception of historical facts with Coover's narrativization of them.

Nixon's courting with the embodiment of the Other results from his insecurities about his liminal status within the Establishment. He sees himself as an outsider within the Republican posse, and is constantly attempting to remain in favor with Uncle Sam, who periodically belittles him. He betrays the binary nature of his thinking by saying he "loved to debate both sides of any issue, but thinking about that strange space in between made [him] sweat" (Coover 92). Nixon's self-doubting narrative of circumstantially assembled links between events reveals that he is "constantly aware that his constructions are, at the end of the day, arbitrary…"[40] Nixon gradually starts to question and challenge the case (as having been orchestrated by the FBI), doubting the involvement of the Rosenbergs. In his skepticism, he reveals only coincidence and uncertainty, "more entropy than order,"[41] more doubt than steadfast "truth."

Demonstrative of the transgressive drive within the Nixon character, he compares his adolescence to Julius' and Ethel's and finds similarities that intrigue him. His claimed humble beginnings gave rise to his

> faith... in the American dream, I believe in it because I have seen it come true in my own life. *TIME* has said that I've had 'a Horatio Alger-like career,' but not even Horatio Alger could have dreamed up a life so American—in the best sense—as mine (Coover 194).

However, whereas Nixon 'made it' within the rigged system, Ethel's starting line was set back, and she additionally lacked the opportunism and craftiness that propelled Nixon towards the sanctioned American Dream. Suffering a similar fate, Julius Rosenberg

> had been born into a true Horatio Alger family, poor but honest, he should have made a fortune. He'd even sold penny candy on the streets during the Depression, earning as much as eighty cents a day. But somehow something went wrong. The boat did not come in. The rich patron with the sweet tooth did not materialize. There was no happy ending (Coover 199).

There is no *deus ex machina* intervention or lottery win, but tellingly, Julius' industriousness fails to bear fruit as well. Despite similar adolescent circumstances, Nixon managed to succeed within the system, while the Rosenbergs did not.

Nixon appropriates the official White House discourse in order to further his career in politics, yet he cannot resist identifying with the subversive Other; in this case, he is drawn to the taboo represented by the Rosenbergs, demonized through the dominant Cold War rhetoric

[40] Olsen 55.
[41] Cioffi 32.

of the USA. Ethel especially becomes Nixon's object of desire to subjugate, and embodies the dual drive of transgression:

> Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it. … the sacred aspect of the taboo is what draws men towards it...[42]

Nixon simultaneously displays anguish at the realization of limits (in his case, the political taboo that consorting with the Rosenbergs would entail), but also pleasure at the thought and acting out of transgressing this prohibition.[43] Nixon's ruminations about the Rosenbergs compel him to take a train to Sing Sing to confront Ethel with his proposal: "Exposure of the FBI in exchange for confessions, a partnership in iconoclasm" (Coover 240). By attempting to connect to Ethel and "to step in and change the script" (Coover 235) of the official historical narrative, Nixon enacts the desired transgression. After kissing Ethel, embracing the Other, he "felt [he]'d reached some new plateau of awareness, of consciousness, things would never be the same again…" (Coover 289). His desire for power allows him to turn this subversive act, exposed by the millions of Americans awaiting the public burning, into the drive that propels him into the hands of the Establishment. In the final execution scene when Ethel's electrocution is botched, Nixon is seen among the first rushing to pull the switch on her dying body, no longer a sovereign subject nor desired object, but rather a representation of the abject.

2.5. The Sons of Light and Darkness

While the voice of the Rosenbergs is represented in the novel, they "have difficulty in breaking through Uncle Sam's dichotomic discourse. … the Rosenberg counter-narrative remains... mediated. [Their] dignified silence and bombastic statements... are immediately framed by Uncle Sam's or Nixon's comments."[44] Their statements and letters are either dramatized or never left to speak for themselves. As exposed during the trial itself, "[p]ractical politics consists in ignorin' facts! Opinion ultimately governs the world!" (Coover 61) and these two have been designated the national enemy by the state even before the trial began for challenging its authority and ideological dominion and for transgressing its laws. In accordance, their version of events is discredited and drowned out by the hysterical

[42] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001) 68.
[43] Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 75.
[44] Cornis-pope 43.

institutional rhetoric. Ethel's botched execution, where she does not immediately die after the first bout of electricity, disrupts the spectacle of the execution as a last defiance to the system.

Despite the inclusion of subversive narrative voices and fragmentariness of the official discourse to illuminate the hysteria within the Cold War power relations, the bearers of institutional power, that is Uncle Sam (as well as his lackey Nixon) and the Phantom, prevail. The readers' expectations are thwarted by the characters "evolv[ing] and mutat[ing], constantly frustrating any ordering principles"[45] apart from the ceaseless drive for power "rooted deep in the social nexus."[46] Nevertheless, the dominion of their deliberately totalizing narratives is discredited through infiltration and self-parody. Both narrators Nixon and Uncle Sam, by resembling fool or trickster characters, gradually become almost likeable.

Then other moments arise when Nixon's focus on his agenda comes through clearly. On the day of the execution, the atmosphere already giving way to anarchy and inversion of order, Nixon sits on a train, looking on as a group of people drags a woman away to gang rape her, and he ponders:

> it suddenly came to me what I had to do! I had to step in and change the script! It was dangerous, I knew, politically it could be the kiss of death, but it was an opportunity as well as a risk, and my philosophy has always been: don't lean with the wind, don't do what is politically expedient, do what your instinct tells you is right! (Coover 235-236).

He is not talking about stepping in to help the woman, but about confronting Ethel Rosenberg. This passage highlights Nixon's opportunism and complete disregard for selfless behavior. His egoism and self-doubt delude and detach him from any connection to reality other than what concerns his own self.[47] All his actions are precisely "politically expedient" and are directed solely towards furthering his position within the political establishment. Nixon's self-serving, opportunistic side perseveres until the very end when he is subjugated by Uncle Sam, who turns out not to be a relatively harmless cartoonish entity, but a ruthless, seriously dangerous force, an almost godly mythological creature.

The two forces of dissent and hegemony, while working in opposition to each other thanks to a mutually maintained system of delimitation, are at the same time complementary to and parasitic upon each other: "high and low orders… both struggle for recognition and supremacy. However, the possibility of one depends upon the necessity of the other and they are fatefully locked in an absolute contingency."[48] The one is contained in the other: the

[45] Cioffi 29.
[46] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2001) 343.
[47] Cioffi 29.
[48] Jenks 173.

control systems of the government, social institutions, the military-industrial complex all transgress to assert their power, while dissenting efforts to undermine the hegemony of the Establishment in dictating social limitations in general do so to assert their own productive potential to assert power, to change the status quo, this being the case of the Rosenbergs and to a certain degree Nixon who finds himself wondering, "why be consistent if the universe wasn't? In a lawless universe, there was a certain power in consistency, of course—*but there was also power in disruption!*" (Coover 235). This mutual inversion propels the power dynamics, or spiral-like perpetuum mobile, as suggested by Foucault, within which transgression necessarily functions.

In the Epilogue, Uncle Sam exposes himself as a sinister character by raping Nixon in a blatant show of power, transgressing any previously asserted claims to moral superiority. Nixon again deludes himself into basically ignoring the violation and perceiving it as a positive thing for his political career, representing as it does Nixon's initiation into the political hegemony of the White House. The scene illustrates the impossibility to fully escape the desire for power which functions on the grounds of the interdependence of transgression-limit. The Epilogue is blatantly Orwellian in Nixon's acceptance of Uncle Sam's violent transposition, mirroring Winston Smith's ultimate reconciled acceptance of Big Brother as his savior: "he was an incorrigible huckster, a sweet-talking con artist, you couldn't trust him, I knew that—but what did it matter? … he was... the most beautiful thing in all the world. I was ready at last to do what I had never done before. '*I... I love you, Uncle Sam!*' I confessed" (Coover 350).

Chapter Three – Gonzo versus Moloch: Exceeding the Limits in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971)

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* first appeared in 1971 as two November installments in the *Rolling Stone* magazine before being published in book form the same year. The story follows Raoul Duke (Thompson) and his attorney Doctor Gonzo (Oscar Zeta Acosta) on a drug-fueled trip to Las Vegas – the mission, as ordered by *Sports Illustrated*, to cover the Mint 400 off-road race. This becomes an excuse for the main objective: to search for the American Dream in the heart of the Establishment by the protagonists' own impulsive, transgressive means, involving "a whole galaxy of uppers, downers, screamers, laughers," LSD, ether, mescaline, and other assorted drugs, overstepping the law, and "the tendency... to push it as far as you can."[1] Part Two of the novel relays the pair attending the National District Attorney's Conference of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, both Duke and Gonzo feeling strongly that "the drug culture should be represented" (Thompson 106) among the repressive forces out of touch with the counterculture. These events Duke and Gonzo have been assigned to cover are instrumental in illustrating "the brutish realities of this foul year of Our Lord, 1971" (Thompson 27), the demise of the countercultural sixties in light of the Vietnam War, and how alienating the Establishment is to a significant portion of the American population through the spectacularization of experience.

The insight of the novel lies in the narrator's perceptions of his surroundings – the Establishment-dominated casino entertainment of Las Vegas, and his attempts to make sense of its weirdness through both immersion and subversion. The narrative transgresses the line between journalism and fiction, embodying the gonzo style, Thompson's own subgenre of New Journalism, and asserts no claim to an objective account of events whatsoever. Duke and Gonzo effectively hijack the spectacle and the carnivalesque of Las Vegas that mainstream middle-class Americans seek out by violating the limitations of grotesque entertainment prescribed within Vegas casinos. They make a travesty of the already far-out circus existence within these non-places, hyperbolizing its alienating nature through their drug-induced crusade of excess upon the purveyors of the Establishment-approved "all-American" way of life, intentionally and viciously attacking its weirdness with their own brand of weirdness.

[1] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (London: Paladin Books, 1987) 12. All subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.

One can even regard the story as a warped, contemporary, parodied version of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), with Duke representing the writer-observer, Sal Paradise, and Gonzo the impulsive Dean Moriarty. The aim remains the same: searching for "it," the American Dream, an authentic understanding and mediation of experience, and yet Duke and Gonzo willingly push it to the extreme with their "might-as-well" mindset. *Fear and Loathing* constitutes perverted elements of the road-trip genre about remaining in control among chaos self-generated within the confines of the Establishment in order to hijack the institutionalized trope of the American Dream. The protagonists' behavior is unconventional and transgressive, with Duke questioning the relativity of normal-deviant, sanity-insanity: "But what is sane? ...in this doomstruck era of Nixon. We are all wired into a *survival* trip now" (Thompson 165).

The picaresque exploits of the two characters are juxtaposed to the Vietnam War which deeply influenced the zeitgeist of the sixties and early seventies, suggesting that both are absurdities on the same scale. While America engages in a pointless conflict overseas, the struggle to survive is present on the domestic front as well. Duke constantly illustrates the differing mindset of the 'normies,' conformist law-abiding citizens who cannot compute when facing the likes of himself and Doctor Gonzo. As the two get away with self-induced preposterous scenarios, the reading requires a certain suspension of disbelief, and yet the environment of Las Vegas seems to naturally allow for Duke and Gonzo's transgressions of normative conventionalities. Thompson's gonzo writing renounces the futile "search for totality" characteristic of objectivist journalism, instead making its focus "the interrogation of the limit."[2] How far is the Establishment willing to go beyond its imposed restrictions on violence, drugs, sex, destruction? For Thompson, there is only one way to find out: by venturing into the belly of the beast.

3.1. Going Gonzo: The High Stakes of Playing the Game

The reader must not forget that *Fear and Loathing* is a partially fictionalized, yet primarily autobiographical journalistic endeavor, portraying Thompson's often exaggerated, subjective perceptions, challenging the inherently alienating dogma of the Establishment in its clean-cut, "wholesome" entertainment for the masses. The gonzo style allows for a conflation of fact and fiction, upgrading the call of New Journalism for involvement with the subject-matter and

[2] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980 50.

claim that "reporting can have an aesthetic dimension… without sacrificing accuracy."[3] In the sixties, New Journalism reacted in harmony with "the atmosphere of social crisis that had begun to make the traditional media seem so suspect and that had called attention to the way the media's claim to be 'objective' was frequently a smokescreen for bias."[4] This contention became especially apparent in how mainstream media reported the Vietnam War in face of mass anti-war protests sweeping the country. Gonzo writing abolishes the concept of this purported journalistic objectivity and instead insists upon presenting an expression of the reporter's *inner experience*, a state embodying "the necessity," as Bataille proposes, "of challenging everything… without permissable rest."[5]

The gonzo writer's experience becomes the center of focus, presenting the narrativization not as an unbiased account of facts and events, but deliberately pointing out the mediated nature of the report. Thompson as Raoul Duke, the conflation of author and narrator here essential,[6] calls the reader's attention to his note-taking and tape-recording of events in the novel, often supposedly attained on the go, so he can report on them later. But these designators of journalistic practices are transgressed by the narrator's unreliability that he himself asserts, admitting his napkin notes often turn out as gibberish and incomprehensible even to him. Similarly, the search for the American Dream in Part Two is prefaced by the editor of the novel, who affirms the unintelligibility of Thompson's documenting of this particular event and has to present the section as a verbatim transcription of the recorded tape.

The thin line between the real and the fabricated in gonzo journalism is blurred by the matter-of-fact rhetoric[7] that presents all reported events as both equally potentially possible or absurd. The style of "satiric exaggeration" echoes the "organizing function"[8] of Vegas which constitutes a conscious eradication of restraint and implementation of excess in its stead. The juxtaposition of contemporary 1971 news (mainly reports of the Vietnam War) and the aptly-chosen spectacular grotesqueness of Vegas "makes the essential madness of the imagined events [the narrator] recounts seem perfectly plausible and right in tune with the news of the

[3] James E. Caron, "Hunter S. Thompson's 'Gonzo' Journalism and the Tall Tale Tradition in America," *Studies in Popular Culture* 8.1 (1985) 1. <www.jstor.org/stable/23412909>
[4] Michael E. Staub, "Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties," *Representations* 57 (1997) 55. <www.jstor.org/stable/2928663>
[5] Georges Bataille, *The Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie A. Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 3. <https://monoskop.org/images/c/c8/Bataille_Georges_Inner_Experience.pdf>
[6] Throughout the following analysis, 'Thompson' and 'Duke' will be used interchangeably.
[7] Caron 3.
[8] Jason Vredenburg, "What Happens in Vegas: Hunter S. Thompson's Political Philosophy," *Journal of American Studies* 47.1 (2013) 165. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875812001314>

day."[9] The oscillation between fact and fiction, and the fusion of the writer and experiencer, participant and observer allow for a kind of candor that the intent of mediating events objectively does not. The iconoclastic appeal of gonzo writing lies therein.

Transgression in Thompson's writing can be seen as mere aberration or aggravation of the status quo, but its intent is to explore the limits of being by testing limits on experience imposed by power structures, giving itself a purpose despite its complicity within the validation of these limits. Foucault's theory of power relations argues that the impetus for power within the social bond is inescapable and asserts the interdependence of limits and transgression.[10] Just as transgression illuminates (and validates) the limits it violates, the assertion of limits invites their own violation. Only through this reciprocal process do both gain purpose; in isolation, they have no meaning. Transgressive experience thus involves joy in crossing these limits from a rational (ordered) state to the realm of disorder, but at the same time it entails "anguish (at the full realization of the force of those boundaries)."[11] Transgression and the limit are thus not strictly antagonistic, but complicit through their shared desire for power. The two forces collaborate with each other in a state of permanent, perpetuated crisis, propelled by the vicious circle of production and destruction they both constitute for the other.

In Bataille's economy of excess, both obligation and escalation are crucial features of the *potlatch* power dynamics. The rival must engage in the game, for power is only gained through recognition by the adversarial force.[12] This prompts the nonproductive use of excess to be a public display, and in *Fear and Loathing*, the Establishment parades its power through extravagant squandering (luxury) represented by the entertainment of Las Vegas casinos, but also through destruction (the Vietnam War, the War on Drugs). Duke and Gonzo, the opponents in this one-upping exchange-game, are obligated to reciprocate and increase the stakes within this power play, otherwise sovereignty is in jeopardy. Thompson's narrative demonstrates this ongoing desire – but more importantly, necessity – to outmaneuver and outdo the rival (in this case, the Establishment). However, in the case of *Fear and Loathing*, the game is rigged from the start. While the Establishment, functioning as a control mechanism of a capitalist economy, has nothing to lose but capital, Thompson the maverick, prodding the fairly indifferent beast, has everything to lose in the form of his nostalgic idealism that seeps through in the book, despite efforts to mask it as cynicism. These different

[9] Caron 5.
[10] See Chapter One, "1.2. Michel Foucault's Theory of Power Relations."
[11] Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 75.
[12] Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 63.

starting points still enable the game, the power struggle of outdoing the other, but the risks attached to the gamble are disproportionate.

3.2. Madness in Any Direction, At Any Hour: Assaulting the Establishment and the American Dream

The encounter with the "poor Okie kid" (Thompson 13) hitchhiker early on in the narrative poignantly illustrates the collision of gonzo reality with the limits of its counterpart. Despite trying to calm the kid down, aware they are on acid, Duke cannot get through to him: "Our vibrations were getting nasty – but why? I was puzzled, frustrated. Was there no communication in this car? Had we deteriorated to the level of *dumb beasts*?" (Thompson 16). The communication breakdown is progressed by Duke's inability to convey their objective of finding the American Dream, despite insisting that it is "*important*, goddamnit! This is a *true story*!" (Thompson 14). The hitchhiker is simply not on the same wavelength, and before long, he bolts, preferring the uncertain prospects of death in the Mojave Desert to being forced on a ride he did not buy the ticket for.

How does Duke encapsulate the purpose of their high-tailing assault on the spectacle of Las Vegas? As he explains,

> our trip… was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that. (Thompson 23)

Regarding the trip as an embodiment of the "decent" American creed is an apparent mockery of the normative regulations of the Establishment-approved American Dream. Keeping in tune with Bataille's concept of excess in transgression, the gonzo attack criticizes the utility, practicality, Protestant work ethic & industriousness so embedded within the "instrumental rationalism"[13] formative of contemporary models of experience – including the American Dream myth. These operational modes are employed for a "higher" idealistic purpose, always a means to an end, never fulfilling by themselves, only by the unguaranteed promise or hope of achieving something beyond their pragmatic scope. Duke and Gonzo, on the other hand, deliver their blow to the Establishment extravagantly, ostentatiously, twisting the "fantastic *possibilities*" of the dream-myth to their positional (momentary) advantage. Inherent to their transgressive drive is the principle of escalation; they must one-up the rival and raise the stakes to stay in the game.

[13] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) 104.

Throughout the novel, Duke and Gonzo viciously and deliberately hassle 'the squares': cruising down the Strip, feigning to sell heroin by screaming at the car beside theirs at a red light; spinning a crazy tale about junkie witchcraft head-choppings to a bewildered cop in a bar at the drug conference; the waitress in the North Star Coffee Lounge that Gonzo casually threatens with a knife; and the unsuspecting maid who comes to clean their room and whom they persuade needs to cooperate with them (donning the identity of undercover cops for the occasion) on a secret drug-busting scheme – to pick a few examples. These instances of disrupting the status quo ridicule the regulated normality imposed by the Establishment and illustrate Duke and Gonzo's own incarnation of the American Dream that allows them to perpetually get away with their transgressions.

Even the encounter with the highway patrol officer betrays this certainty of extricating themselves from the consequences of illicit acts carried out against the restrictions of the Establishment. But how do they manage to escape repercussion for passing the limits of acceptability (and arguably credibility)? Here it is imperative to again point out the interdependence of transgression and limits which never work in isolation, but on a basis of mutual infection and escalation. Like a poker game whose rules demand raising the stakes with each turn, the stakes are high and must be continually increased – this results either in calling the bluff of the opponent who is forced to forfeit (thus losing face) or in obligating the opponent to escalate the risk and demanding more in return (acquiring an advantage).

The objective is to keep one step ahead in the game; and here, the adversary is catching up to the transgressor. In taking the cop for a joyride, Duke is not merely exceeding the expectations and norms dictated by the law, he is orchestrating the situation to his advantage, deliberately confusing the cop by calmly interacting with him after the high-speed chase to get away with the trunk full of drugs in the car: "The idea is to show him that you were always in total control of yourself and your vehicle – while *he* lost control of everything" (Thompson 86-87). The officer is impressed by Duke's gall and frankness and allows him to leave without a ticket, a symbolic victory for Thompson and the gonzo cause (especially considering the arsenal stashed in the car trunk). Yet he is *allowed* to leave on the law enforcer's terms. The momentary transgression runs its course: Duke gets away with illegal drug- and firearm-possession, and the police officer ensures the continuing existence of both limit and transgression by outmaneuvering the subversion's destructive intent.

Preceding this scene is Duke's realization that they may have taken their exploits in Vegas too far, upsetting the charged equilibrium of the power game: "The only hope now, I felt, was the possibility that we'd gone to such excess, with our gig, that nobody in a position

to bring the hammer down on us could possibly *believe* it" (Thompson 160). Facing the risk of being found out (having trashed the hotel room and run up an astronomical room service bill, carting around a car trunk full of drugs and an illegally-held gun), Duke asks himself: "How would Horatio Alger handle the situation?" (Thompson 69). He mocks the embodiment of the American Dream in the rags-to-riches Alger myth which guarantees success not through hard work, but through an act of *deus ex machina*, which in the context of Thompson's novel is just as absurd as in that of the Alger novels. Having stared into the abyss for too long, Duke's attorney companion flees Vegas before the abyss has a chance to stare back. Finding himself the lone mutineer against the Establishment in the heart of the lion's den, Duke regroups:

> To hell with this panic. Get a grip. *Maintain*. For the next twenty-four hours this matter of personal control would be critical. Here I am sitting out here alone in this fucking desert, in this nest of armed loonies, with a very dangerous carload of hazards, horrors and liabilities that I *must* get back to L.A. [...] Better to get the hell out of this atavistic state at high speed. (Thompson 70)

His escape to L.A. is, of course, thwarted by the highway patrol, and just when it looks like the gig will be exposed, the solution arrives in the form of a new assignment, this time from *Rolling Stone* magazine, to cover the National Drug Conference – an ironic opportunity too befitting to the overall subversion of normativity of Thompson's trip to pass up.

Duke describes the convention as "apparently [having] been set up by people who had been in a Seconal stupor since 1964" (Thompson 134), so out-of-touch with the contemporary drug situation are the speakers and attendees. Duke notes the police force's desire to pinpoint the exact cause of the drug culture: "There were rumours in the hallways that maybe the Mafia was behind it. Or perhaps the Beatles" (Thompson 134). No indication arises that drug use could be a symptom of normative repression, and the Establishment figures consistently betray their lack of drug know-how by claiming, for instance, that a joint is called a "roach" by junkies because it resembles a cockroach, to which Doctor Gonzo quips, "'You'd have to be crazy on acid to think a joint looked like a goddamn cockroach!'" (Thompson 129). Furthermore, Dr Bloomquist, the keynote speaker, imposes a hierarchy upon the varying "states of being" of the stoner that he proposes as "Cool, Groovy, Hip & Square," where one can apparently rise up from being a "Square" to the ultimate stage of being "Cool" (Thompson 130). While ridiculed by the pair, they fail to recognize that the appropriation of this distorted, travestied drug jargon by the National Drug Convention ambassadors can be an effective means of dismantling the War on Drugs discourse through its corruption from the inside.

In the middle of Part Two, the narrative is interrupted by verbatim transcribed tape recordings of the protagonists' quest to locate the American Dream down on Paradise Boulevard. They stop by a diner for food and ask the waitress and cook if they know where they can find the American Dream. Mistaking it for a venue, they assume it is where the Psychiatrist's Club used to be and explain the directions to get there. The cook describes it as "a mental joint, where all the dopers hang out" (Thompson 154). The end of this quest maintains that "*Dr Duke and his attorney finally located what was left of the 'Old Psychiatrist's Club' – a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds… [that] had 'burned down about three years ago'*" (Thompson 156). This would date the demise of the American Dream to around 1968, arguably the beginning of the end of the hippie movement.

Thompson himself muses about the failure of the sixties' counterculture to mark any significant change or subversion of systemic power structures:

> There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning…
>
> And that, I think, was the handle – that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. [...] Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting – on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave… (Thompson 66-67).

Thompson's nostalgic revaluation of the anti-Establishment drive seems to overlook the functioning of power relations in society, which must always remain in crisis, oscillating between loss and gain. A wave cannot keep rising forever, but must inevitably "br[eak] and roll… back" (Thompson 67), fulfilling the model of spiral-like dynamo as proposed by Foucault.

Thompson's retrospect is sentimental, but ultimately critical. As Duke purports, the sense of passive righteousness of the counterculture, overcome by the blind trust in psychedelic drugs as a means to transcendental awareness, heralded the inevitable failure to change the system. Instead, Richard Nixon became president in 1969, and "it is worth noting, historically," Duke quips, "that downers came in with Nixon" (Thompson 186). Reliance on psychedelics as the bearers of universal truths and expanded consciousness proved destructive to the counterculture's transgressive drive, replacing one ultimacy with another. While the acid culture of the sixties may have been a genuine attempt to explore limit-experience outside the control of the government and institutions, it soon became demonized by these power structures once they discovered the uselessness of the psychoactive drug for subjugation, but the usefulness of waging war on Drugs as another incarnation of the perpetual (necessary) enemy.

The idealism of the sixties' zeitgeist is further contrasted to the picture of 1971 Duke paints from headlines he reads in the Las Vegas *Sun*: anti-war protests in Washington D.C. blasted by police, Muhammad Ali sentenced to five years in prison for refusing to draft for the Vietnam War, the (actual) drug crisis among soldiers in Vietnam and civilians in other Asian countries, illegal torture, loony shootings (in the U.S.), etc. Meanwhile, parallel to this, the Establishment represented by the National District Attorney Drug convention is "still burning the taxpayers for thousands of dollars to make films about 'the dangers of LSD', at a time when acid is widely known – to everybody but cops – to be the Studebaker of the drug market…" (Thompson 185). And while these sweeping statements are perhaps guilty of chronologizing drug use, as though drugs were subject to the principles of evolution and extinction, they do capture the Establishment's perpetual lag in identifying and recognizing marginalized groups and subcultures, yet consistently, slowly but steadily, appropriating them to regenerate their control over these subjects.

Launching a "campaign against drugs is a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression," as Foucault has claimed, "through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual."[14] The threat of drugs, exaggerated to produce mass hysteria about a nation-sweeping epidemic of delinquency and terror, can function as a viable control mechanism for repressive forces and law-enforcement actions reaching the absurdity of the superheroic "Mission Accomplished" sentiment in the Iraq War.[15] As Duke fears (and loathes), not only was the drug (counter)culture demonized, but to neutralize its subversive drive, it also became appropriated and commodified, ridding it of any initial anti-Establishment potency. Despite this inevitable eventual co-opting by the Establishment, the protagonists use drugs not as a means for consciousness expansion, but as a tool to hyperbolize the already psychedelic nature of Las Vegas and to cope with its grotesque panoptikum.

3.3. Las Vegas: No Sympathy for the Devil

While the squares are busy looking for a culprit to blame for what they deem a current national marijuana and LSD epidemic, Duke and Gonzo dive into the throes of Las Vegas, where they have "found the main nerve" of the American Dream. This realization causes Doctor Gonzo to get "the Fear" (Thompson 49), a drug-bolstered paranoia served with a side

[14] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 226.
[15] Jarrett Murphy, "'Mission Accomplished' Whodunit," *CBS NEWS*, 29 Oct. 2003, 15 Apr. 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mission-accomplished-whodunit/>

of impostor syndrome. Despite the horrifying acid-scape of reptilia and blood-soaked carpets the two hallucinate, Duke describes Vegas as "a town full of bedrock crazies [where] nobody even *notices* an acid freak" (Thompson 28) and where "[r]eality itself is too twisted" (Thompson 49). At one point, Duke remarks that Nixon would have been a fitting mayor for the city. The casino-life itself is far weirder than anything drugs could conjure, while at the same time embodying Americana entertainment catered to the consumer target, the middle class. The carnivalesque element of the casinos is controlled, "a sanctioned form of 'subversion' whose very purpose is to sublimate and defuse the social tensions that might lead to genuine subversion – a sort of opiate of the masses."[16] Anything outside of this Establishment-restricted diversion is regarded as deviant and must be eradicated; transgression permitted by the very institutional powers against which it is aimed defies the subversive drive of the act.

While Las Vegas may at first glance *seem* to be a place of revolt against the mainstream, it is actually rooted in organized crime, "capitalism and commercialism [which] secured a profitable, well-rooted hegemony… and powerful corporate interests... responsible for the intensive regulatory controls that helped normalise gambling around mid-century."[17] The two protagonists are to a certain extent con-men who 'fake it till they make it' in an environment founded on appearances. Relying on self-asserted authority to legitimize their position within the system, Duke literally entitles himself as "Doctor of Journalism" and proclaims his title in public showdowns when necessary to assert legitimacy. Doctor Gonzo frequently prefaces his suggestions to Duke (usually entailing illegal acts and/or transgressions of excess) "as your attorney," thus somehow grotesquely justifying the validity of his motions.

The real spectacle can be found in Sin City (not in the hectic drug-fueled journey itself) as enabling an institutionalized variation of the American Dream to be served in the town's casinos. The consumption of luxury, seen through Debord's interpretation, embodies "the world of the mutual spectacularization of everyone, the world of… estrangement and nonparticipation… [The spectacle] answers perfectly the needs of a reified and alienated culture: the spectacle-spectator is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order."[18] The spectacle alienates substance from reality, becoming mere representation,[19] and the casino

[16] Keith Booker, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and The Carnivalesque.* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991) 5-6.
[17] Lindsey M. Banco, "Trafficking Trips: Drugs and the Anti-Tourist Novels of Hunter S. Thompson and Alex Garland," *Studies in Travel Writing* 11.2 (2007) 136. < http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645145.2007.9634825>
[18] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983) 307-8.
[19] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005) 7.

entertainment is wholly isolated from real life and turned into "the nonliving."[20] Las Vegas here functions as a caricatured simulation of America, and Duke speculates upon the character and origin of these dreamer-consumers:

> Who *are* these people? [...] They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real*... still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (Thompson 56-57)

Vegas in the fifties and sixties embodied the Establishment and the majority of its visitors were white, middle-class, middle-aged Americans hoping to dutifully 'make it,' just as prescribed by the mainstream vision of the American Dream, too blinded by the glitz and gaudy luxury to realize the lack of substance of the place, or simply not willing to ruin the illusion. Just like this generation that experienced the full blast of pure materialism in the fifties, the following generation of the hippie counterculture, "who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit" (Thompson 165), was likewise reluctant to surrender (or question) their alternative narrative of hope and faith in their distinct variation of redemption through drug-fueled consciousness expansion.

Of course, Thompson's "anti-tourist sentiment" betrays the irony of self-implication, "predicated upon the same class privileges… that the so-called vulgar tourist brings to Vegas,"[21] himself making use of the comforts provided by capitalist structures, himself a spectator as well, complicit in perpetuating the spectacle. The middle-class values that Thompson attacks through his critique of Vegas are the same that allow him the privilege to take this journey to Vegas and run up astronomical hotel suite bills in the first place. On the other hand, he takes consumption to the extreme, a manifestation of Bataille's *potlatch* excess (that goes against capitalist values of utility and self-preservation) to mock (and outdo) the Establishment-sanctioned consumption. Duke and Gonzo thus hack the system for all that it is worth, their expenses comprising drugs, rented flashy cars, and an incongruous number of soap bars and grapefruits (apart from the drugs all to be paid by the magazines Thompson is working for). At one point Gonzo offensively berates an unsuspecting car rental clerk over the phone, ridiculing polite customer service with its subversive counterpart: "*Of course* the gentleman has a major credit card! Do you realize who the fuck you're talking to?" (Thompson 19). Their recklessness functions as a stand-in for the unlimited consumption endorsed by its capitalist framework.

[20] Ibid 7.
[21] Banco 129, 136.

Nevertheless, transgression in *Fear and Loathing* remains complicitly bound to both capitalist and Bataille's general economy values. In capitalism, in matters not why Duke "spent all the rest of [his] cash on garbage – complete shit, souvenirs of Las Vegas, plastic fake-Zippo-lighters with a built-in roulette wheel… tin apes that shook dice…" (Thompson 68) – it just matters that he did it and profit was made. But in the realm of general economy, this act of nonproductive excess, the (self-)destruction of resources, is a symbolic blow to the adversary. The escalation has no purpose if not recognized and thus validated by the opposition (that which it transgresses). Thompson's attacks on the Establishment through the transgression of social boundaries of acceptability force the authority to confirm this demarcation, hence simultaneously confirming its violation. Only by condemning an act (by confirming it has exceeded a limit) does it become transgressive.

Transgression must necessarily remain recurring and ongoing in order to fulfil its purpose; concluding the transgression would render it gratuitous. The self-destructive drive of transgression manifests in Thompson's excesses, that – while provocative – betray a hope in the ideal of a morally just system, and in the possibility of producing change to the current social model based on repression despite the inherent inability of transgression to do so. And when the going gets too weird, the narrator in the heart of it, Duke "walk[s] over to the TV set and turn[s] it on to a dead channel – white noise at maximum decibels, a fine sound for sleeping, a powerful continuous hiss to drown out everything strange" (Thompson 61). Facing the paradoxical, basically self-refuting principle of transgression, there is always the comforting, tranquilizing possibility to escape the inevitable anxiety that comes with incessantly challenging order and immersing oneself in unsettling chaos.

By supplementing institutionalized weirdness with personalized weirdness, the two mavericks navigate and upset the waters of the Establishment, but at one point, Duke realizes they may have finally gone overboard: "I'd abused every rule Vegas lived by – burning the locals, abusing the tourists, terrifying the help" (Thompson 160). Duke notes that the Vegas security at casinos is "super tense and strict [...] to make sure the high rollers don't have even momentary hassles with 'undesireables'" (Thompson 144), disruptors of the status quo. Instigators of unordained chaos or individuality within the controlled carnivalesque are eradicated to preserve the authority of the ruling hegemony. Thompson's writing exposes this regulated disorder of the carnival[22] and assaults this contained system of permitted chaos with his own gonzoism, the weirdness of his characters clashing with the weirdness of this forced debauchery. While they manage to get away with their transgressions, Duke recalls the story

[22] As discussed in Chapter Two, "2.2. Sacrifice, The Carnival."

of his "drifter" friend who got picked up in Vegas by the police for merely standing on the sidewalk looking at a fountain, was fined $50, charged with vagrancy, and spent a week in jail. According to the inverted logic of the carnival world of Las Vegas, the more gonzo you go, the more you fit in (Thompson 161).

However, Las Vegas can also be regarded as "a social scapegoat"[23] onto which is projected the status of symbolizing America's corruption. The genius loci should be instead considered a logical consequence, not the cause, of crime and capitalist exploitation that is tolerated and enforced by the Establishment. The essence of "fabulous"[24] Las Vegas has evolved, from its originating beginnings as an outlaw Prohibition-ignoring town with gambling that quickly became institutionalized (and legalized along with prostitution in 1931)[25] by capitalist and corporate structures catering to a middle-class audience from the mid-century, to its most recent focus on family-friendly tourism. Once perhaps a signifier of risk and transgression, nowadays it embodies pseudo-risk, fun for the whole family. The corporatization of gambling by the late 1970s led to a boom in hotel and commercial development[26] and the expansion of Vegas' target audience in order to maximize profits.

Thompson's assault on Vegas suggests that transgressions are punished in this city only if they overstep the boundaries set by the Establishment; weirdness or deviance is tolerated when it fits into the (entertainment) narrative enforced by the hegemony. The effects of drugs "can be romanticised, demonised or pathologised, or [they] can be rendered socially invisible"[27] – while psychoactive drugs are considered dangerous by the Establishment, certain drugs like alcohol, painkillers, and barbiturates are normalized and institutionalized. Hence the duo who, strung out on ether, are allowed into Circus Circus casino, because they are mistaken for drunks, and are thus tolerated and "embrac[ed]... as fuel for [Vegas'] capitalist machinery."[28]

3.4. Don't Follow Leaders, Watch the Parkin' Meters

Duke and Gonzo highlight the liminality of acceptability by exploiting this profit-driven system just as much as the system aims to exploit them as inevitable consumers. As Thompson proclaims the creed of *Fear and Loathing*, "When you bring an act into this town,

[23] Hal K. Rothman, "Las Vegas and the American Psyche, Past and Present," *Pacific Historical Review* 70.4 (2001): 628. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2001.70.4.627>
[24] As proclaimed on the city's flamboyant neon welcome sign, erected in 1959 on the South end of the Strip.
[25] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 165.
[26] Cullen 166.
[27] Banco 131.
[28] Banco 139.

you want to bring it in heavy. Don't waste any time with cheap shucks and misdemeanors. Go straight for the jugular. Get right into felonies" (Thompson 160-161). The message is clear: assault the Establishment and carry out this transgression to the limits – and beyond. Do not accept its terms and conditions; instead, throw the book back them, "confront these rotten bastards, on their own turf."[29] In *Fear and Loathing*, the arguably self-destructive drive of the protagonists embodies this transgression, deconstructing the contingency of boundaries and extremes. As Duke remarks on infiltrating the National District Attorney's Conference of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, "[i]t was dangerous lunacy, but it was also the kind of thing a real connoisseur of edge-work could make an argument for" (Thompson 79). The point of this "flagrantly cranked-up act that we intended to push all the way to the limit" is ultimately "a sense of obligation and even duty" (Thompson 106) to keep the savage crusade of gonzo alive.

Challenging the power-driven lunacy of the Establishment on its own terms, but from the margins as an outsider intent to transgress these rules without an issued license to transgress, comes with a risk. In *Fear and Loathing*, Thompson encapsulates this threat as "[n]o mercy for a criminal freak in Las Vegas. This place is like the Army: the shark ethic prevails – eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody's guilty, the only crime is getting caught" (Thompson 70). It is the perception of the transgressive act by both perpetrator and transgressed institution as a threat that highlights the limits of acceptability. The substance of the risk and how the transgression is handled exposes the social bond. While the risky feats carried out in the novel may seem then perpetrated for their own sake and euphoria, they represent a self-conscious resistance to normative structures and instead allow for a radical self-definition in opposition to the Establishment's contingent authority. By probing and exceeding these boundaries, transgressive acts provide a diagnosis of societal systemic control.

The gonzo style and content of the novel can be seen as "assaulting the totalising myth of the American Dream"[30] – it both affirms and subverts this myth. Thompson distorts the commonly accepted attributes of the trope, labeling himself "a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger… a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (Thompson 188). The eccentricity of the characters' search for the American Dream functions as a justified and suitable reaction to the artificially-induced extravaganza of Las Vegas – a grotesque response to a grotesque manifestation of excess, underscoring the pathology of this

[29] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist, The Gonzo Letters, Volume II, 1968-1976*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 416.
[30] Banco 135.

particular American reality embedded within the authoritative framework of the Establishment. Nevertheless, even this attempt at transgression is eventually absorbed by the very structures it aims to trespass or challenge.

Thompson's gonzo writing inevitably betrays resignation towards the self-perpetuating political power in the American establishment which maintains the military-industrial complex as the center of its authority in a war culture built on fighting the Enemy – *any* Enemy, whether the Red Menace, the Drug "Menace" (Thompson 106), foreign terrorist forces, or the enemy within (Coover 15). This capitalist-fueled fight for power, transgressing its own taboos of violence, "murder… connived at immediately after being banned,"[31] inevitably becomes an export for the benefit of the immense war industry and fuels American exceptionalist (and expansionist) politics. Considering he continued to write critically against American domestic and foreign policies, institutions, and political agencies until his death, Thompson kept the offensive going despite recognizing the U.S.A.'s eternal war-mongering as the reincarnation of its power.

Can gonzo writing then be seen as a sort of last stand defiance in face of certain defeat? Is Thompson's anti-Establishment tirade really the fulfilment of his transgressive desire or the system fueling this subversiveness in order to reassert its power to control and appropriate these transgressive attempts? The self-destructiveness of the transgressive drive lies in the obligation to play the power game, rendering any dissenting intent complicit with the system it attacks. Transgression is already *part of* the system it assaults. In Thompson's fiction, pushing the limits of acceptability set by the control apparatuses of the American government regarding the Vietnam War, the Drug Enforcement Administration in its War on Drugs, and journalistic claims to objectivity amidst populistic rhetoric on both home fronts, ultimately betray his desire for recognition by the system. The anti-systemic drive of his writing is a provocation aimed at the Establishment, putting its hypocrisy on display, but for what purpose? Thompson's attack, however cynical it appears to be, reveals outrage at the transgressions of the system. The system which should be fair because *it* sets the terms of the power play? While Coover's *The Public Burning* recognizes the complicity, not dichotomy, of transgression-limit, Thompson displays a more nostalgic desire for justice and integrity within institutional power structures. Without acknowledging the workings of the power play within which it operates, the transgressive impulse of the writing can remain gratuitous, casting pearls before swine, ultimately annihilating itself.

[31] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001) 63.

Chapter Four – William S. Burroughs' Grotesque Control Machines

William S. Burroughs is often ranked among the Beat Generation despite his affinity with this literary group being rather grounded in personal relationships and friendships than any similarities in writing techniques. One could say that Beat writing resisted conformist, conservative values enforced in Cold War America, something Burroughs was very much a part of, sharing with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, among other Beat figures, "a sense of moral and aesthetic obligation"[1] to subvert and transgress the restrictions of the cultural hegemony. Burroughs, as a proponent of antinomianism, verged off from the Beat path of romanticized humanism into radical experimentation with representational form and far-out conceptualizations of institutional control. His texts work against the Culture Industry and its control mechanisms of mass surveillance, dissemination of propaganda through the viral language of mass media, the commodification of art, fundamentalism, Othering based on racial, ethnic, sexual differences, and the appropriation of subversive anti-systemic attacks to neuter their power.

The 'counter-narratives' of *Naked Lunch* rupture narrative linearity and associational logic by identifying the power of language to control the subject through ideological discourse. *The Nova Trilogy* takes this subversion further, using the cut-up technique as a transgression against the system: it ruptures these discourses and feeds them, inflected with dissenting language, back into the control apparatuses. These anti-narratives deconstruct conventions of unity, hierarchies, and rationalism in artistic representation – and Burroughs does "not presume to impose 'story' 'plot' 'continuity.'"[2] His program is to subvert institutionalized language; to "[c]ut word lines[–]Smash the control images–Smash the control machine"[3] of globalized capitalist structures that perpetuate their drive for profit by appropriation of all hegemonic and dissenting ideologies alike. In order to escape the control of normative hegemony, one must "*rub out the word forever.*"[4]

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[1] Jones Irwin, "William Burroughs as Philosopher: From Beat Morality to Third Worldism to Continental Theory," *The Philosophy of the Beats*, ed. Sharin N. Elkholy (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) 270. <www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcg6d.20>

[2] William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, eds. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) 184. Referred to as *NL* in all subsequent in-text citations.

[3] William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*, *Three Novels: The Soft Machine, Nova Express, The Wild Boys* (Grove Press, New York, 1988) 92-93. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

[4] William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*, *Three Novels: The Soft Machine, Nova Express, The Wild Boys* (Grove Press, New York, 1988) 186. Referred to as *NE* in all subsequent in-text citations.

4.1. Rub Out the Word Forever: Language as Virus

In his essay collection *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), Burroughs posits the theory that language is a virus: "the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible. The word has not been recognized as a virus because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the [human] host…"[5] He describes "the life cycle of a virus" as the "penetration of a cell or activation within the cell, replication within the cell, escape from the cell to invade other cells, escape from host to infect a new host" (Burroughs, *ER* 25). As he postulates further, "[t]he word itself may be a virus that has achieved a permanent status with the host" (*ER* 25). Accordingly, discourses embed themselves within language users and replicate (that is, disseminate) through communication. The host of the language virus thus becomes a "soft machine" into which imposed discourses are embedded according to the host's desires.[6]

To take the argument further by transposing language as virus onto controlling social institutions, achieving total control of the subject (host) would effectively deconstruct the purpose of the control machine, for in order to be effective, the control institution requires a dose of resistance from the subject it controls. Complete subjugation of the subject renders the control machine stagnant; stasis replaces the crisis that propels the power dynamo. The rule of hegemony is dependent upon opposition, dissent, and power relations – total control would mean entropy, uniformity; nothing left to control. Thus the language virus and its human host live in parasitic co-dependence.

The referential faculty of language is arbitrary and can never be uniform; however, people inherently seek out language that creates definitive images that fulfill their desire for conclusive representations of their (imposed) needs and wants, despite the totalizing nature of the discourses asserting these representations. This internalization of discourses that overwhelms the individuals' agency constitutes the subjects as "predictable, and hence manipulable, automatons."[7] Authoritative, hegemonic institutions exploit this dependency on clear-cut meanings and use language to fulfill their own need for control. Those who are unconsciously shaped by discourses may think they are in control by choosing the fictions of gratification they feel most affinity to, while those who exploit the first group's needs also believe they are in control without realizing that their addiction to control mirrors the universal determination by language. The true controlling agent is the virus of language which

[5] William S. Burroughs, "The Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden," *The Electronic Revolution* (Neuausgabe: Ubu Classics, 2005) 5. Referred to as *ER* in all subsequent in-text citations.
[6] Frederick M. Dolan, "The Poetics of Postmodern Subversion: The Politics of Writing in William S. Burroughs's 'The Western Lands,'" *Contemporary Literature* 32.4 (1991) 536. <www.jstor.org/stable/1208515>
[7] Dolan 536.

affects all equally. The concept of agency, then, is arguably reduced to the illusion of choice within this forced symbiosis with language; the subject acts upon their impulses and desires, but these desires are perpetuated and mediated extrinsically to serve the structures of control.

Burroughs therefore proposes (but does not implement) a new language that would delete "certain falsifications inherit [*sic*] in all existing western languages" (*ER* 33) and would be pictorial with a hieroglyphic script. He criticizes "the assignment of permanent condition" in the verbal form "is," the definite article "the" which assumes the exclusive uniqueness of its referent, and the binary opposition of "either/or" (*ER* 33-34). Phrases incorporating these demarcating concepts like 'To be or not to be, that is the question' function as categorical imperatives or virus formulas that restrict the subject (that is, language user) within definitiveness and oppositional conclusiveness: "THE universe locks you in THE, and denies the possibility of any other. If other universes are possible, then the universe is no longer THE it becomes A" (*ER* 34).

4.2. The Cut-up Method

The main tool Burroughs used in fighting the logic of institutional language is the cut-up method, the influence of Dada traceable in their shared "action set in opposition"[8] rather than on an identifiable, consistent technique. Burroughs' cut-up experiments, however, seem to function not on chance, but on intent and deliberation, despite the created illusion of spontaneity. Collage may arise out of Dadaistic haphazardness, but in Burroughs' texts, it finds purpose in the Situationist practice of *détournement*, the re-situating of existing texts to create new meanings. Burroughs' first cut-up experiments appeared in *Minutes to Go* (1959), a collaboration with Gregory Corso and Brion Gysin, the latter whom was instrumental in influencing Burroughs' cut-up technique. Burroughs employs the cut-up to expose the illusion of temporal linearity, the logic of continuity, causality, coherence, containment. It destabilizes fixed meanings and connotations by re-situating words and phrases into new, disruptive contexts where referents and signifiers are obfuscated. The technique gives Burroughs' texts a rhizomatic quality with the absence of linear logic, severing of associational links, and challenge to unitary, rational representation. Introducing an alternative narrative of synchronicity of events and experience, there is no novelistic beginning (exposition), linear development of plot, and end (conclusion) in Burroughs' texts: they do not necessarily have to be read from cover to cover. The cut-up is Burroughs' reaction to the human virus of language which creates the necessity to get rid of "the word." Instead, Burroughs champions

[8] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) 152.

non-verbal communication, intuition, telepathy, a return to "direct pictorial mimesis."[9] At the same time, this alternative remains purely on a theoretical level, perhaps because Burroughs realises the difficulty (or impossibility) in implementing such a radical change in communication.

The cut-up technique, while a radical experimental rupture, may inherently set itself up for failure in novel form. All *Nova* texts have been published in several different editions, and for instance, the second edition of *The Soft Machine* was significantly revised by Burroughs "in order to undo the originally *un*restrained use of cut-up methods that made the first edition of his first cut-up novel so *in*accessible."[10] The need for this revision indicates the destructive ability of the cut-up to go beyond the limits of communicating or interpreting any discernible meaning. At the same time, this modification process seems to be *inherent* to the cut-up technique, keeping in tune with its self-perpetuating mechanism. Just as the product of the cut-up method is indeterminate with no definitive meaning, and can be further altered, added onto, or discarded, so is its containment within the conclusive printed form debatable.

Burroughs' method of expression through the cut-up and montage can be read as an interpretation of the world apposite to his experience of it – as highly visual, story-based, cinematic. According to Burroughs, the less pictorial a language is, the wider the gap it creates between words and what these words signify (*ER* 35). As he remarks in the "Atrophied Preface" of *Naked Lunch*, "This book spill [*sic*] off the page in all directions, kaleidoscope of vistas, medley of tunes and street noises, farts and riot yips and the slamming steel shutters of commerce…" (*NL* 191). Burroughs thus translates reality – which he sees unfolding as a highly audio-visually stimulating motion-picture – into written narrative using film techniques – rapidly cutting or cropped scenes, fade-outs (sometimes marked by ellipses), in media res, a montage juxtaposition of miscellaneous images, etc.

As Burroughs contends, "consciousness is a cut-up; life is a cut up."[11] While the cut-up text can seem disorienting to the reader, with no context or background information provided, it reflects the disorienting nature of everyday experience. Reality is not experienced linearly, orderly, and so Burroughs does not express it as such in his texts. He does not impose a retrospective systematic ordering of events into a coherent whole,[12] typical for

[9] Dolan 537.
[10] Oliver Harris, "Cutting up Politics," *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 177.
[11] William S. Burroughs, *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993) 61.
[12] During an interview in 1974, Burroughs remarked: "cut-ups simply make explicit a process that goes on all the time. When you walk down the street, that's a cut-up – because your stream of consciousness is constantly being cut by random events. Life is a cut-up, by its nature. Every time you look outside the window, you're cutting up. [...] Cut-ups… are closer to the actual facts of perception than sequential narrative or representative painting.

realism – this would betray an application of an agenda. The cut-up, on the other hand, does not assert any alternative ordering or narrative in its most obvious sense, rupturing the language of controlling agents as a methodical process. However, Burroughs' use of the cut-up is not strictly destructive: his cut-up texts betray a desire to be productive of change, to have an effect on the control systems they transgress. Burroughs facilitates this desired effect of the cut-up due to the frequent 'plagiarism' of his own texts and idiosyncratic (memorable) phrases which re-occur in varying contexts, while associations and links unclear at the time can occur to the reader in retrospect. The reading is thus arguably contained (or constrained) within Burroughs' universe.

4.3. *Naked Lunch* – The Grotesque of the West is the Best

The narrative that ultimately became *Naked Lunch* was initially part of a thousand-page manuscript, which also comprised the texts of *Queer* and *The Yage Letters*. The text itself was not created with the cut-up method, which Burroughs took up only in 1959[13] through Brion Gysin, but the arbitrary and changing arrangement of the chapters (or routines) suggests a similar subversive intent to rupture "realistic" representations of experience. The final ordering of the *Naked Lunch* sections was left as assembled at the printer (with one change – Burroughs switched the beginning and end) and was published as the 1959 Olympia Press Paris edition.[14] The differing printed editions of Burroughs' novels also somewhat embody the cut-up mindset, as the productive process is ever ongoing. As Burroughs himself posits, "[y]ou can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point…" (*NL* 187) which creates a sense of spontaneity and unpredictability in each reading and disrupts linear interpretation. One can regard this editorial process as the beginnings of Burroughs' experimental cut-up method which features prominently in *The Nova Trilogy*.

The reality of *Naked Lunch* is conveyed through an alternative anti-structure that transgresses rational logic and exposes the contingency and arbitrariness of its limitations. Nowhere else does the liminality of order and disorder manifest more bizarrely than in the City of Interzone. The Interzone represents globalization gone haywire: a synthesis of cultures capitalized by corporations and warring factions, a balancing act of order and chaos, transgression and the limit. This fringe space on the outskirts of the empire of meaning, a sort

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Those aren't the way things happen." William Burroughs, "Talking with William S. Burroughs" by William Bates, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*, ed. Allen Hibbard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 92-93.

[13] Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 11. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft0580030m>

[14] Barry Miles and James Grauerholz, "Editors' Note," *Naked Lunch: The Restored Text*, eds. James Grauerholz and Barry Miles (London: Harper Perennial, 2005) 233-240.

of no man's land of factions fighting for control, is depicted by sexual 'deviance,' drugs, violence, and 'the Orient' representing 'the Other' which the Interzone parties attempt to expropriate. In the Interzone, arriving strangers "are escorted by a drunken cop to register in a vast public lavatory. The data taken down is put on pegs to be used as toilet paper" (*NL* 90).

Burroughs is here mocking the mechanisms of rationalism and its potential for social repression. Michel Foucault too questions the humanist tradition of understanding the world through reason and conceptualizing the subject as a rational, stable entity. He identifies humanism as enslaving of the subject: "humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts *the desire for power*: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized."[15] One proposed way of fighting this subjugation and liberating the subject's will-to-power is

> through an attack on 'culture': the suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes… the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all prohibitions that form and guide the development of a normal individual… all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature. (Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," 222)

Foucault suggests that attacking forms of social repression is the way to liberate the subject from the systematic control of society which deliberately disenfranchises its members by declaring a monopoly on power. On the terms of societal control machines, the subject can gain restricted power monitored by the system instilling and permitting these "subjected sovereignties" (Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," 221), a similar power dynamics to Bataille's necessarily collaborative economy of excess, and its manifestations as e.g. the regulated anarchy of the carnival or the self-destructive drive of transgression. Recognizing its complicity within these power dynamics is necessary for transgression to effectively violate control systems.

In the Interzone, regulations and the logic of order are parodied, and yet in "[t]he Composite City where all human potentials are spread out in a vast silent market" (*NL* 89), there is no escape from the clutches of capitalism, which here imposes on all aspects of human life. As a 'holy man' wryly quips, "*Mohammed?* Are you kidding? He was dreamed up by the Mecca Chamber of Commerce" (*NL* 96). Religions, ideologies, values, principles – they all fall under the wheels of the capitalist machine, operating incognito, covertly behind the scenes. The market in the Interzone is full of "marketeers of World War III... […] brokers

[15] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 221-222.

of exquisite dreams and nostalgias tested on the sensitized cells of junk sickness..." (*NL* 91). As already discussed in Chapter Three, the Establishment-waged war on drugs is "a pretext for the reinforcement of social repression… through the indirect exaltation of the normal, rational, conscientious, and well-adjusted individual" (Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," 226). It is an effective self-perpetuating mechanism of control, since "[j]unk is the ideal product...the ultimate merchandise... The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product" (*NL* 201). These dreams, the product of an addiction to pacifying discourse as well as drugs, are also the product of the propaganda of capitalist structures which aim to profit off of this addiction.

In *Naked Lunch*, the capitalist institutions of the Western world and their sweeping commodification that affects all is satirized in "Islam Incorporated," the umbrella crime organization functioning in the Interzone, purportedly financed by A. J. (Lee's agent colleague). The corporation's name is an obvious nod to the pervasiveness of the capitalist machine which produces profit in the name of any religion or ideology. Islam Inc. constitutes "Mullahs and Muftis and Muezzins and Caids and Glauois and Sheiks and Sultans and Holy Men and representatives of every conceivable Arab party" (*NL* 122), but it has nothing to do with the actual religion which it exploits nominally and in stereotypes of violent extremism.[16] It finances the main "parties of interzone," the control machines that want to either liquidate or subjugate Interzone's inhabitants.

Burroughs satirically attacks the Western world's ideological propaganda of exceptionalism and supremacy and mocks its obsession with demonizing the Other as grotesque and hypocritical. The routine "*Meeting of International Conference of Technological Psychiatry*" shows Doctor "Fingers" Schäfer, aka "The Lobotomy Kid," transforming a man into "a monster black centipede" at some sort of convention in order to create "The Complete All American Deanxietized Man" (*NL* 87). The hysteria that follows mirrors the Cold War rhetoric during the fifties, with a "fat, frog-faced Southern doctor" insisting on immediate annihilation: "We must stomp out the Un-American crittah… 'Fetch gasoline!' he bellows. 'We gotta burn the son of a bitch like an uppity Nigra!'" (*NL* 88). After the Frankenstein creation is destroyed, a trial reveals the identity of the man turned into the nightmarish centipede as Clarence Cowie. The District Attorney nevertheless pardons the murder as the fulfilment of a "'duty to the human race' to destroy this monster before it could,

[16] For instance, "President Ra threw the British Prime Minister to the ground and forcibly sodomized him, the spectacle being televised to the entire Arab World" (*NL* 122), reminiscent of the spectacularized public execution of the Rosenbergs in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, as well as the Nixon character subjugated by Uncle Sam at the end of the novel. (Coover 348-350).

by any means at its disposal, perpetrate its kind . . .'" (*NL* 88). This passage grotesquely distorts "the idea of the racial Other as monster [and] the racist construction of difference as a monstrosity that must be destroyed."[17] This obsession with purity (whether ethnic or bodily) and rejection of the Other is also mocked in the vignette where the teeth of the Cincinnati Anti-Fluoride Society members fall out, their motto being "Out... with the filthy foreign fluorides!" (*NL* 123).

First world problems of the Western world are satirized throughout the text, mocking the arbitrariness of socially constructed taboos and the accompanying snobbery of normative morality. The chapter "*islam incorporated and the parties of interzone*" shows the character of A.J. spiking the punch

> with a mixture of yagé, hashish and yohimbine during a Fourth of July reception at the U.S. Embassy, precipitating an orgy. Ten prominent citizens–American, of course–subsequently died of shame. Dying of shame is an accomplishment peculiar to Kwakiutl Indians and Americans–others simply say "*Zut alors*" or "*Son cosas de la vida*" or "Allah fucked me, the All Powerful . . ." (*NL* 123)

These moments of transgression vary in degree of intensity, but form a constant attack upon institutional hegemonic structures that seek control through Othering and the uniformization of acceptable behavior. One episode has A.J., a subversive force par excellence, instigating a full-scale riot at a high-end restaurant by audaciously asking for ketchup:

> Thirty gourmets stop chewing at once. You could have heard a *soufflé* drop. […] The Sommelier snarls hideously, his face turning a strange iridescent purple . . . He breaks off a bottle of Brut Champagne . . . '26 . . . […] An elderly gourmet with the insane bloodshot eyes of a mandrill is fashioning a hangman's knot with a red velvet curtain cord . . . (*NL* 124-125).

The chaos intensifies with the restaurant owner being eaten by hogs. Depicting such grotesque scenarios as possible within the limits of Western ideological institutions which assert a monopoly on morality illustrates the grotesqueness of self-proclaimed authoritative regimes.

As Foucault argues, "[r]evolutionary action… implies that we attack the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor."[18] Burroughs hyperbolizes the grotesque nature of the ideological systems as well as its controlling discourses and declared monopolies on morality, normality, acceptability. His satirical forays exploit the dissonance between tone and content, where the disinterested,

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[17] Fiona Paton, "Monstrous Rhetoric: Naked Lunch, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 52.1 (2010) 55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40755564>

[18] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 228.

clinical tone of the narrator distances itself from the grotesque, the abject it exposes. The produced effect is two-fold: fusing together horror and humor to disturb the reader. Burroughs, in his assault on institutional control, employs the grotesque "as a satirical imagery that plays on the exaggeration of certain features of its object in order to demonize or otherwise undermine it."[19] This exaggeration can be utilized not only to challenge hegemonic powers, but also by these powers themselves in enforcing their differentiation from minority or marginal groups based on Othering which justifies their authority.[20]

Naked Lunch is rife with "fence straddlers" (*NL* 74) and stories that aim to disrupt the rigidity of the imposed morality and normativity of control systems. For instance, the chapter "*A.J.'s annual party*" portrays graphic, violent sexual scenes that are obviously not meant to be read realistically as "the surrealist and staged element is stressed."[21] The scene is rendered so explicitly obscenely to highlight just how far the control mechanisms that allow this type of scene to appear in pornographic films will transgress their own limits on normativity in the name of profit. In general, Burroughs' transgressive writing that goes beyond the limits of the abject expresses the "necessity of subverting authoritarian discourse from within, of using monstrosity against itself."[22] The hypocrisy inherent to the Western world in regards to morality, "the basic American rottenness" (*NL* 112) is exposed in its mirror opposite – the grotesque distorts the familiar as a means of exposing the vice in fixed values.

The "Hospital" routine involves Burroughs' spiel on Cold War rhetoric, where an American diplomat is forced to deny the "un-American" activity of a male giving birth (seen as an act of monstrosity). The scene of the announcement, complete with American flag draped over the platform, is immediately infiltrated by subversive elements. A singer in "a Daniel Boone costume" singing the Star-Spangled Banner is replaced for being "brown" by a "sex-changed Liz athlete […] concealed in a *papier mache* Arc de Triomphe." Her costume rips as she sings a high note, revealing "The Lesbian" as "clad only in a leopard-skin jockstrap with enormous falsie basket" (*NL* 53-54). The travesty results in the Diplomat's speech disintegrating as he dies of cerebral hemorrhage.

As Burroughs points out in *Naked Lunch*, "Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference" (*NL* 179). When confronted with the subversion of hegemonic values, the reader is at least jolted into realizing

[19] Dennis McDaniel, "New World Ordure: Burroughs, Globalization and the Grotesque," *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Schneiderman, Davis and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 133.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Irwin 276.
[22] Paton 64.

the existence of a hierarchized, institutionalized illusion of binary logic: this is right, that is wrong; this is acceptable, that is unacceptable. Through satire, Burroughs attacks Western stigmatization of sex, sexual identity, and the limits of acceptability and obscenity. The author bares the body, riddled with normative discourses by the hegemony, grotesquely portraying its natural processes as obscene, to highlight the contingency of the labelling of the abject based on normative restrictions. This unsettling of rigidity is ultimately emancipatory for transgression and embodies the necessary process of producing an ongoing conflict with limits to validate its purpose.

4.4. The Reality Studio: Control Machines in Burroughs' Novels

Institutionalization embodies another tool for subjugating "unproductive"[23] individuals, those unwilling to function within the limits of capitalist values (productivity, utility, efficiency) or within the limits of social acceptability. Just like in Thompson's *Fear and Loathing*, institutional powers employ incarceration and containment as a deterrent for dissenting forces, a hegemonic trump card that is difficult to outmaneuver once played. Burroughs takes this further, hyperbolizing the destructive range and impact of institutionalization through his control machines – The Parties of Interzone, Doctor Benway, the "telepathic" bureaucratization of all aspects of life, and the "Reality Studio" in *The Nova Trilogy* – all which use extreme force to exterminate opposition and difference.

4.4.1. The Parties of Interzone

The control machines in *Naked Lunch* are represented by the three oppressive "parties of interzone," or factions – the Liquefactionists, the Divisionists, and the Senders – which attempt to homogenize society, while the Factualists offer a path of some resistance. The Divisionists desire to achieve control by cloning themselves, ultimately achieving the uniformity of society by outnumbering undesirables: "[They] cut off tiny bits of their flesh and grow exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly. …eventually there will be only one replica of one sex on the planet: that is, one person in the world with millions of separate bodies..." (*NL* 137). They enforce this imperialistic, exceptionalist tendency parallel to the Liquefactionists' agenda of eradicating the heterogeneity of the population through the annihilation of individuals, the goal being "the eventual merging of everyone into One Man by a process of protoplasmic absorption." (*NL* 123).

These two factions, but especially the Liquefactionists, demonstrate a fascist, ultraviolent agenda, while the Senders seek control of the population through one-way

[23] Jenks 136.

telepathic domination. This enslavement of its non-members (as opposed to liquidation), represents "the barrage of mass-media control technology,"[24] and the Senders' "rabid fear of any *fact*" (*NL* 136) stems from their agenda of obliterating the rational (and dissenting) thinking of their 'receivers' through brainwashing. Despite the different mechanisms of subjugation, all three parties strive to eliminate opposition and dissent through total control. The factions engage in a power play, outdoing each other in subjugation with the ultimate goal of annihilation of difference in the population, the instillment of uniformity. They take Bataille's *potlatch* symbolic show of power further in their systematic destruction of resources which turns into self-annihilation if completed. The revolutionary Factualists, on the other hand, resist this tyranny and denounce the three totalitarian factions, agents A.J. and William Lee functioning as whistleblowers. However, the Factualists' stance is mostly oppositional, offering no viable alternative apart from constant resistance. Complicity is characteristic of the factions, where distinctions between their agents are unclear: "You can never be sure of anyone in the industry" (*NL* 123).

4.4.2. Doctor Benway

Foucault describes panopticism as an efficient means to social repression, and its "threefold aspect… — supervision, control, correction— seems to be a fundamental and characteristic dimension of the power relations that exist in our society."[25] The mechanisms of punishment and compensation for submitting to discipline and mass surveillance are explored in *Naked Lunch*. Both the police force and medical facilities are implicated in *Naked Lunch* as being in the position to suppress or treat the human virus of control (addiction), while the justification of their existence depends upon preserving the virus.[26] The recurring figure of Doctor Benway, "a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control" (*NL* 19) proves that the manipulability of human behavior and desires is possible with Pavlovian practices. In Annexia, "his assignment had been T.D.— Total Demoralization" (*NL* 19) which he achieves by intensifying the bureacratization of everyday living conditions to the absurd. The resulting Orwellian atmosphere of *Brazil*-like absurdist intensity involves required identification documents stamped with vanishing ink, never-ending red tape, mass detainment, urban flora and benches removed, installed searchlights and loud buzzers that ring every fifteen minutes, bars and cafés shut down, alcohol only to be purchased with a special permit, curtains and locks

[24] Murphy 89.
[25] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2001) 70.
[26] Murphy 81.

prohibited and the police having access to all citizens' homes (*NL* 20). In an attempt to increase the efficiency of control, Benway rejects brutality as ineffective and instead champions the method of "prolonged mistreatment... […] The subject... must be made to feel that he deserves any treatment he receives because there is something (never specified) horribly wrong with him" (*NL* 19). This correlates to Mark Fisher's idea of responsibilisation discussed in Chapter One, making subjects feel guilty about external conditions and who thus blame themselves instead of (repressive) social structures.[27]

Despite rejecting brutality, Benway does also use methods to break the subject through torture, drugs, hypnosis, sexual humiliation: all part of his Pavlovian conditioning of subjects (*NL* 21-25) as "behavior modification, under the guise of science."[28] Parts of this chapter read like a pseudo-scientific tract on torture methods with the reader being referred to the Appendix (detailing drug effects) and explanatory notes being a part of the text. In charge of the Reconditioning Center in the Freeland Republic to instill the "homogeneity" (*NL* 28) of society and the discipline and obedience of subjects to social structures, the project goes terribly wrong when all R.C. patients are released into the public through a glitch in the computer system.

As agent Lee remarks, "a scene of unparalleled horror" (32) unfolds – mayhem that embodies complete transgression of existing social taboos concerning sex, violence, the abject (*NL* 32-38) – all instigated by Benway, whose task is to subjugate citizens into uniformity. Because he is a "*pure* scientist" (29), he cares only for the success of his experiments – which arguably have "absolutely no medical value" (*NL* 52) – in the name of "[d]isinterested research" (*NL* 110) and not the potential moral and social consequences. The obscene, graphic depictions of the (often hyperbolic) transgressions at the end of the "Benway" routine serve as a censure of Othering in the name of normativity that Western social and cultural structures impose upon subjects, as it is revealed that amidst the pandemonium are not only mentally ill patients, but also foreigners:[29] "Amoks trot along cutting heads… [...] Arab rioters yip and howl, castrating, disembowelling, throw burning gasoline… [...] Kwakuitl Cannibal Society initiates bite off noses and ears… (*NL* 32-33).

[27] Mark Fisher, "Good for Nothing," *The Occupied Times*, Mar. 19 2014, May 20 2017, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>
[28] Murphy 83.
[29] Ibid.

4.4.3. Burroughs and Bureaus

Kafkaesque bureaucracy, most poignantly manifested in the "Benway" chapter, is another control organ that Burroughs identifies in *Naked Lunch*. Equating this agent of the control machine to cancer in a democracy, the author postulates:

> A bureau operates on [the] principle of inventing needs to justify its existence... Bureaucracy is... a turning away from the human evolutionary direction of infinite potentials and differentiation and independent spontaneous action, to the complete parasitism of a virus. […] Bureaus die when the structure of the state collapses. They are as helpless and unfit for independent existences as a displaced tapeworm, or a virus that has killed the host. (*NL* 112-113)

Whether total anarchy is thus the desired denouement is unclear, as descriptions of rupturing the control of social structures in the novel seem to represent deconstructive (and self-destructive) consequences rather than a productive way out. As a possible alternative to this sometimes deadly chaos, Burroughs claims the potential of cooperatives which create independent units to meet its members' needs (*NL* 112) as opposed to "Telepathic Bureaucracies" (*NL* 181) and the control of "bureaucrats of spectral departments, officials of unconstituted police states" (*NL* 91).

In the last chapter, agent Lee is to be arrested by O'Brien and Hauser, agents of the Narcotic Department. He escapes after killing them and later calls the Department to find out if an investigation of their agents' murders is taking place. The bureau denies the existence of the two, and Lee realizes he is now free, "occluded from space-time… Locked out… Never again would I have… a Point of Intersection…" (*NL* 181). Figuratively speaking, by completing the transgression, by cutting out the agents of control from his existence, Lee is thrown outside of the limits of language into the realm of limitlessness. Language, in light of its self-referentiality that contains (subjugates) expression, becomes a limitation for subjects and denotes "a state of permanent rupture in their speech."[30] But without limits, the subject can no longer transgress. They are no longer confined by boundaries, but without these boundaries, there is no power dynamics; instead of the permanent crisis that enables transgression, an incapacitating stasis is achieved. By ending the power play, William Lee now stands in non-contextual isolation, removed from the equation of interdependency, the controlling limitations of language, but "[t]o step wilfully outside of these modalities is to elude meaning."[31] Refusing to interact with the system and rupturing the push-and-pull of

[30] Donald Bouchard, "Introduction," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* [of Michel Foucault], ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 21.
[31] Jenks 45.

power dynamics means that Lee no longer has "a Point of Intersection" with the reality of this system of control.

The purpose of *Naked Lunch* can be regarded as launching an offensive on control mechanisms in society that individuals internalize and willingly disseminate, portraying this parasitic symbiosis as a force that must be resisted. Conclusive solutions, however, are impossible, as any resistance necessarily functions within the system of control it opposes, and a productive alternative would have to function outside this system. To embody its purpose, the transgressive drive must be kept alive through a continual assault on the limits; completion is not an option, and neither is the denial of limits. Burroughs regards control as an addiction for which, according to the authority of medicine, the "'Treatment is symptomatic'—which means in the trade there is none" (*NL* 37). Burroughs opposes this passive treatment of control as mitigation of its symptoms, and instead chooses to penetrate to the underlying causes through radical incision. There is subversive potential in transgressive writing which directly attacks these institutions of control structurally. *Naked Lunch* prefigures this mode of resistance which Burroughs implements most visibly in *The Nova Trilogy* through the cut-up technique.

4.4.4. *The Nova Trilogy*

Burroughs depicts agents of control through various metaphors in the *Nova* texts: vampiric characters and institutions who feed on subjects and possess a self-perpetuating dependency for replenishing their source of vitality; control as addiction, expressed as the 'algebra of need'; and most importantly, language functioning as a virus that controls its human host through embedding and appropriating discourses.[32] Both the virus control mechanisms and the agents of dissent function in a space of liminality, mutually infecting and transgressing the other. All these interdependent concepts of control function through "The Reality Studio" (*NE* 189) of the *Nova* novels and mirror the control factions in *Naked Lunch*. The way to counter these regimes of control is by infiltrating their language through *détournement* cut-ups.

The premise of Burroughs' *Nova* trilogy is represented by the "Nova Conspiracy" of alien "Nova Criminals" who parasite on humans and stoke their addiction to language (meaning) in order to fulfill their own addiction to control. These vampire entities base and perpetuate their dominion through ideological propaganda of state power structures, disseminated by mass media and subversive control operatives, and the only way to break free

[32] Dolan 535-536.

of their influence is to confront and reveal the Reality Studio "as a nexus of control, enslavement, and dependence."[33] The reader learns of this reign non-linearly, as the form of the novels itself is already engaged in assaulting the control machine put in place by the Nova aliens through cut-up and deliberate signal jamming and short-circuiting of the official master narrative.

The message of resistance is articulated in *The Soft Machine* as follows: "Prisoners of the earth, come out […] Storm the Reality Studio and retake the universe […] Calling partisans of all nations—Shift linguals—Cut word lines—Vibrate tourists—Free doorways—Photo falling—Word falling…" (*TSM* 151-152). This passage embodies the program intended and directly implemented by infiltrating the power structures of the "boards syndicates and governments of the earth" (*NE* 185). These all-powerful institutions "are serving The Garden of Delights Immortality Cosmic Consciousness The Best Ever in Drug Kicks" (*NE* 187) which agent Lee denounces while questioning the inferred monopoly on immortality and other abstract ideas: "Love Sex and Dream? Who monopolized Life Time and Fortune?" (*NE* 187).

4.5. "Nothing is True—Everything is Permitted—"[34]

Burroughs' attack on the Reality Studio's repression schemes of totalizing discourse and means of subjugation inevitably functions within the struggle for the control of language. The subject as addict to the language system is colonized by the language virus and attempts to break free of the imposed restrictions. This addiction to language, paralleled in Burroughs' texts to drug addiction, both effective measures of social subjugation, has become so internalized that it embodies the subjectivity of the individual. The language addict cannot fully break away from the system of language within which his addiction operates. While Burroughs suggests alternative means of communication (telepathy, non-verbal pictorial-based language) for the subject, their functionality and effectiveness are delegated to the yet inapplicable realms of futuristic nostalgia.[35]

In the aftermath of exploding the fictions of the control machines *through* language, no matter how cut up, what is left standing if not language itself? The cut-up assault on language requires the necessary acknowledgement of the limits of language in order to challenge it, thereby functioning on its terms, never escaping the contamination of the

[33] Dolan 538.
[34] Burroughs, *Nova Express* 331.
[35] Jason Morelyle, "Speculating Freedom: Addiction, Control and Rescriptive Subjectivity in the Work of William S. Burroughs," *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization*, eds. Schneiderman, Davis and Philip Walsh (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 75-76.

language virus. This fuels Burroughs' projected longing to escape its control, to exist in a tabula rasa space (literally the cosmos) free from history, ideology, and language: "In you I cancel all your words forever / You cannot take words with you into space."[36] This nostalgic, and arguably "quintessentially American"[37] desire to conquer the final frontier which offers unknown possibilities of freedom paradoxically grounds Burroughs within an American tradition, no matter how dissenting the author's intentions may be. His texts offer no conclusion, no redemptive solution, only permanent crisis in the symbiotic relationship of language-host, control machine-subject.

Nevertheless, Burroughs' subversive writing techniques are effective in what he sets out to do, which is to induce that "frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork,"[38] exposing the systems of control and addiction within society, and instead of the superimposed illusion of chronology, rationalizing logic, and narrative order, revealing the montage-like simultaneity, not linearity, of experience. Having exposed language as a control mechanism exploited by power-driven institutions, Burroughs fights back against the system by cutting up its own language. The cut-up method jams and scrambles these signals (of ideological propaganda, populistic rhetoric, deliberately obfuscating discourse requiring a re-assertion of order by the institutional powers to anaesthetize fear and subjugate its subjects). It does so both in the open and subliminally with the intent to infect the system, to exploit its recurrent power-asserting principle of expropriation by forcing it to re-absorb its own language, now contaminated through the cut-up with dissenting meanings. The question remains whether this infiltration alone can produce the disintegration of the control machines identified by Burroughs, remaining as it does within the addiction to the language virus, merely manipulating its course, and whether that is the point. Any viable overhaul of the system is predisposed to becoming the new status quo, the new interim order within the oscillating, self-perpetuating power dynamics of transgression-limit.

[36] William S. Burroughs, "Last Words of Hassan Sabbah," from *Nothing Here Now But the Recordings* (Kansas City: Industrial Records, 1981), transcript, *IGN*, 11 Sep. 2009, 14 Dec 2016, <http://www.ign.com/boards/threads/last-words-of-hassan-sabbah.184958373/>
[37] Dolan 548.
[38] Burroughs, "Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness," *Naked Lunch* 199.

Chapter Five – Kathy Acker's Forbidden Language in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988)

In *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), Kathy Acker's attack on the institutions of power identifies their control mechanisms in capitalism, rationality, authorship, and patriarchal systems of representation. These are transgressed by her implemented discourse of the forbidden, that is, the explicit expression of taboos, and the re-inscription of the female voice into literary tradition (existing canonical texts). Rationality is defied by the novel's deliberately inconsistent plotline, unpredictable plot development, and non-linear narrative, offering little reassurance regarding where the story could be heading. It does not operate under the logic of rationality, and the reader has to navigate through the residue "anarchy in [the] drunken wakes"[1] of the protagonists to actively piece together meaning. Abhor (a mixed-race part-cyborg) and Thivai (her drug-addict pirate partner) are the only consistently recurring characters (apart from Abhor's father, tellingly) who relate their family history of violence and incest throughout the novel. They become wandering terrorists, assuming various identities in socially outcast communities of hackers, pirates, biker gangs, anarchists, and take turns relaying the post-apocalyptic, post-revolutionary cityscape of Paris in ruins after it has been taken over by dispossessed Algerians. The characters' identities fluctuate and often transform quite unpredictably, not contingent on circumstances, and their voices, which fade in and out of the narrative, recount and interpret memories or previously narrated experiences differently.

The structure of *Empire* reveals the progression of Acker's strategy of dissent from deconstructive to utopian to compromisingly constructive. Part I, "Elegy for the World of the Fathers," depicts a patriarchal society "defined by the oedipal taboo."[2] Taboos are rendered explicitly into words, and the narrative involves the desire to "kill the father on every level"[3] (and all its variations in master, authoritative figures and mechanisms). Part II, "Alone," pictures an anti-phallogocentric society where taboos regarded by a patriarchal society are no longer taboos; they are explicitly expressed, transgressed, enacted. However, Part III, "Pirate Night," admits the impossibility of having a functioning society without taboos. These three

[1] Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (New York: Grove Press, 1988) 113. Referred to as *ES* in all subsequent in-text citations.
[2] Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (Fall 1989) 35. All subsequent citations are from this edition.
[3] Ellen G. Friedman, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9.3 (Fall 1989), <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-kathy-acker-by-ellen-g-friedman>.

sections perform a speculative fiction scenario where Acker's theories are translated into practice to discover their (im)plausibility: the identification of Western taboos, the attempt to create a post-Oedipal society, and the realization of its impossibility present the framework within which Acker attacks stigmatizing patriarchal discourse.

5.1. Anti-Oedipal Subversion of Patriarchal Representation

In "A Preface to Transgression" (1980), Michel Foucault remarks that in modern society, with God dead, transgression now represents the source of profanation, and sexuality "the only [source of] division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings, and spaces to desecrate."[4] In this secular world, sexuality becomes the principal subject of taboos and stigmatization – and therefore a tool of social repression. Part I, "Elegy for the World of the Fathers," shows Abhor's childhood and adolescence dominated by the restrictive force of the Oedipal complex in the form of her father. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari criticize the Freudian Oedipal complex as a forced, dogmatic myth in psychoanalysis which "makes Oedipus into a referential axis not only for the pre-oedipal phases, but also for the para-oedipal varieties, and the exo-oedipal phenomena."[5] Foucault sees in Oedipus

> not a truth of nature, but an instrument of limitation and constraint… use[d] to contain desire and insert it within a family structure... Oedipus… is not the secret content of our unconscious, but [...] an instrument of power, a certain manner by which medical and psychoanalytic power is brought to bear on desire and the unconscious.[6]

Continuing the post-structuralist deconstruction of formative myths, in Part II, Acker attempts to destabilize the Oedipal complex as "a despotic signifier"[7] of the domination and repression of desires and the production of neuroses, a marker of capitalist society.[8]

In Part I – "Elegy for the World of the Fathers" – Thivai narrates Abhor's childhood, speaking *for* the character through her first-person voice, as female expression is suppressed and mediated through patriarchal representation. As a teenager, Abhor is involved in an incestual relationship with her father, locked into the dualistic Oedipal trope (and taboo) of patriarchal society. After Abhor is raped by her father, she maintains that "[p]art of me

[4] Michel Foucault, "A Preface to Transgression," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 30.
[5] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "The Imperialism of Oedipus," *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 52.
[6] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001) 16.
[7] Deleuze and Guattari 54.
[8] Deleuze and Guattari 80.

wanted him and part of me wanted to kill him" (*ES* 12), voicing both the taboo of incest and the taboo of patricide, both "submission (desire) and revolt (hatred)."[9] Abhor's desire both embodies the Oedipus myth and the general dynamics of power struggle (acceptance-rejection, submission-domination). The daughter is conceptualized as the father's creation, something he produced and assumed possession of – "By him. His" (*ES* 9), the mother exiled from any source of power. The daughter, created in the image of her father who denies her difference, reflects the father subject's perception of the Other as "only the mirror-image of the self."[10] Her identity is wholly dependent on his existence and will. After rejecting this relationship and fixed identity, escaping from it and becoming a nomad, Abhor's discovery of her identity transforms into a constant process of becoming, a fluctuation and adapting of different roles.

The focus of Part I, the total domination of the female subject within the realm of "the iron collar of Oedipus,"[11] highlights the realm of the "public fake sex" of live sex-shows that the father attends, where "the primal urge of sex had become a revolting phenomenon" (*ES* 17) and where

> language was degraded… his speech turned from the usual neutral and acceptable journalese most normal humans use as a stylus mediocris into . . . His language went through an indoctrination of nothingness, for sexuality had no more value in his world, until his language no longer had sense. Lack of meaning appeared as linguistic degradation. (*ES* 17).

Acker's writing on pornography marks the recuperation of sex "from the orgy of consumerism,"[12] where sex is emptied of its transgressive drive, retaining value only as commodity. In pornography, sex comes to represent a regulated transgression, acted out not for the sake of desire, but for the sake of economic profit. The simultaneous pleasure and anguish inherent to transgression (joy in exceeding the limits, anguish in realizing the force of limits) cannot function in pornography which embodies *staged* sex, simulated transgression, spectacularization of the real act, emptied of substance, now a mere representation of "that [which] was directly lived."[13] Following his visits to the sex shows, the father's language disintegrates when having sex with Abhor into disjointed traces of Portuguese that make no sense (*ES* 17). The disintegration of patriarchal language is bolstered by Acker's anti-Oedipal

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[9] David Vichnar, "Disruption Necessary for Business: Kathy Acker's Terrorist Aesthetics," *Pornoterrorism* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2015) 91.
[10] Nicola Pitchford, *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2002) 95.
[11] Deleuze and Guattari 53.
[12] D. J. Huppatz, "Corporeal Poetics: Kathy Acker's Writing," *Contemporary Poetics*, ed. Louis Armand (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007) 115.
[13] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005) 7.

use of plagiaristic appropriation and collage, "a system of writing that denies paternity, asserting – in the violent act of decoupage that inaugurates it – a castrating prerogative over the texts constituting official culture… it is impossible to know who has fathered it."[14]

5.2. Appropriation, Plagiarism, Re-Contextualization

Unlike Coover's consistently thorough citing of appropriated historic texts in *The Public Burning*, executed to create the dichotomic effect of historical accuracy and hyperreality, Acker does not acknowledge her appropriation of existing texts *within* her fiction, amounting to plagiarism – and yet as an author she openly speaks about the practice and identifies the specific works plagiarized. This deliberate obfuscation works in harmony with her anti-copyright approach to language and writing. According to Acker, words do not belong to anyone, and the writer's response to existing texts is to (re-)use them, not to cite or merely write about them. Authorship and originality stem from an egotistic claim to language embedded within a patriarchal possessiveness (Acker, "A Few Notes," 33) and Acker deconstructs these concepts of creativity by proposing an alternative to the ownership of words: "you can make, but you don't create" (Acker, "A Few Notes," 34), profaning the cult of the author. She eradicates the concept of copyright and instills the common domain of words. In effect, Acker's pirating and hijacking of existing texts incorporates the postmodern drive to give voice to marginalized, silenced discourses by inserting them into the newly arranged texts. Acker's *détournement* inscription of the female voice into texts of the male-dominated literary canon can also be regarded as a manifestation of Hélène Cixous's call for "[w]oman [to] put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement,"[15] furthering the author's anti-Oedipal agenda of destabilizing patriarchal myths. This interpolation comes to full fruition in Acker's novels *Great Expectations* (1982) – a re-telling of Charles Dickens' classic novel – and *Don Quixote* (1986), which transposes the gender of the protagonist, the now female Quixote embarking on a quest through various cities.

Acker acknowledges in "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" (1989) that she plagiarizes parts of William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) in *Empire*, and the final section of her novel borrows the plot structure of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885).[16] The latter appropriation is immediately recognizable in Thivai assuming the role of

[14] Rob Latham, "Collage as Critique and Invention in the Fiction of William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 5.3 (1993) 50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308163>
[15] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976) 875. <www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>. All subsequent in-text citations are from this edition.
[16] Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" 36.

Huck and Abhor the role of Jim, being put in jail and Thivai planning to rescue her. However, the plot is rendered (or regurgitated) through the prism of sexism (instead of the racism in Twain's novel), as it was Thivai who arranged for Abhor to be imprisoned in the first place so that he could act out the role of rescuer of damsel in distress. Thivai's hidden motive of this deliberate trap serves to justify his upper hand over Abhor, and Abhor has to escape from this controlling mechanism herself to gain freedom by becoming a biker, discarding *The Highway Code* rulebook, and creating her own rules instead (this act of merely replacing a framework of limitation with an alternative one foreshadowing the resignation to the inescapability from language). Finally, Abhor implements the "need [for women] to become literary 'criminals,' break the literary laws"[17] that have systematically silenced their expression, instead of continuing to function within a tradition that has excluded them.

This demand for "*new insurgent* writing" that would allow women to express their bodies and desires is the focus of Cixous' feminist tract "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), which identifies the inferiorization of the female gender through the patriarchal system that controls the expression of female identity. Cixous suggests that women cannot openly express their needs and desires, stigmatized by the patriarchal code, and must therefore fight against subjugation by identifying this ostracizing discourse and creating an alternative discourse, *l'écriture féminine*, that allows them the freedom to write as subjects, not (Othered) objects. It involves inscribing the female voice, but also, importantly, the female body, into language distancing itself from the phallogocentrism and rationalism of the patriarchal symbolic order.[18] Paradoxically, a kind of essentialism and exclusion arises in Cixous' focus on female writing, where sovereignty is forcibly bound to gender in that "woman must write woman. And man, man" (Cixous 877). Narrowing this new mode of writing to be determined exclusively by the female gender creates a bond (or perhaps more accurately, bind) between individuals whose only identifiable commonality can be precisely this gender, entailing a potentially dangerous erasure of differences (of race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexuality, ability, etc.) and an artificially maintained solidarity.

Cixous' call to dismantle patriarchal language arguably still relies upon the adversarial, essentialist, *binary* oppositionality between man-woman by differentiating between masculine/feminine writing, championing a "woman's style" (Cixous 882). It thus assumes that gender has definable limits and identifiable, recurring characteristics in

[17] Larry McCaffery, "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk' Aesthetics," *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, eds. Ellen G. Friedman, Miriam Fuchs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 218. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7ztv41.18>
[18] Cixous 875-880.

feminine/masculine oppositionality, and that there is such a thing as a distinctly gendered voice (Cixous 881-882). Acker identifiably inserts the female voice into history and literature by means of re-writing canonical texts, employing Cixous' urgency to make the female voice heard, but at the same time, Acker's texts reject the gender dichotomy (as they do with any dichotomic concepts) along with the notion of gendered writing and gender as anything other than a social construct.[19] Her transgressive agenda exceeds that of gender binaries and deconstructs oppositionality inherent to a rational understanding of the world, functioning more in the realm of Judith Butler's performativity as defining concept of gender identity,[20] exploring the liminality of transgression-limit, and attacking the social structures that perpetuate their control through the enforcement of normative discourse.

In Part III of *Empire*, Acker here re-works – or samples – a prototypical classical novel of the male-dominated literary canon, a Great American Novel at that, in order to give expression to the marginalized female voice, contrary to the patriarchal notion that "writing is at once too high, too great for [women], …reserved for the great – that is, for 'great men.'"[21] She juxtaposes this fight against omission with the social pariah status of black Americans in American society, mirroring the episode in *Huckleberry Finn* where Jim's struggle to survive is romanticized by his dangerously oblivious friend Huck who views Jim's imprisonment as one big exciting adventure. By re-writing the literary tropes and traditional stories of the (largely) male-constructed canon, Acker fights against the patriarchal master-slave narrative that prescribes heteronormative restrictions and silences any discourses that threaten its formative authority.

Acker's program here is to utilize the "potential for contradiction among the utterances of authority"[22] through the re-contextualization of existing texts carrying socially-rendered connotations. Authorship – the ownership of words – represents another power structure that has the potential to silence or manipulate (Acker, "A Few Notes," 33). By rupturing the original placement of the texts and juxtaposing them with other images that further the potential for a conflicting reading, this appropriation paradoxically works *against* the appropriative methods of the hegemony. However, challenging "rationalism, the reigning logic of capitalism"[23] with an irrational, rupturing expression of experience does not escape the ultimate absorption by the control mechanisms of institutional powers, which prove well-capable of taking advantage even of this irrational expression, just like the chapter "Let the

[19] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 1-2.
[20] Butler 20.
[21] Cixous 876.
[22] Pitchford 17.
[23] Pitchford 17.

Algerians take over Paris" in Part II shows the CIA extending its sphere of influence into post-revolutionary Paris, effectively usurping the revolution aimed against the power structures within which the agency operates.

The incorporation of canonized works into Acker's own texts represents a direct attack on the Culture Industry which turns works of art into marketable, profitable products. Her re-appropriation strips the texts recognized as meritorious by the literary Establishment of their status (or product label) of Literature,[24] and exposes the contradictions that arise in an alternative interpretation by being re-positioned into an unfamiliar, unsettling context, continuing in the vein of the Situationist *détournement* practice which alienates the original sense through "[t]he integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu."[25] The aim is to free images, symbols, and words of their socially attributed meanings and connotations, but even this liberation can and is recuperated by the Establishment to keep the dynamics of power (subversion – hegemony) in motion.

5.3. Anti-Systemic Transgression of Control Mechanisms: Punk Aesthetics, Aesthetic Terrorism, Language of the Powerless

Both Burroughs and Acker shared a paranoid vision of institutional control (machines) that imposes upon the individual. This manifests in their texts through grotesque and exaggerated depictions of the already grotesque, depraved reach and encroachment of these power structures onto conformist and nonconformist subjects alike. Acker was inspired by Burroughs' use of the cut-up method in her own attempts to attack institutionalized control, calling his writing "immediate" and of "the other tradition… the nonacceptable literary tradition" (Acker, "A Few Notes," 31). The common punk aesthetics in both iconoclasts' works manifest in exploring the effect (and consequences) of revolution, the inversion of hierarchized social values (so "the bad and the ugly" of everyday life is highlighted and "the good" and the beautiful is ignored), and "the elevation of crime and perversity into art."[26] The anti-elitist unrestrained assault on "the traditions and language of Great Art" implicated within the same system that proliferates the capitalist values of "profit and reason at the expense of human needs and feelings" makes use of "primitivism, noise, cut-up methods,

[24] Louis Armand, "LUMPENPROLETARIAT: WRITING ATTACK | ANTISYSTEM | SUBLITERATURE," *Videology 2* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2017) 185.
[25] "Definitions," *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June 1958), ed. Guy Debord, trans. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Online*, 20 June 2017, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline///si/definitions.html>
[26] McCaffery 220.

perceptual alterations, and a celebration of the perverse and forbidden—all this designed to subvert the usual ways meaning could be transferred."[27]

Continuing the anti-humanist strain that rejects the monopoly of reason in the understanding of the world and in the conceptualization of the subject as a stable, fixed identity, Acker views rationality as a key controlling mechanism of hegemonic rule (and its employed language), and asserts the necessity to fight it on the linguistic level:

> Reason which always homogenizes and reduces, represses and unifies phenomena or actuality into what can be perceived and so controlled. The subjects, us, are now stable and socializable. Reason is always in the service of the political and economic masters. It is here that literature strikes... Literature is that which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified. (*ES* 12)

Embodying Foucault's call to revolutionary action, Acker "attack[s] the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor."[28] Irrationality can serve as a subversive practice employed against rationalism, but can also descend into incomprehension, non-sense (on a linguistic level) or insanity and total destruction (on a thematic level). At the same time, Acker mocks the hegemony of logic and rationality as a universal solvent when Abhor purports she "shall now by means of [her] profound rational processes find the explanation for [her] madness, and human socially unacceptable behavior" (*ES* 30). When exploring her subjective mode of expression, Abhor draws down pictorial signs that "came to [her] for no reason at all and so it all had to be true" (*ES* 221), embodying an anti-rational stance in the Romanticist vein of "authentic self."[29] While Acker depicts an unjust world, the narrative voice nevertheless betrays an expectation of (and desire for) social justice. This humanist desire for fair, decent treatment contradicts the postmodern skepticism towards institutions and systems of power.

Acker posits the unconscious as the only possible realm free of control and regards it as "our only defense against institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement, prison" (*ES* 133). Thivai describes the tension between his unconscious desires and social subjugation in Part I, chapter 2, "Raise Us From the Dead":

> now I did whatever I was told because I was no longer me. That is, the I who was acting was theirs, separate from the I who knew and whom I had known. Lots of eyes were watching me. […] …since the I who desired and the eye who

[27] McCaffery 220.
[28] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 228.
[29] Kathryn Hume, "Voice in Kathy Acker's Fiction," *Contemporary Literature* 42.3 (Autumn 2001) 507. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208993>

> perceived had nothing to do with each other and at the same time existed in the same body – mine: I was not possible. (*ES* 33)

The "I who desired" is silenced and devalued by patriarchal language, but this does not signify its non-existence. A possible way of reconciling this contradiction arises from Acker implementing her "forbidden" language of voicing taboos that communicates unconscious desires unencumbered by social normative restrictions. This can be linked to the Surrealist urge to eliminate the influence of the superego, transgressing its limits and those of rationality. Creation would thus "occur directly from dreams, the unconscious, free-association of ideas, desire, the *id* – a primal human source before the uniformity of thought style, cognition, logic, dialectics, that is *reason*, had occurred."[30]

Acker's "forbidden" language fights against this social order based on repression of desire. In a Freudian sense, transgressing taboos poses a threat to society due to their contagious character. If a transgressor were to gratify a repressed desire without repercussions, this could warrant temptation (and gratification of this desire) in the community. By punishing the perpetrator, order (based on repression, prevention, and prohibition) is restored within society where all members must contend with these repressed impulses to maintain a functioning system.[31] However, transgression and taboos are contingent upon each other; their interaction asserts the social order: "The transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends it and completes it."[32] Bataille points out that hegemonic power structures transgress their own rules and restrictions in order to assert the efficacy of these limits (taboos). These limitations are not founded on rationality in opposition to violence: "the nature of the taboo... makes a world of calm reason possible but is itself basically a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is."[33] Bataille further explicates this overlapping of power mechanisms complicit within the very taboos they enforce: "If the opposition did not itself draw upon violence in some way, if some violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits authoritatively enough."[34] Taboos are thus not rational, but they function as a tool of rationality that structures the social order, the "world of reason"[35] grounded in the prohibition of desires.

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[30] Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003) 156-157.
[31] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950) 71-72.
[32] Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001) 63.
[33] Bataille, *Eroticism* 64.
[34] Bataille, *Eroticism* 63-64.
[35] Bataille, *Eroticism* 63.

The deliberate, explicit crudeness and obscenity in *Empire* manifests as a "freed" expression of taboo content. In their nomadic wandering, Abhor and Thivai encounter pirates, mavericks, outcasts, terrorists, and "[t]he Algerians, [who] in their carnivals, embraced nonsense, such as Voodoo, and noise" (*ES* 73). The ceaseless viscerality and abrasiveness of Acker's writing performs the "sheering [of] linguistic clutter to an emotional core"[36] and forcibly shocks the readers into a continuous awareness of power structures that provoke such an aggressive reaction. Acker's intense, straightforward mode of expression communicates, not represents or describes, experience on a desired instinctual, not rational, level. To be expected, then, the text is void of lengthy, flowery descriptions, but also of descriptions necessary for the rationalization of contextual meaning. *Empire* provides a minimum of explanatory passages to encumber the montage-like narrative of jump-cut scenes. The unconnected juxtaposition of unrelated images and unexplained (and inexplicable) shifts within the "plot" challenge logicality, embodying the fragmentary, arbitrary (dis)order of things.

Like Burroughs, Acker's montage style of writing emulates the near-schizophrenic experience of life in a world dominated by marketing overload where one's perception of it are choppy, fragmented, unconnected, nonsensical and non-rational scenes of "noise" that defy any sort of logic of linearity – where meaning is constructed and attributed retrospectively. Acker attacks this in *Empire* through aesthetic terrorism: "[i]n such a world which was non-reality terrorism made a lot of sense" (*ES* 35). This terrorism, whose "most apparent intention is to destroy the sense of safety and order on which societies fundamentally rely,"[37] is enacted in *Empire* on the level of content and form. In the novel, Algerian terrorists (the dispossessed outsiders rejected by societal institutions in power) start a revolution during which they occupy and take control of Paris on par with Abhor's remark that "revolutions usually begin by terrorism" (*ES* 75), and Acker enacts her own linguistic revolution against reductive, totalizing language exploited by institutional control mechanisms – anesthetization (or on the other hand hysterization) via media, news coverage, governmental rhetoric, the CIA (a powerful subversive entity), and normalized patriarchal discourse.

Acker thus blasts apart this monopolizing empire of meaning, following Burroughs' lead by assaulting conventional narrative form, genre distinctions, and form of representation with a montage, cut-up style and sabotage of official discourses and jargon. However, while "[t]en years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language

[36] Christina Milletti, "Violent Acts, Volatile Words: Kathy Acker's Terrorist Aesthetic," *Studies in the Novel* 36.3 (2004) 364. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20831901>
[37] Milletti 367.

which normalizes by cutting that language," (Acker here directly acknowledging the pioneering influence of Burroughs' cut-up experimentation), ultimately "this nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the normalizing institutions. [...] Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes..." (*ES* 134). In other words, cutting up the language of power does not render that language powerless, but implicates this act of transgression within the transgressed system of representation. Despite creating an alternative mode of expression, Acker's insurgent writing (as any writing) remains complicit within the control system of language. In light of this realization, how then does Acker intend her revolution on "the prisons of meaning" (*ES* 134) to be effective?

The key lies in "speaking precisely that which the codes [of language] forbid" that ultimately "breaks the codes" (*ES* 134). A new form of communication is needed, a "language of the 'unconscious'" (*ES* 134) that expresses taboos, the unacceptable, the forbidden; a language disregarding Western social conventions of purported ideological and moral consensus. At the same time, though, the idea of this new language is already inherently implicated within the necessity of recognition and acceptance without which it cannot function or have any impact. Nevertheless, voicing social taboos and offensive subject-matter (the offensiveness relative) graphically, exposing their viscera, are acts of violence against the Empire, systems of representation monopolized by the Western world that regards non-Western societies, cultures, and values as radically Other.

Acker also assaults this oppositionality by interspersing the dominating English text with Persian script from the subchapter "A Degenerating Language" in Part I and onwards. After all, "for Westerners today… the other is now Muslim" (Acker, "A Few Notes," 35), and the Algerians that overthrow the French government during the anarchic revolution come to signify the colonial Other.[38] Sometimes translated (or bi-lingual with English), but often without translation, the Persian represents "[a] sign of nothing" (*ES* 53) and the Other to the common Western reader,[39] disrupting the dominance of the English language in the creation of meaning. This terrorism on both a linguistic and thematic level intends to assault Western imperialism and colonization of representation by rationalism. The anarchic principle of personal freedom can be productive (rather than the destructive drive of the oppressed under authoritarian control, as depicted in the overthrow of Paris), but only if it recognizes its complicity within the controlling systems that it opposes. This accountability of being part of the "dreaded" system's mechanisms of control (tradition, rationality, hierarchy, language) can

[38] Vichnar 92.
[39] Pitchford 96.

induce a productive symbiosis, allowing both transgressive acts and hegemonic rule to perpetuate (and justify) their existence by sustaining the required push-pull momentum.

The process of naming begets the process of control through the language of oppositional (binary) differentiation that both Burroughs and Acker purportedly reject. However, their texts reveal their agendas to be complicit within this "us & them" Othering as well. Their attempt to destroy this binary oppositionality is a Sisyphean task, as all languages (whether non-pictorial or pictorial) operate upon such logic of hierarchical division and order.[40] The ubiquitous dynamics of power – subordination and domination – self-perpetuate even in attempted transgressive writing. Subverting mechanisms of control (whether patriarchal language, the capitalist hegemony, the representational monopoly of advertising and mainstream media, or social constructs of taboos and normativity) operates upon the desire to be recognized as valid and effective by these very hegemonic power structures. Without this desire, transgression as a principle could not exist, and paradoxically, it loses its subversive force precisely by being acknowledged and appropriated by institutional powers.

5.4. The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

Part II, "Alone," covers the revolution in Paris which is taken over by Algerian terrorists and Abhor and Thivai are separated. Thivai's narrative involves manifestations of taboos (rape, incest, child prostitution) and socially (still) controversial notions (like homosexuality, interracial and intergenerational sex) in his pirate ventures. The revolution,[41] aimed at overthrowing the institutions of societal oppression, is acknowledged by Abhor as "insufficient" and "anachronistic in the postmodern world"[42] where the hegemonic power dynamics of master-slave, represented by the patriarchy in the overthrow of Paris, have been replaced by capitalist structures that assume the same position of power. Additionally, the reach of globalizing capitalism is more widespread, diffused, and more difficult to effectively transgress due to its inhuman, indifferent status of machine: "My father's no longer important cause interpersonal power in this world means corporate power. The multinationals along with their computers have changed and are changing reality. Viewed as organisms, they've attained immortality via bio-chips. Etc." (*ES* 83).

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[40] Edward S. Robinson, *Shift Linguals: Cut-Up Narratives from William S. Burroughs to the Present* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011) 176.

[41] Not only is this revolution an allusion to the actual Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) fought against French dominion, the fictionalized Algerian occupation of Paris also mirrors the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) where slaves fought French colonial rule and created their own sovereign state. Franklin W. Knight, "The Haitian Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 105.1 (2000): 103-115. <www.jstor.org/stable/2652438>.

[42] Pitchford 97.

Paris, in post-revolutionary shambles, is rebuilt by multinational corporations (the CIA, a subversive, capitalist underground force in the vanguard of this restoration) despite the fall of government, exposing their independence of national organizational structures. Corporations are supranational powers that have the immense advantage of their existence depending on the supply-and-demand principle, ceaseless in the age of hyper-consumerism (of not only commodities, but experience through these commodities). The hegemony of the Western world operates on the premise that "[m]oney is a kind of citizenship. Americans are world citizens" (*ES* 39) that can buy their way into anything and anywhere. While revolutions, destructive in their "criminal" (*ES* 114), violent nature, can become productive of a re-building, re-placement of overthrown hegemony, they signify a transformation from transgressive drive (overthrowing the old order) to self-destructive annihilation of purpose (installation of a new order).

After the Algerians take over Paris, a third of the city in ashes, Abhor realizes that "[o]nce [she] had had enough of working for bosses. Now I had had enough of [wandering through] nothing" (*ES* 81-81). Total control versus total chaos share the common pole of extremity, and either "[r]eality is enough to make you crazy" (*ES* 86). After the collapse of the Parisian government, the CIA infiltrates the sex clubs in Paris to forcibly test the effects of LSD on unsuspecting customers, many of whom die of overdose. The American control agency tortures and lobotomizes these "johns," asserting their power in the midst of anarchy (which had supposedly rid these controlling mechanisms of power). Everything is a business in capitalism, and the CIA manages to commodify (and infiltrate) even an anarchic revolution.

The parasitic CIA, "[w]ho descended into nihilism, who descended deeper than nihilism into the grey of yuppie life (the worship of commodities, the belief that there is nothing left but commodities, who turn to the surfaces of class race money for reality, who despise taboo)…"[43] (*ES* 147), represent power more effectively than "any definable figure such as a father or a state government."[44] Power structures function not always blatantly, but more often than not subversively through underground, transgressive networks of their own. This shows the inevitable failure of "toppling" the system – it will always rebuild itself by absorbing the revolution and any transgressive acts. These subversive acts are actually what keep the system going, they are complicit in justifying the power dynamics functioning on the basis of permanent crisis (and symbiosis) between transgressions and limits.

[43] The structure is appropriated and re-contextualized from Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl (For Carl Solomon)" (1956).
[44] Pitchford 94.

5.5. Fighting the System: Acker's Language of the Forbidden, Making Up the Rules

After Abhor "[w]ithdraw[s] allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power" in the form of her father, she wanders the world, assuming various roles, preferring "mobile arrangements over systems" in her belief that "what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic."[45] Acker's rebellion against Western taboo-based society manifests in the form of pirates, hijackers of social normativity. These social outcasts and (sometimes literally) castaways violate taboos (child rape, open homosexuality, gender fluctuation) and "leave anarchy in their drunken wakes" (*ES* 113) just as Acker does by pirating existing texts and hijacking their established interpretations (sanctioned by the literary Establishment) by re-situating them. Tattoos go hand in hand with piracy, representing in Acker's understanding a personalized mode of sign-making[46] that can harbor secret meaning for the person whose body is inscribed. Acker regains tattoos from the realm of stigma, where pirates were branded for the transgression of laws,[47] and posits them into the empire of her forbidden, private language. However, this closing in on itself can also be seen as defeating the purpose of language, which is primarily the communication of meaning to others. Acker's vision of anarchic utopia involves the internalization of the status of drifter "where the strongest common bond is that of being an outsider banned from mainstream society,"[48] but it is a common bond nevertheless.

When Abhor escapes jail in Part III, she decides to become part of a motorcycle gang in order to gain freedom. In order to do that, she must learn how to ride a bike, and is told by Thivai this requires learning the rules of "*The Highway Code.*" Abhor, however, modifies this rulebook to her own experiences and current situation, and decides to "think for [her]self" (*ES* 214) since "these rules… had nothing to do with nothing" (*ES* 216). After causing a bit of chaos by trying to follow *The Highway Code* out of its intended context, Abhor realizes that "[t]he problem with following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself. Therefore, rules prevent, dement, and even kill the people who follow them. [...] From now on *The Highway Code* no longer mattered. I was making up the rules" (*ES* 219, 222), echoing Hélène Cixous' call for "*insurgent* writing,"[49] *l'écriture féminine* that employs guerilla

[45] Michel Foucault, "Preface to Anti-Oedipus," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Three*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 2001) 109.
[46] Friedman 17.
[47] Vichnar 96.
[48] Hume 504.
[49] Cixous 880.

tactics[50] to challenge the symbolic order of patriarchal language. She casts away these pre-conceived restrictions and instead lets rules arise out of her own subjective articulation of experience: "[w]hatever my heart now said was absolutely true" (*ES* 219). This immediately causes problems as a cop stops her for "speed[ing] along without any regard for me so I was forced to keep up with you," accusing her "[that she] was dangerous to all living men… [and] that it had been difficult for him to follow [her] because [she] had signalled too soon." (*ES* 223, 224).

The problem with this solipsist rule-making renders living in society impossible. Abhor changes her mind about becoming a biker when she hears how misogynist and dangerous motorcycle gangs can be to women. She realizes that she "didn't as yet know what [she] wanted. [She] now fully knew what [she] didn't want and what and whom [she] hated. That was something" (*ES* 227). There is no resolution or redemption to be arrived at. In "A Few Notes," Acker talks about writing *Empire of the Senseless* and realizing the impossibility of deconstructing the "frauds" of patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist control mechanisms upon which modern society is founded. Just as the reminder that there is no "outside" of governability: "where there is no distinction between 'in' and 'out'... there is no 'out' of the law's reach," then similarly "there is no outside of language itself, regardless of one's position as to its legitimacy – even such an objection must be rendered linguistically. We come into being *I* through language, we identify *we* in language, and we die when someone pronounces us dead."[51] In the wake of this disillusion, the goal lies in finding a belief, "a myth, a place, not the myth, the place" (Acker, "A Few Notes" 35). The indefinite article here indicates the plurality and rhizomatic de-hierarchization of formative representational fictions. Acker could insist upon her "forbidden" language as the most effective means of transgressing normative language to create sense, but she does not, deliberately, as that would render her even more complicit with the hierarchizing control machine of language than her fictions already inevitably are.

5.6. Discipline and Anarchy, Intertwined

The narrative voice in Part II questions the search "for an adequate mode of expression" and calls it "senseless... Since all acts, including expressive acts, are inter-dependent… Theory doesn't work" (*ES* 113). In her texts, however, Acker puts her theories in action. While theory does not translate into an adequate communication of experience, practice does not either,

[50] Kathy Acker, "Postmodernism," *Bodies at Work* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997) 5.
[51] Vanessa Place, "WHY I AM A LITERARY TERRORIST," *Pornoterrorism* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2015) 15.

according to Abhor's attempt to make the rulebook her own – she is ultimately forced to relinquish her (idealized) concept of freedom (joining a biker gang) due to how embedded it is within an oppressive, normative society grounded in the repression of desire. Ultimately, attacking power structures necessitates acknowledging their existence and does nothing to nullify their power. Due to the impossibility of escaping the framework of this society and its controlling mechanisms (patriarchal discourse, capitalism, rationality), "[t]he only 'resolution' in [Acker's] works is like that produced in the aftermath of an explosion; with all familiar structures destroyed, one must begin reassembling the elements of existence into newer (and hopefully more liberating) patterns."[52]

In face of the inevitable co-opting of any transgression by capitalism, Acker's tactics of appropriation and insurgent writing are a double-edged sword. Acker herself realizes the impossibility of her aim to re-appropriate from institutional powers the means of producing meaning. This alternative language of transgressive intent must function *within* language, and is thus forced to challenge the patriarchal codes and the rationality of representation that shape the meaning and connotations of its communication. This forbidden language requires validation by the very system whose control mechanisms of patriarchy and rationalism it deconstructs, and therein lies the hurdle to Acker's intent of a direct assault on heteronormative and otherwise restrictive language. In order for this transgression of the systemic oppressive forces of a patriarchal society to have any power, Acker's writing must launch an attack from the inside by re-contextualizing the connotations and attributed meanings of existing symbols, images, and discourse.[53] Acker's guerilla attack on language shows that "[p]urely oppositional strategies are helpless to contest this empire, both because those who would oppose it are already compromised... and because power is a matter of images, and therefore very difficult to target."[54] The realization of complicity between transgression-limit in their power dynamics necessitates an effective pursuit of transgressive intent, and Acker concedes the need to search for less dualistic and antagonistic narratives of resistance.

Acker's bricolage writing explores disparate manifestations of transgression in *Empire*, while her discursive pastiche narrative style aims to destigmatize expression in a dominating mode of representation grounded in rationality (and taboos). The privileging of any formative fiction is rejected in *Empire* as the characters and narrative voices (or deliberate lack of) undermine their own authority and discourse. Acker seeks reconciliation of the self

[52] McCaffery 218.
[53] Pitchford 16.
[54] Pitchford 93-94.

with the system and subsequently *within* the system when it becomes apparent that this is the only position from which it is possible to operate: hers is "a poetics that pushes excessively toward failure"[55] in that completion of the intent would be self-annihilation. If writing is to remain transgressive, it must adapt to the inevitable absorption by the capitalist hegemony and constantly find ways of subverting the recuperation of transgressive intent and effect, as criticizing from some mythical, untainted "outside" space is proven to be impossible.

Despite this failure to subvert normative patriarchal language by using an alternative language that openly expresses the substance of taboos in defiance of this normativity, Acker's writing shows the need to persevere in challenging these power structures. Acker's hijacking of "institutionalized language" (*ES* 133) through deliberately graphic depictions of its taboos carries the potential of becoming re-appropriated by the Culture Industry, as it inevitably will be, thus infiltrating its discourse: perhaps the only potentially transgressive intent any anti-systemic writing can possess in light of "[rationalism's] ability to incorporate flux and subsume irrationality, which in turn allows capitalism to insinuate itself into the 'personal' space of different bodies."[56] The ongoing nature of transgression is absolutely imperative: a completion of transgression – achieving balance or entropy in the power dynamics between the act of dissent and the transgressed hegemony – would equal the failure of the transgressive drive, the paradoxical aim of which is not to complete its purpose, but to perpetuate the momentum of crisis. This calls for the constantly evolving action of transgressive intent, which, when inevitably recuperated by the control mechanisms of the hegemony, must immediately find new manifestations to validate and enable its existence, its old realizations now institutionalized, defused.

[55] Huppatz 111.
[56] Pitchford 93.

Chapter Six – Anti-Systemic Fiction in the Land of the Free

6.1. Mutually Assured Destruction of Transgression and the Limit

Through the grotesque expression of taboos, excess, and travesty, transgressive writing deliberately defies the familiar – the truly grotesque. That which is familiar is the hegemonic power structures of the government, mainstream media, the police force, corporations, which themselves transgress self-imposed norms to retain their institutional control, acting as aggressors. Transgressive writing highlights this hypocrisy within hegemonic normative practices, and focuses its critical attack on norms of social acceptability. The purpose of transgression in literature can be found in relocating the fringe to the center of attention, and in overhauling the status of marginality attributed by the language used by the Establishment to writing that subverts its rules. The hegemonic powers seek (and need) to perpetuate the push-and-pull power dynamics between those in power and those without power, just as transgressive forces do. Transgression interacts with the authorities that bind it to the realization of limits both as rival and accomplice, itself thus a systemic method of perpetuating, not obliterating power.

Transgression is ultimately a gratuitous act. It is an act doomed to failing its own purpose due to the necessity of remaining an ongoing, never completed process. It must remain within a transitional, imperfective stage to avoid replicating the systems of control it attempts to transgress, compelling its incompleteness, its vital repetition. If transgression were to reach its conclusion of anti-systemic destruction, it would itself risk becoming the new order. Thus the transgressive drive is inherently self-destructive; it can never achieve its aim, because that would annul its purpose. And yet transgressive writing always hopes to produce despite its inability to do so. This awareness is simultaneously both liberating and incapacitating.

Neither limits (taboos, social norms, literary conventions) nor transgression can exist without the other, and their existence validates and is validated by the existence of the counterpart. This conditional purpose of both limit and transgression co-exists complicitly in a functioning, yet always precarious symbiosis wholly dependent on the perpetual tension between the two forces. Due to this dynamics, both transgression and the transgressed system *must*, to a certain degree, tolerate each other, because annihilation of the other would mean annihilation of the self. In other words, destruction is mutually assured.

6.2. Taking on the American Dream Machine

The analyzed transgressive texts have in common the questioning of authority in imposing limits of experience, representation (and mediation) of reality, and acceptability. As challenged in Burroughs' *Nova Express*: Who holds this monopoly on "Love Sex and Dream? Who monopolized Life Time and Fortune?"[1] American cultural and political propaganda, extending well past the Cold War era into the modern day of terrorist threat, testifies in favor of the official Establishment structures and military industrial complex aided by media. Reality becomes first spectacle, then propaganda. These texts arguably portray a contradictory, two-fold desire, perhaps characteristic of transgressive fiction: first, they identify, to a lesser or greater degree, the complicit functioning of their transgression within the system due to the universal drive for power, whether through consumerism or language, both inescapable elements of living in modern society, and the hypocrisy of this system which transgresses its own norms to perpetuate control. Second, despite this concession, they nevertheless desire to liberate the transgressive drive from its self-destructive Catch 22 cyclical existence and produce change to the system, to *complete* the transgressive design. There is a desire for mastery embedded within transgression that paradoxically, if acted out, brings about the annulation of purpose.

Motifs that recur throughout the novels are that of the maverick, embodied by Coover's Nixon, Thompson's Duke and Gonzo, Burroughs' Factualist agents William Lee and A.J., and Acker's pirates Abhor and Thivai. The pursuit of happiness, inherently realized by transgressing the system's limits, is implemented in Nixon's desire to dominate Ethel Rosenberg, in Duke and Gonzo getting away with their weirdness & "sticking it to the man," in Lee and A.J.'s instilment of chaos into order, infiltrating the discourse of the Reality Studio, and in Abhor's rejection of psychoanalytic myths and exploration of her identity in a continual process of becoming a pirate, an anarchist, a biker. Self-validation, however, is exposed as an illusion: validation arises from the recognition by the opposition.

Power dynamics function on the grounds of permanent crisis, and the texts all involve an incarnation of conflict that propels transgression forward. The Situationist practice of *détournement* proves to be an effective means of inverting the language of the spectacle society upon itself; using the system's discourse against itself by forcing the system to re-appropriate infiltrated language (populistic expressions, propagandist slogans, mottos). Coover's anti-systemic intent works well due to his appropriation of existing Cold War texts

[1] William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* from *Three Novels: The Soft Machine, Nova Express, The Wild Boys* (Grove Press, New York, 1988) 187.

through which he showcases the hysteria of the historical discourse by hyperbolizing it. His narrative is intentionally complicit within the dynamics of transgression-limit, aware that the only effective means of fighting the system are its own, which it then re-appropriates, propelling the cycle of control ever onward.

While Coover upstages the system through the hyperbolization of demonizing American Cold War governmental rhetoric, spotlighting its monstrosity and presenting it through the "objective" Chronicler perspective, Thompson does so via his gonzo assault upon the gonzoism of the Establishment, escalating the spectacle of excess to bring its travesty into focus. Burroughs creates monstrous control machines of bureaucracy, surveillance agencies, and repressive institutionalization that mirror those in real life, operating in sync with the algebra of need and the language virus whose influence is inescapable for its human host, while Acker shows the self-destructive drive of revolutions and the ceaseless process of transgressing normative language to locate (anarchic) personal freedom. A continuous yielding and appropriation of power propels anti-systemic writing in its relationship to the Establishment. The anti-systemic fictions of Coover, Thompson, Burroughs, and Acker can all thus be seen to be part of the American Dream Machine. Whether its spokesmen or incarnations are Coover's Uncle Sam, Thompson's travesty of Las Vegas, Burroughs' Reality Studio, or the furtive CIA in Acker's *Empire*, they all spin around on the merry-go-round of power.

6.3. The Role of the Transgressive Writer

Despite the anti-systemic agenda of their texts, these iconoclastic writers have been institutionalized by the literary Establishment into regulatable and marketable brands of dissent, the transgressive intent of the texts expropriated and promptly neutered to re-assert hegemonic order. Normalization through appropriation is the control mechanism *par excellence* of hegemonic power in neutralizing dissent. The initial subversion is pulverized by the American Dream Machine – but does this render the transgression a failure of intent? Can transgressive texts effectively work in opposition to social normativity if they themselves become normalized by the very institutions they attack? The answer is just as inconclusive as transgression must remain to preserve its purpose.

The role of the transgressive writer is not to serve as prophet, messiah, bringer of happy (or any) ends, or miracle-maker, just as "to imagine another system is to extend our

participation in the present system."[2] It is rather to ceaselessly challenge repressive power situations that arise in history, be it (in the American context) the Cold War, the War on Drugs, the War on Terror, or the next in line of wars on abstractions. Accepting their role as accomplices within the same power play that gives rise to this eternal war for the sake of power, these writers can exploit the system's methods of appropriation, forcing it to reappropriate its own infected language, images, symbols, genres: *détournement* working hand in hand with recuperation.

Can the transgressive writer pose a threat to the social order through their texts, purporting as they do to challenge divisive propaganda, systems of repression, institutionalization, and the power of myths? Perhaps the theorization of imagined scenarios, "[t]his need for theory," remains "still part of the system we reject."[3] The social impact of literature is practically intangible, unquantifiable, transgressive fiction particularly being "*without obvious redeeming qualities*" as this validation would "first require... society (this bought-and-sold pornocapitalist America) to renounce itself."[4] The cultural positioning of transgressive writers is more easily recognizable. Undergoing assimilation into the mainstream imposes an iconicity onto the iconoclastic writers, revealing that resistance is futile; even anti-systemic fictions and their rage against the machine become incorporated into the very same control systems and Culture Industries they attack. Transgressive writers maintain a dualistic, antagonistic position in the cultural sphere, simultaneously personifying cultural dissidence and being represented as countercultural icons (whether they like it or not) by the cultural hegemony and respective subcultures alike. In face of the inevitable incorporation by the literary Establishment and Culture Industry, the transgressive intent of these texts is paradoxically both validated and annihilated.

Ironically, all the discussed authors seem to betray in their texts a hint of Romanticist grievance over the Establishment transgressing its own rules, despite recognizing this inherent hypocrisy on the side of the hegemony, but sometimes not within their own ranks in the desire to assert power. In the texts, there arises an expectation of "liberty and justice for all," even in light of the historical (sur)reality that the texts expose suggesting otherwise. The discussed transgressive writers seek acknowledgment and agreement in their hope to create a productive – if not practice, at least – critique. The agenda is to gain sovereignty, not just attack those in

[2] Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 230.
[3] Foucault, "Revolutionary Action" 231.
[4] Louis Armand, "All That's Solid Melts into Weird: Coover | Thompson | Garcia | Chaffee," *Videology* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2015) 262.

power through verbal violence. The transgressive texts articulate a maverick drive while at the same time embodying an expectant desire for a pat on the back, betraying their contingent position within the social bond. While the systems of control against which these selected authors transgress in their works impose patterns of exclusion, the writers, working from this exiled position, *seek* inclusion, for inclusion means validation. Perhaps reluctantly, they want to matter in the eyes of the master figures and social institutions against which they rebel. Like the prodigal sons and daughter returning home to be reconciled with the father, these transgressive writers strive for the recognition of their work as something more than destructive in order to validate their creative power.

6.4. What's the Score Here? What's Next?

Amidst "the surreality of spectacle news,"[5] the U.S.A. appears to be in a steady, slow, apocalyptic decline, foreshadowing its own demise by painfully slowly moving into an era of unsustainable collapse of its power structures, degenerating into a parody of its foundational values. In the 21st century, more apparent than ever before, America has become a travesty of its purported exceptionality and greatness, embodied in the figure of Donald J. Trump, a grotesque (yet terrifyingly real) self-caricature of pure, narcissistic power-overdrive. On this apocalyptic road where the power struggle inherent to a "functioning" American society is continually shifting gears as the speed increases, how far can this self-destructive escalation go? Is there a limit to this suicidal drive? With Trump at the wheel, the odds for total annihilation are very, very good, if not the best.

Transgressive texts are symptomatic of this nightmarish, and yet terrifyingly sobering American reality. Fictions attempting to dismantle systemic control and power structures must come to terms with the realization of inevitable complicity within the system they transgress if they are to have any impact on the increasingly farcical status quo. Institutional expropriation of dissenting art (and activism) is inevitable, but yielding and exploiting this loss of design in order to (re-)gain subversive purpose is perhaps the only viable option for transgressive writing in the escalatory surreal extravaganza that has come to mark the U.S. in the 21st century. Transgressive narratives are part of this machinery, keeping the wheels of the whole system of supply-demand, push-and-pull, dissent-appropriation turning. Atop this sinking ship, the American Dream Machine churns out its swan song in a last bid to keep the dream alive.

[5] Armand 253.

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Thesis Abstract

The thesis examines manifestations of transgression in Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) and *The Nova Trilogy* (1961-1967), and Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* (1988) on a structural and thematic level. Georges Bataille's theory of escalated excess and Michel Foucault's theory of the transgression-limit power dynamics, outlined in Chapter One, provide the theoretical framework through which the texts are analyzed, as through concepts of the spectacle, the carnival, taboo, and the Situationist *détournement* practice. The nature of the American Dream Machine is explored in regards to its chief components of control; the American war on abstractions, American exceptionalism, and the American Dream, examined through their contradictory connotations and historical relevance. The thesis proposes that despite their anti-systemic drive, the selected texts are complicit with and dependent on the American Dream Machine in perpetuating their power play.

In Chapter Two, the hyperbolization of American Cold War propaganda rhetoric is analyzed in Coover's *The Public Burning*. Chapter Three details Thompson's gonzo writing against the Establishment embodying the *potlatch* principle of escalation. Both Coover and Thompson assault the monopoly on objectivity claimed by "serious" journalism and mainstream media outlets, spotlighting their discourse of propaganda in regards to the Cold War (Coover) and the War on Drugs (Thompson) which enables and perpetuates the spectacularization of reality. In Chapter Four, Burroughs exaggerates the demonization inherent to propagandist discourse through his grotesque control machines, mirroring the repressive bureaucratic, institutional machinery in real life. Both he and Acker attack the normative language used by these institutions and its enforced monopoly on modes of expression curtailed by taboos, social norms, and the laws of language – Burroughs by exposing the "language virus," and Acker through her "forbidden" language (Chapter Five). Additionally, Acker's novel explores the cause and effect of revolution realized within the reach of the American Dream Machine.

The discussed texts use hyperbole, parody, and excess to spotlight the system's hypocrisy in transgressing its own rules. Chapter Six provides an overview of the paradox of transgression and the role of the transgressive writer, confirming the fictionality and inherently contradictory (and self-destructive) nature of the anti-systemic transgressive drive

in fiction which, despite opposing institutional authority, remains (and must remain) complicit in the power exchange in order to fulfil its purpose.

Abstrakt práce

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá strukturální i tematické podoby transgrese v románech Roberta Coovera (*The Public Burning*, 1977), Huntera S. Thompsona (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American* Dream, 1971), Williama S. Burroughse (*Naked Lunch*, 1959 a *The Nova Trilogy*, 1961-1967) a Kathy Acker (*Empire of the Senseless*, 1988). Teorie stupňované excese Georgese Bataille a teorie mocenské dynamiky mezi transgresí a limity popsané v kapitole první tvoří teoretický rámec pro analýzu vybraných textů, stejně jako koncepty spektáklu, karnevalu, tabu, a Situacionistické *détournement* praktiky. První kapitola také zkoumá charakter stroje na americký sen, podmíněného americkou válkou s abstrakcemi, americkou výjimečností, a americkým snem (jehož historický a socio-politický vývoj je předložen). Hypotéza předkládá, že navzdory protisystémovému ladění se vybrané texty účastní na udržování koloběhu moci skrz mašinérii na americký sen.

Druhá kapitola zkoumá nadsazenou americkou propagandistickou rétoriku studené války v Cooverově románu *The Public Burning*. Kapitola třetí se zaměřuje na Thompsonovu stylistiku gonzo představující princip eskalace, skrze kterou atakuje establishment. Oba spisovatelé napadají monopol na objektivitu vyhlášený seriózní žurnalistikou a médii a upozorňují na propagandistický diskurz studené války (Coover) a války proti drogám (Thompson), který umožňuje přeměnu reality do spektáklu. Čtvrtá kapitola analyzuje, jak Burroughs pomocí svých groteskních mocenských mašinérií napadá démonizační charakter propagandy. Jak on, tak Acker kritizují normativní jazyk institucí a omezování projevu skrze tabu, společenské normy, a regule jazyka. Burroughs tak činí odhalením jazyka jako mimozemského viru a Acker použitím „zapovězeného jazyka“ (kapitola pátá). Ackerův román také zkoumá příčiny a následky revolucí realizovaných v dosahu mašinérie na americký sen.

Analyzované texty využívají hyperbolu, parodii a exces, aby upozornili na pokrytectví mocenské mašinérie, která porušuje vlastní stanovená pravidla. Kapitola šestá shrnuje paradox transgrese, roli transgresivního spisovatele, a potvrzuje fiktivnost a nedílně rozporuplnou (a sebedestruktivní) podstatu protisystémového, transgresivního úmyslu v beletrii, která i přesto, že se staví proti institucionálním pravomocím, se podílí (a nutně musí podílet) na koloběhu moci, aby její záměr mohl byl naplněn.