

David Vichnar, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re "*The American Dream Machine: The Anti-Systemic Fictions
of Coover, Thompson, Burroughs & Acker,*"
by Tereza Novická
(MA dissertation, 2017)

Ms Novická's MA thesis deals with the dialectics of "limit" and "transgression", of "norm-setting" and "rule-breaking", as manifested in the work of the four post-war American writers specified in her title. For all four of these, the "American Dream," as evolving in the 1950s-80s USA, was increasingly perverted into a nightmare. The discursive pastiche & carnival of Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo journalism and anti-antidrug campaign in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, William Burroughs' phantasmagorias of control and addiction in *Naked Lunch* & his appropriation of the cut-up technique in *Nova* trilogy, and finally the radically plagiarist anti-patriarchal détournement of central literary tropes and clichés in Kathy Acker's *Empire of the Senseless* – all these are subversive, "transgressive" tactics through which these four authors "launch the crusade" against "the imperialistic manifest destiny" of the American dream (15).

If the thesis were "only" the four brilliant close-readings of these four experimenters, which Ms Novická undertakes with critical nuance and perspicacity, it would in itself present already an important contribution to the scholarship of these authors (the list of secondary sources spans no fewer than seven pages, intelligently employing most relevant literary criticism). Still, the thesis is yet more: a meditation on the dialectics of limitations and breaches thereof, an intelligent survey of how the "American dream," under the condition of increasingly globalised capitalism, soured into an American nightmare (Chapter One), and last but not least, a brave attempt at accounting for the subversive potential of writing (Chiefly, Chapter Six).

Throughout, Ms Novická intelligently discusses a range of theoretical concepts with which to grapple with these issues (Foucault on power and reason, Debord on the spectacle, Bakhtin on the not-so-subversive carnival, Cixous on *écriture féminine*, and especially Bataille on the economy of excess). It is to her credit that Ms Novická manages to read fiction and theory side by side, as two mutually informing and enriching discourses with which to convey similar insights (Coover with Foucault, Burroughs with Debord, Acker with Cixous, etc.), and thus avoids the pitfall of mechanically "applying" the one to the other.

Ms Novická's style and language are also up to par – she has an eye & ear for the succinct formula and fitting metaphor (cf. e.g. "The forcefulness of transgression wrenches open closures, contaminates boundaries, and floodlights the contested space of liminality that has always been there" [6]), and is also unafraid to occasionally commit the pardonable pun (a personal favourite, "Burroughs and Bureaus" [59]). Her argument is thus always free-flowing, to the point, and simply a joy to read.

Perhaps most valuably of all, Ms Novická does not settle for simply pinpointing the formal "experimental" traces of her four authors, but also meditates on the pragmatic value of their "transgression" in the wider social context of "literature", "fiction", or "writing", concepts never devoid of their political import. Transgression is never an easy way out of a hegemony – at best it presupposes one against which it defines itself, at worst it purports to abolish one only in order to

create another. Thus, Coover's novel ends up oscillating, like a "perpetuum mobile", between the two complementary forces of "dissent" and "hegemony" (30-1); Burroughs' cut-ups, while purporting to fight against the "language virus", still remain caught up "within the addiction to the language virus, merely manipulating its course" (62); Acker's anarchic challenge to power structures, in turn, resists any "completion of transgression", for that would "equal the failure of the transgressive drive, the paradoxical aim of which is not to complete its purpose" (79).

These are some of the concerns and remarks that make Ms Novická's thesis relevant far beyond its thematic focus. This becomes clearest in the concluding chapter of the project, where apart from thematic & stylistic similarities among the four authors, Ms Novická also deals with their "roles" – both in their lifetimes and, more relevantly, as part of literary tradition and history.

Departing from these are my three broader questions to be addressed at the defence:

a) The "incomplete project" that is literary transgression in your reading of these four writers would clearly align them with the perpetually suspended (and necessarily failing) project of the historical avant-garde. Though you do trace Burroughs' cut-ups (via Gysin) back to Dada, the heritage and traditions reworked in the other three authors aren't as clearly identified (or easily identifiable). Could more be said about those? Also, what should we make of their shared "hint of Romanticist grievance over the Establishment transgressing its own rules" (83)? Where does that come from?

b) If indeed "these iconoclastic writers have been institutionalized by the literary Establishment into regulatable and marketable brands of dissent" and "the transgressive intent of the texts expropriated and promptly neutered to re-assert hegemonic order" (82), how does that problematize their status as transgressors? I agree with you that "the role of the transgressive writer is not to serve as prophet, messiah, bringer of happy (or any) ends" (82), but is their institutionalization equally "unsolicited" by all four? Is it really only the result of their "striving for the recognition of their work as something more than destructive in order to validate their creative power" (84), whatever that means? Can we be more specific here? For instance, which of the four resists institutionalization the most and which is the most readily appropriable?

c) Most broadly and least to the point – I understand the final question of "What's the Score Here? What's Next?" to be meant as a rhetorical one, but still: where does the shared effort of these four leave us post-2001? How, to your mind, are they relevant for today's writing and who are their most "transgressive" followers?

Ms Novická's thesis is an exceptionally well-written, clearly structured and persuasively argued work. I have no reservations in recommending that it be graded excellent.

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30 August 2017