

# WORD VIRUS

the WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS reader

edited by james grauerholz  
and ira silverberg

with an introduction by ann douglas



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I think that Richard Nixon will go down in history as a true folk hero, who struck a vital blow to the whole diseased concept of the revered image and gave the American virtue of irreverence and skepticism back to the people.

## THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

There is a growing interest in new techniques of mind-control. It has been suggested that Sirhan Sirhan was the subject of post-hypnotic suggestion [as he sat shaking violently on the steam table in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles while an as-yet unidentified woman held him and whispered in his ear]. It has been alleged that behavior-modification techniques are used on troublesome prisoners and inmates, often without their consent. Dr Delgado, who once stopped a charging bull by remote control of electrodes in the bull's brain, left the U.S. to pursue his studies on human subjects in Spain. Brainwashing, psychotropic drugs, lobotomy and other more subtle forms of psychosurgery; the technocratic control apparatus of the United States has at its fingertips new techniques which if fully exploited could make Orwell's 1984 seem like a benevolent utopia. But words are still the principal instruments of control. Suggestions are words. Persuasions are words. Orders are words. No control machine so far devised can operate without words, and any control machine which attempts to do so relying entirely on external force or entirely on physical control of the mind will soon encounter the limits of control.

A basic impasse of all control machines is this: Control needs time in which to exercise control. Because control also needs opposition or acquiescence; otherwise it ceases to be control. I *control* a hypnotized subject (at least partially); I *control* a slave, a dog, a worker; but if I establish *complete* control somehow, as by implanting electrodes in the brain, then my subject is little more than a tape recorder, a camera, a robot. You don't *control* a tape recorder—you *use* it. Consider the distinction, and the impasse implicit here. All control systems try to make control as tight as possible, but at the same time, if they succeeded completely, there would be nothing left to control. Suppose for example a control system installed electrodes in the brains of all prospective workers at birth. Control is now complete. Even the thought of rebellion is neurologically impossible. No police force is necessary. No psychological control is necessary, other than pressing buttons to achieve certain activations and operations.

When there is no more opposition, control becomes a meaningless proposition. It is highly questionable whether a human organism could survive complete control. There would be nothing there. No persons there. *Life is will* (motivation) and the workers would no longer be alive, perhaps literally. The concept of suggestion as a control technique presupposes that control is partial and not complete. You do not have to give suggestions to your tape recorder, nor subject it to pain and coercion or persuasion.

In the Mayan control system, where the priests kept the all-important Books of seasons and gods, the Calendar was predicated on the illiteracy of the workers. Modern control systems are predicated on universal literacy since they operate through the mass media—a very two-edged control instrument, as Watergate has shown. Control systems are vulnerable, and the news media are by their nature uncontrollable, at least in Western society. The alternative press is news, and alternative society is news, and as such both are taken up by the mass media. The monopoly that Hearst and Luce once exercised is breaking down. In fact, the more completely hermetic and seemingly successful a control system is, the more vulnerable it becomes. A weakness inherent in the Mayan system is that they didn't need an army to control their workers, and therefore did not have an army when they needed one to repel invaders. It is a rule of social structures that anything that is not needed will atrophy and become inoperative over a period of time. Cut off from the war game—and remember, the Mayans had no neighbors to quarrel with—they lose the ability to fight. In "The Mayan Caper" I suggested that such a hermetic control system could be completely disoriented and shattered by even one person who tampered with the control calendar on which the control system depended more and more heavily as the actual means of force withered away.

Consider a control situation: ten people in a lifeboat. Two armed self-appointed leaders force the other eight to do the rowing while they dispose of the food and water, keeping most of it for themselves and doling out only enough to keep the other eight rowing. The two leaders now *need* to exercise control to maintain an advantageous position which they could not hold without it. Here the method of control is force—the possession of guns. Decontrol would be accomplished by overpowering the leaders and taking their guns. This effected, it would be advantageous to kill them at once. So once embarked on a policy of control, the leaders must continue the policy as a matter of self-preservation. Who, then, needs to control others but those who protect by such control a position of relative advantage? Why do they need to exercise control? Because they would soon lose this position and advantage and in many cases their lives as well, if they relinquished control.

Now examine the reasons by which control is exercised in the lifeboat scenario: The two leaders are armed, let's say, with .38 revolvers—twelve shots and eight potential opponents. They can take turns sleeping. However, they must still exercise care not to let the eight rowers know that they intend to kill them when land is sighted. Even in this primitive situation force is supplemented with deception and persuasion. The leaders will disembark at point A, leaving the others sufficient food to reach point B, they explain. They have the compass and they are contributing their navigational skills. In short they will endeavour to convince the others that this is a cooperative enterprise in which they are all working for the same goal. They may also make concessions: increase food and water rations. A concession of course means the retention of control—that is, the disposition of the food and water supplies. By

persuasions and by concessions they hope to prevent a concerted attack by the eight rowers.

Actually they intend to poison the drinking water as soon as they leave the boat. If all the rowers knew this they would attack, no matter what the odds. We now see that another essential factor in control is to conceal from the controlled the actual intentions of the controllers. Extending the lifeboat analogy to the Ship of State, few existing governments could withstand a sudden, all-out attack by all their underprivileged citizens, and such an attack might well occur if the intentions of certain existing governments were unequivocally apparent. Suppose the lifeboat leaders had built a barricade and could withstand a concerted attack and kill all eight of the rowers if necessary. They would then have to do the rowing themselves and neither would be safe from the other. Similarly, a modern government armed with heavy weapons and prepared for attack could wipe out ninety-five percent of its citizens. But who would do the work, and who would protect them from the soldiers and technicians needed to make and man the weapons? Successful control means achieving a balance and avoiding a showdown where all-out force would be necessary. This is achieved through various techniques of psychological control, also balanced. The techniques of both force and psychological control are constantly improved and refined, and yet worldwide dissent has never been so widespread or so dangerous to the present controllers.

All modern control systems are riddled with contradictions. Look at England. "Never go too far in any direction," is the basic rule on which England is built, and there is some wisdom in that. However, avoiding one impasse they step into another. Anything that is not going forward is on the way out. Well, nothing lasts forever. Time is that which ends, and control needs time. England is simply stalling for time as it slowly founders. Look at America. Who actually controls this country? It is very difficult to say. Certainly the very wealthy are one of the most powerful control groups, since they are in a position to control and manipulate the entire economy. However, it would not be to their advantage to set up or attempt to set up an overly fascist government. Force, once brought in, subverts the power of money. This is another impasse of control: protection from the protectors. Hitler formed the S.S. to protect him from the S.A. If he had lived long enough the question of protection from the S.S. would have posed itself. The Roman Emperors were at the mercy of the Praetorian Guard, who in one year killed many Emperors. And besides, no modern industrial country has ever gone fascist without a program of military expansion. There is no longer anyplace to expand to—after hundreds of years, colonialism is a thing of the past.

There can be no doubt that a cultural revolution of unprecedented dimensions has taken place in America during the last thirty years, and since America is now the model for the rest of the Western world, this revolution is worldwide. Another factor is the mass media, which spreads all cultural movements in all directions. The fact that this worldwide revolution has taken place indicates that the controllers have been forced to make concessions. Of course, a

concession is still the retention of control. Here's a dime, I keep a dollar. Ease up on censorship, but remember we could take it all back. Well, at this point, that is questionable.

Concession is another control bind. History shows that once a government starts to make concessions it is on a one-way street. They could of course take all the concessions back, but that would expose them to the double jeopardy of revolution and the much greater danger of overt fascism, both highly dangerous to the present controllers. Does any clear policy arise from this welter of confusion? The answer is probably no. The mass media has proven a very unreliable and even treacherous instrument of control. It is uncontrollable owing to its need for NEWS. If one paper or even a string of papers owned by the same person makes that story hotter as NEWS, some paper will pick it up. Any imposition of government censorship on the media is a step in the direction of State control, a step which big money is most reluctant to take.

I don't mean to suggest that control automatically defeats itself, nor that protest is therefore unnecessary. A government is never more dangerous than when embarking on a self-defeating or downright suicidal course. It is encouraging that some behavior modification projects have been exposed and halted, and certainly such exposure and publicity could continue. In fact, I submit that we have a *right* to insist that all scientific research be subject to public scrutiny, and that there should be no such thing as "top-secret" research.

## LES VOLEURS

Writers work with words and voices just as painters work with colors; and where do these words and voices come from? Many sources: conversations heard and overheard, movies and radio broadcasts, newspapers, magazines, yes, and *other writers*; a phrase comes into the mind from an old western story in a pulp magazine read years ago, can't remember where or when: "He looked at her, trying to read her mind—but her eyes were old, unbluffed, unreadable." There's one that I lifted.

The County Clerk sequence in *Naked Lunch* derived from contact with the County Clerk in Cold Springs, Texas. It was in fact an elaboration of his monologue, which seemed merely boring at the time, since I didn't know yet that I was a writer. In any case, there wouldn't have been any County Clerk if I had been sitting on my ass waiting for my "very own words." You've all met the ad man who is going to get out of the rat race, shut himself up in a cabin, and write the Great American Novel. I always tell him, "Don't cut your input, B.J.—you might need it." So many times I have been stuck on a story line, can't see where it will go from here; then someone drops around and tells me about fruit-eating fish in Brazil. I got a whole chapter out of that. Or I buy a book to read on the plane, and there is the answer; and there's a nice phrase too, "sweetly inhuman voices." I had a dream about such voices before I read *The Big Jump* by Leigh Brackett, and found that phrase.